

1-1-1996

## The Writing Center and the Good Writer

Frank Devlin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/wcj>

---

### Recommended Citation

Devlin, Frank (1996) "The Writing Center and the Good Writer," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 2, Article 4.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1350>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries.  
Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

---

---

# The Writing Center and the Good Writer<sup>1</sup>

*Frank Devlin*

---

Writing in *College Teaching* several years ago, Richard Leahy pinpointed a frustration still shared by most writing centers: though the writing center seeks “to attract good writers . . . on the majority of campuses it still predominantly serves weak writers, those who are struggling with their composition classes and competency exams, and those who have finished their requirements but still have problems” (45). Our writing center at Salem State College is no exception to this pattern. In memos to the English department we talk about the center as a community of trained readers available to *all* students; we explicitly point out that “above average writers” can benefit from going to the center; we even remind department members that many professional writers seek informed response to their work before they submit their manuscripts. And in the literally thousands of publicity flyers we send out each semester to faculty and students across campus, we reject the image of a typical writing center student and talk instead about servicing students from all classes, with all sorts of assignments and all ranges of ability. Though there is some truth to these claims (we do see students from all classes, we do work with a variety of assignments, we do encounter good student writing), we continue for the most part to fit Leahy’s profile—despite our desire to be more inclusive we almost always see problem writers rather than strong ones.

Our frustration with this pattern prompted Nancy Schultz and I, co-directors of Salem’s writing center, to conduct several experiments last year that we hoped would document the center’s value to average and superior writers and thus enable us to communicate our message more effectively to

*The Writing Center Journal*, Volume 16, Number 2, Spring 1996

both faculty and students. Except for anecdotal information, we had no hard evidence that the center would in fact meet the needs of our better writers. If anything, what documentation we did possess would encourage the exact trend we wanted to break or at least mitigate. Our writing center, like many others, is exclusively a drop-in facility, except for the two sections of developmental English offered each semester that include a weekly tutoring component. We thus fit a familiar writing center profile: voluntary for all students except those designated as particularly weak writers. This practice, of course, simply fortified the very image we wished to dispel, but for both practical and academic reasons we continued this arrangement. From a practical point of view, much of our administrative support historically stems from our involvement with the developmental program run by the college's Learning Center. So our policy, like that of all writing centers, reflects a specific institutional context and history. We were also persuaded (as well as gratified) by the apparent success of this mandatory tutoring. The developmental students consistently gave the center high marks in the anonymous questionnaires we would administer near the end of every term. Each semester the students overwhelmingly said that the tutoring had improved their writing skills and that their experience in the center had been quite positive—a view corroborated by the feedback we received throughout the term from the developmental writing instructor.

But we lacked any corresponding data from stronger writers. Would they, in fact, endorse our claims about the value of the center for all writers? Would their response to sustained tutoring parallel the developmental students'? Would their reaction enable us to promote our philosophy more persuasively? To help answer such questions, Nancy and I made weekly tutoring in the writing center mandatory in the five freshman writing sections we taught during spring and fall 1994. Because college policy precluded assigning students extra instructional hours, these weekly tutorials substituted for eight class meetings, during which we held individual student conferences. Thus, twice a semester we would confer with each student for fifteen minutes, but neither Nancy nor I worked with any of these students in their weekly writing center tutorials. Three of our sections were regular composition classes; two were Freshman Honors English. Throughout both semesters we monitored the students' responses to the tutoring in various ways: journal entries, take-home exams, formal papers, and anonymous end-of-the-term questionnaires. The two sections of honors English, which Nancy taught, were especially important since they enabled us to study the reactions of students who rarely visit writing centers, particularly on a regular basis.

To complement our student research, we also canvassed the faculty in fall 1994 to get a more definitive take on how they actually defined our role. As studies at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks and the University of Southern

California confirm, faculty intervention is far and away the most important reason students go to a writing center (Bishop; Clark, "Leading the Horse"). This fact alone would have been warrant enough to survey faculty perceptions, but we also wanted to determine if our own assumptions about the faculty's attitudes were justified. Because we largely saw only struggling students, we suspected that the faculty probably viewed our work much more narrowly than we did. We were also concerned by a 1992 faculty survey conducted by the college's writing-across-the-curriculum coordinator. In particular, the answers to two questions seemed to raise troubling implications for the writing center: (1) of the 117 faculty who responded (over one third of the faculty), almost 93 percent identified poor student writing as a problem in their classes; and (2) when given a list of common writing problems and asked to check how frequently they occurred in student writing ("rarely," "sometimes," "often"), 95 percent of the faculty marked "often" next to "grammar, punctuation and spelling" ("poor organization" came in a distant second at 45 percent). In circumstances where faculty considered poor student writing widespread and identified surface errors as the most common problem, we suspected they might look to the writing center largely as a remediation service for weak writers. But since the WAC survey never directly mentioned the writing center, we felt that we needed our own research to see if our concerns about faculty perceptions had any merit.

The composite picture that emerged from our student experiments and faculty survey both reassured and depressed us. The reassurance came from the student response. As we had hoped, the reactions of both regular and honors sections paralleled the response we had typically received from the developmental students. We were particularly pleased by the honor students' assessment. Their vigorous endorsement of the center not only supported our tutoring priorities (an emphasis on conceptual issues before structural or mechanical ones) but also validated our belief that the center could effectively serve the needs of good writers as well as those with serious problems. The faculty survey, however, told a different story. Although we had anticipated that "the tradition of misunderstanding," as Muriel Harris terms it ("What's Up" 19), would surface, we were surprised at how deep this misunderstanding ran. The survey verified in spades what we had suspected—that the faculty limited our appropriate clientele to the weakest writers and our focus largely to sentence-level or structural difficulties. We were clearly working from one set of assumptions and the faculty another.

What now remains is to examine our student and faculty research more closely and see how it both highlights a common writing center problem and provides a potential corrective—a counterbalance that can speak to the needs of writing centers beyond Salem State's.

## The Research Context

Since the research for this essay originates within a specific context, let me first supply some shape to that context. To start with, some institutional statistics. Of the 5200 students who attend Salem State full-time, approximately 80 percent commute and roughly the same percentage work up to 30 hours a week while attending school. Our students' average verbal SAT score in 1994 was 421, which puts us near the national average for college-bound seniors. Virtually all freshmen take two semesters of writing, and within this sequence are developmental classes reserved for students specifically recruited by the college's Learning Center. The verbal SATs for students in these sections (usually two per semester) range from 200 to 350. The only exception to the two-semester writing requirement is Freshman Honors English, a one-semester writing course for students in the college's honors program. For these students (about 40 per year) the average verbal SAT is around 550. Thus, each year we have about 40 students in developmental English, about the same number in honors English, and the rest in what we call regular composition classes.

Our writing center, which began in the late 1970s, is primarily staffed by undergraduate tutors (usually 20-25 per term) who take a semester-long training course I offer every fall. Each year we also have one or two graduate assistants who take the training course and tutor in the center (Salem State has a small M.A. program in English comprised largely of part-time evening students). None of our undergraduate courses, however, is taught by graduate students, so we don't have the kind of classroom/writing center association sometimes found in universities where graduate students may alternate between teaching freshman writing and tutoring in the writing center. Nancy and I are, in effect, the only classroom instructors directly connected with the center. Finally, a word about our writing center philosophy. Although Eric Hobson is technically correct in saying "that no two writing centers are identical" (77), most writing centers, Salem's included, share at least two fundamental characteristics. One is purely procedural but absolutely basic: our center, like most, operates exclusively through one-on-one tutorials. And the philosophy which informs our tutorials places us squarely in the mainstream of contemporary writing center policy. In a provocative essay, which relates writing centers to the larger context of competing educational theories, Christina Murphy identifies three overarching perspectives influencing today's writing centers: a "conservative" perspective which supports "a student's mastery of skills—specifically, grammar, mechanics, vocabulary and sentence complexity and variety"; a "liberal" approach that emphasizes the writer's process and through tutorial interaction "advances the writer's analytical and critical thinking skills"; and a "radical" model in which writing centers become "advocates for

literacy” and endorse a perspective that respects various literacies in addition to standard written English (277-278).

Though Murphy implies that in trying to define themselves writing centers are struggling with these divergent viewpoints, my own sense is that most centers today explicitly espouse the liberal perspective (and have for some time). Articles by Tilly and John Warnock (1984), Stephen North (1985), Richard Leahy (1990), Diane George and Nancy Grimm (1990), and Muriel Harris (1995), to name just a few, define the role of the writing center in terms that clearly echo Murphy’s liberal model—a model we follow in the Salem State writing center. For instance, the central text in our tutor training course is Meyer and Smith’s *Practical Tutor*, whose emphasis on dialogic procedures and the entire writing process resembles earlier guides such as Wiener’s chapter on “Writing Centers” in *The Writing Room* (1980) and Harris’s *Teaching One-to-One* (1986) as well as later manuals like the second edition of Clark’s *Writing in the Center* (1992). All of these texts, along with others, share a liberal perspective as their core philosophy.

Thus the context for our research is typical in two important ways: the academic profile of our freshmen (as gauged by their SAT verbal scores) approximates the national average for American colleges and universities, and the tutoring philosophy we follow reflects the approach adopted by most college writing centers.

## **The Faculty Survey**

To assess their perceptions of the writing center, we asked faculty to complete an anonymous one-page questionnaire (they could, if they wished, designate their department). By the end of fall term 1994, we had received 102 completed questionnaires (about 35 percent of the entire faculty). Of this total, approximately 15 percent came from English and the remainder from 18 other departments (10 percent did not specify a department). Included were faculty from the college’s three divisions: Arts and Sciences, Business, and Human Services. The responses thus represented a reasonably broad cross-section of the campus. Of the five questions on the survey, three were essentially background checks asking if faculty had ever referred students to the center and if so, how often. Not surprisingly, of those who returned the survey the vast majority (over 95 percent) had specifically directed students to the writing center.

Our real interest, however, lay in the other two questions. The first simply asked: “Would you briefly describe why you might suggest to a student that he/she go to the Writing Center?” Instead of providing a list of possible reasons to check off, we kept the question deliberately open-ended because we wanted the faculty to define their reasons in their own words, without any prompts from us. At the same time, we limited the question to referrals of individual students because we wanted faculty to consider

initiatives that went beyond passing out flyers on the first day of class and offering some perfunctory recommendations about using the center. In this way we hoped to get a truer picture of their attitude toward the center and toward the students they referred. Of the 88 faculty who answered this question, almost 97 percent of their responses (85 of 88) fell into one of four categories:

I. 31 percent (n=27) Comments pointing *exclusively* to grammatical, mechanical, or syntactical problems (“remediation for poorly executed written work—syntax, grammar, etc.,” “difficulty with basic sentence structure, grammar, and spelling,” “technical problems—grammar, punctuation, spelling,” “grammar and sentence structure problems,” “careless grammatical problems”).

II. 31 percent (n=27) Comments pointing to a general level of skills deficiency (“poor written English,” “student represents himself as poor writer,” “needs help,” “poorly written essays or exams,” “writing is severely deficient,” “cannot write essay exams clearly,” “when I feel the student cannot handle the language,” “poor writing skills”).

III. 25 percent (n=22) Comments pointing to problems *including* grammar and mechanics (“poor organization, lack of clarity, grammar problems,” “to improve their grammar and to organize and develop their ideas,” “grammar problems, poor sentence structure, difficulty organizing papers,” “difficulty with spelling, grammar, and formulating their ideas”).

IV. 10 percent (n=9) Comments pointing to discrete problems (generally in structure and organization) other than grammar or mechanics (“help with formatting and structuring writing,” “to help organize a writing assignment,” “lack of coherence,” “unclear or unorganized overall structure”).

Only three comments looked beyond problems, either specific or general, and suggested instead that getting informed feedback can help any writer improve:

“I’ve explained to students that having a well-trained, trusted reader is a necessary—and normal—part of any good writer’s process.”

“For help with revising a paper.”

“I think *all* people should constantly strive to improve their writing skills.”

The faculty’s response overwhelmingly voiced the conservative perspective that Murphy describes—a perspective that emphasizes surface errors,

focuses on rectifying weaknesses, and appears to consider writing the arrangement of disparate parts and the product of isolated skills. In their totality, the survey results create a kind of time warp as they echo Robert Moore's 1950 essay in *College English*. Based on data collected from twenty-four universities and colleges with established writing clinics or labs, Moore offers a detailed picture of the mid-century writing center (still a relatively new phenomenon on American campuses). His characterization of such centers—"remedial agencies for removing students' deficiencies in composition" (388)—as well as his description of their emphasis on mechanical and organizational problems, perfectly catch the faculty's feelings forty-five years later. Though not all early labs fit this narrow model, as Peter Carino has recently shown, to the writing center community today, Moore's article probably seems an interesting bit of writing center lore, a kind of historical marker which can help show us how far we have come in our thinking about writing and about writing centers. To the faculty in our survey, however, Moore's attitude represents not the past but the present; it's not a barometer of where we have been but where we should be.

Many of the comments also convey an exasperated tone, a subtext which implies that students sent to the writing center shouldn't be in college in the first place: "Can not write a simple test question," "When a student's writing is so inarticulate that it would represent embarrassment to the college," "The student lacks the ability to write a complete sentence," "Inability to construct a grammatically correct sentence," "Failure to meet college writing standards." The undercurrent of futility running through such remarks can't help but color the students' image of themselves as well as their perception of the writing center. Assessments of faculty attitudes at other institutions suggest that our Salem colleagues are hardly unique. Responses to a questionnaire from a 1992 WAC workshop at East Central University in Oklahoma evoked this conclusion: "Faculty still see us [writing center] as a remediation lab, concentrating on mechanical aspects of writing" (Davis 7). And ten years earlier a survey of twenty-six English faculty at Indiana University of Pennsylvania revealed that errors in grammar and punctuation were the main reasons students were referred to the writing center (Hayward 5). Such reports, Salem's included, should caution against any untested assumptions that a faculty and a writing center share a common vision.

The other question used to assess faculty sentiment was decidedly more pointed: "Have you ever recommended that your best student writers visit the Writing Center? Yes \_\_\_ Why? No \_\_\_ Why?" As might be expected, the answers we received generally mirrored the attitudes evoked by the earlier question. Of the 93 faculty who responded, 75 percent checked "No" (70 of 93). Even this figure is deceptively low since over half of the 23 faculty who answered "Yes" supplied reasons that either missed the intent of the question ("to see if the student can become a tutor"), or sounded like a



blanket suggestion rather than a specific directive to a good writer (“Yes, as part of a general recommendation to the class”), or still focused on problems (“may need assistance on a weak part of a paper”). At best, only 10 percent of the faculty (9 out of 93) saw the center as an appropriate place for skilled writers to go.

The reasons for saying “no” generally split into three categories, with the two largest essentially representing different ways of saying the same thing. Many faculty simply felt that good writers don’t need a writing center: “they can write,” “they are doing well,” “not necessary,” “I’m not sure what the Writing Center could offer them,” “they exhibited good writing already,” “did not think they needed help.” Approximately the same number deliver a similar message but with a different focus. If good writers don’t need the center, then the obverse must be true: “I assume that the center is for those needing assistance with their skills,” “I had considered the Writing Center to be for remedial help,” “I guess I look at it as a place for those who have problems,” “I see it as a place to learn the basics of writing.” Both vantage points clearly narrow the suitable clientele to the problem writer and recall the kind of mindset that Stephen North decries—the view that “writers fall into three fairly distinct groups: the talented, the average, and the others; and the Writing Center’s only logical *raison d’être* must be to handle those others” (435). This mindset, however, did not extend to all faculty in the survey. A small number actually appeared intrigued by our question and receptive to a notion that they had apparently never considered: “A very good question,” “Never thought of it,” “Good question—I can see where this might be a good idea,” “It never occurred to me,” “That’s a good question—maybe I should,” “I don’t know why.” But in the context of the entire survey, such sentiment seemed decidedly muted.

## The Student Response

As noted earlier, we used various instruments to elicit students’ feelings about working in the center: end-of-the-term questionnaires, on-going journal entries, take-home exams, and on occasion formal papers. Taken together, these documents provide abundant opportunity for comparing student reactions from three distinct classes: developmental writing, regular composition, and honors English. The comparisons central to this essay addressed three questions: How much did the groups vary in their overall response to the tutoring? Did the tutoring priorities shift significantly from one group to another? Did different groups perceive different benefits in the tutoring? In each case the groups’ answers were notably similar—they concurred in their overall assessment of the center, the focus of the tutoring did not change sharply from one group to the next, and each group valued the tutoring for identical reasons. Especially telling were the parallels between the honors sections and the other classes since honors students

represent those competent and sometimes talented writers who are rarely directed to a writing center.

The end-of-the-term questionnaires provide a good starting point for comparing overall student response. As noted above, we have always used these questionnaires in the developmental sections we service each term, but for this study I'm going to consider developmental data only from the past two years since this period roughly corresponds to the time frame when the other groups were surveyed. We can begin our look at student attitudes with two points of easy comparison. Early in the questionnaire students were asked to rate their experience in the center on a five-part scale: "very positive," "positive," "no impact," "negative," "very negative." In all three sections, the vast majority rated their experience "very positive" or "positive."

Developmental Sections—85 percent (73 of 86)

Regular Sections—92 percent (34 of 37)

Honors Sections—88 percent (29 of 33)

Each group registered a clearly favorable response, and in their overall assessment at least, the strong writers were indistinguishable from the weaker ones. In all groups, the vast majority of students reacted positively to the tutoring.

The questionnaire later asked students to check off which of five areas they had worked on most often in the center. Again, the results were instructive.

	Developmental (111 checks)	Regular (63 checks)	Honors (58 checks)
Prewriting/brainstorming	21%	28%	17%
Thesis/main idea	14%	30%	26%
Org./paragraphing	37%	28%	33%
Style/sentence structure	15%	11%	19%
Grammar/spell./punct.	14%	3%	5%

The sequence here, of course, represents our own tutoring priorities since we, like most writing centers, first try to emphasize higher-order issues such as helping writers generate ideas, discover focus, and mold structure to purpose (activities that correspond to the first three areas listed on the questionnaire). But regardless of these priorities, we always adapt to the students' particular needs and take our lead from the specific writing they bring to the center. Despite the latitude inherent in this individualized approach, a clear pattern still emerges in the students' answers. Though there is some variation among groups (grammatical and mechanical errors, for instance, were discussed more frequently in developmental sessions than in the other two), in all categories global issues by far received the greatest

attention. Even the developmental students reported that over 70 percent of their time was spent on larger compositional concerns—issues which often require working on cognitive skills like analyzing and conceptualizing. This overall pattern is significant for two related reasons. Since the students enthusiastically endorsed their experience in the center, they apparently felt that the focus of our tutoring addressed their particular needs as writers. And, equally important, the work of all three groups clustered around similar activities or concerns, suggesting that the center's priorities benefit writers of widely varying ability.

Though suggestive of overall trends, checks on questionnaires obviously lack the resonance and force of the students' own voices as heard in literally hundreds of pages of journal entries and more formalized commentaries. Over and over, students reaffirm the center's core belief: that all writers need a supportive and informed audience. Throughout, they reiterate the advantage of having a trusted outsider to talk to about their work. Listen to some representative remarks that echo this theme. [When quoting from students here and later, I'll use notations (H) for honors, (R) for regular, and (D) for developmental since it's important to underscore the shared sentiment of these groups.]

It was good to have another viewpoint on my writing and one that would be serious and objective. (H)

I'm a person who needs feedback on my writing. The writing center is the ideal place to go. (H)

When an outsider reads my work, it becomes clear that my point isn't always understood. I need that kind of reaction. (R)

I like having a different perspective on my papers. (R)

It's important for me to have a reader since I tend to leave out details and assume that the reader knows what I mean. (D)

It helped to have an outsider to point out areas that weren't clear. (D)

All groups repeat the same refrain—the advantage of getting informed response to their writing. But it's a refrain that emerges out of a special setting. The students are not reacting to written comments on their papers nor to quick verbal assessments but to sustained dialogue about choices they made in their writing and about the effect these choices may produce on a reader. They are, in a word, endorsing the kind of extended reader response characteristically found in writing centers.

Besides stressing the value of an outside reader, the students' comments cluster around the kinds of issues that Muriel Harris discusses. Harris

primarily addresses faculty outside the writing center community and demonstrates how tutorial interaction helps students in ways “that are not possible in other institutionalized settings” (“Talking” 27). To document this claim, Harris takes sample student comments from anonymous evaluation forms filed at Purdue University’s Writing Center and groups them into four categories: “Encouraging Independence in Collaborative Talk,” “Assisting with Acquisition of Strategic Knowledge,” “Assisting with Affective Concerns,” and “Interpreting the Meaning of Academic Language.” As Harris eloquently shows, each of these categories promotes a writer’s growth and involves actions and attitudes uniquely nurtured by one-on-one tutoring. Her study, however, does not offer distinctions, academic or otherwise, among the writing center clients she quotes. But if we view the student comments from Salem through the frame that Harris provides, we can see that different groups of writers, representing different levels of ability, claim to garner identical benefits from tutoring.

#### **Category I: Encouraging Independence in Collaborative Talk**

He’s very willing to let me sort of “run the show” but offers extremely important suggestions if I get stuck. (H)

The tutor has an excellent approach. She never gives me the answers to anything. She asks me questions and lets me figure it out for myself. (H)

Patricia gave me the help I needed but didn’t do my work for me. She didn’t force anything on me or change my mind. She just encouraged me to write with my own ideas. (R)

She makes me think for myself. (R)

The tutor makes me say the answer rather than just give it to me. I find it useful because I find out I can do it myself. (D)

My tutor’s fantastic. She gets me to come out with my ideas without just telling me what’s wrong. (D)

Our students, like Harris’s, value the independent thinking that tutoring encourages. They acknowledge the importance of sorting through issues on their own and having the tutor act largely as a guide or catalyst. By putting students more in charge, this process discourages the dependency (even passivity) with which students often react when faced with instructors’ written corrections or directives on their work. Whether developmental, regular, or honors, the students prefer a process that enables them to retain authority over their own writing.

## **Category II: Assisting with Acquisition of Strategic Knowledge**

She had me brainstorm what I wanted to say and then take notes. (H)

My tutor showed me how to use a few words to describe the main idea of a paragraph and write them in the margin. (H)

I am learning how to open myself up for new ideas and also digging into my own experiences and reflecting upon them for insight. (R)

I am learning how to ask myself the same questions Camille asks me when she's reading my paper. This helps me a lot when I'm revising. (R)

The tutor showed me how to come up with a basic outline. (D)

Another thing I learned from my conference was how to tie my paragraphs together. (D)

As Harris explains, tutorial interaction can help students gain practical knowledge—i.e., knowledge acquired through performing some activity—by having them directly experience different compositional strategies. Working side by side with a tutor, students can practice various exploring techniques, for instance, and if needed get feedback on what they are doing right at that moment. The key term students use in their comments is “how to,” words that in this context suggest the ability to perform some sort of action. Thus, for students across the board, tutoring provides the opportunity to practice and perhaps internalize various procedures, to rehearse them in front of an attentive audience who can step in if the writer gets stuck or simply wants some response. Regardless of their academic placement, our students often talked in terms of learning how to do something—or, in Harris's words, learning some “strategic knowledge” to apply to their writing.

Though no less important, Harris's last two categories virtually speak for themselves and require little explanation.

## **Category III: Assisting with Affective Concerns**

I was surprised at how good I felt after I left the conference. She made me feel like I wasn't stupid for writing about being afraid. (H)

She helped me regain my confidence and helped me generate new ideas for my paper. (H)

Our discussion helped me realize that my difficulties were not uncommon and that other writers have to get over the same obstacles. (R)

After this session I am starting to feel more comfortable writing. (R)

I felt discouraged when I first sat down but then as the session went on things went smoothly. I felt much better. (D)

After discussing my paper with my tutor I felt more confident. (D)

For many students tutoring clearly boosts their confidence and eases their self-doubts. We know that addressing individual needs of this sort is next to impossible to do in the classroom; yet we also know how easily lack of confidence can erode motivation and invite writer's block. Significantly, this anxiety crosses different academic groups and, as the students' remarks illustrate, affects strong writers as well as weak ones.

#### **Category IV: Interpreting the Meaning of Academic Language**

I had absolutely no idea how to start the mid-term so I brought my syllabus and the assignment with me. (H)

The conference was important because I had many questions about how my first essay had been graded and what I would need to do to improve that mark. (H)

She went over your comments and basically translated them for me. (R)

I also wanted her to clarify the second paper. I'm not totally clear on the assignment. (R)

I had good results because after I met with my tutor I understood what you meant by emotional and logical appeals in the assignment. (D)

Ellen showed me how to break down a writing assignment so I can understand it better. (D)

Like the previous category, this one is self-explanatory and should resonate with anyone who has ever worked in a writing center. Having one foot in the classroom and the other in the center, I have seen how easily my own assignments can be misconstrued and my paper comments occasion confusion rather than clarification. Thus I'm not surprised that students from all groups frequently ask tutors to help them navigate the language of their assignments and the comments they receive on their papers.

Seeing how closely our students' comments fit Harris's categories underscores several important points. Most obvious is that our students are in no way atypical. They confirm exactly what Harris's piece argues—that tutorial interaction has a unique dynamic that helps students in special ways—and both the Salem and the Purdue students mirror one another in

defining what these are. More significant, however, is the dimension our research adds to Harris's analysis since we purposely studied students who represented very different levels of writing ability (as noted earlier, Harris does not make any distinctions among the students she quotes). Whether in developmental, regular, or honors English, our students talk about the benefits of tutoring in comparable terms. They voice similar concerns, face similar problems, and value similar approaches. These results explicitly document what Harris's piece only implies: that developing independent thinking, gaining confidence, and understanding professors' assignments and comments are issues for all student writers regardless of ability.

Finally, built into the experiments were two features that we believed fostered the students' highly positive response. All classes in the study (developmental, regular, and honors) allowed students to revise their papers, a practice which generally encourages more productive tutoring sessions. When discussing pieces that can be reworked, students often seem more open about their writing—more interested in getting a reader's response, more willing to explore issues that gave them difficulty, and more ready to try out alternative strategies. And because they don't have the pressure of a one-shot submission, they appear less concerned with making surface issues the main order of business. The experiments also involved a series of tutoring sessions, not just an isolated conference or two—another procedure that obviously affected the nature of the students' work in the center as well as their attitude toward the tutoring. Among other things, this arrangement gave students and tutors the opportunity to look for recurring issues in the writing and to move the discussions beyond the context of a particular assignment. In effect, it helped shift attention from a specific paper to the student's writing process in general, the kind of shift that promotes long term growth and improvement.

## Conclusions

In its broad outlines, our research highlights three related issues: (1) it reaffirms what is for most writing centers an inescapable reality, i.e., the central role of the faculty in the student/writing center connection; (2) it reflects a problem common to this reality, namely, the faculty's tendency to marginalize writing centers by seeing them primarily as places where weak writers work on sentence-level and structural problems; (3) most important, it offers a powerful response to such attitudes by documenting the center's value to proficient writers and by showing that both strong and weak writers favor a vastly more inclusive tutoring agenda than faculties frequently envision. All three issues clearly speak to the concern that initially prompted our study—the desire we share with most writing centers to attract better writers and thus broaden the range of students we typically see.

Most obviously, the research reminds us that it is the faculty who largely

determine which students will visit a writing center. Consider, for instance, our students' Janus-like response to the following two questions:

Should tutoring be required for next year's students?

Regular Sections: Yes	82 %	Honors Sections: Yes	82 %
No	15 %	No	18 %
Not Sure	3 %		

If you were not required to go to the Writing Center, but were just given information about its services, do you think you would have gone for tutoring?

Regular Sections: Yes	7 %	Honors Sections: Yes	19 %
No	82 %	No	81 %
Not Sure	11 %		

On the one hand, students apparently think so highly of the tutoring that over 80 percent would make it a requirement, yet just as many admit that they would not have gone on their own, even if informed about the center and its services. These figures echo Wendy Bishop's study at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks. Of the 200 writing center clients Bishop surveyed, only 11 percent went because of advertising, staff visits to classes, or recommendations of friends. The instructor's suggestion, or in some cases requirement, accounted for the remaining 89 percent (34). Surveys like ours and Bishop's deliver an unmistakable message: faculty intervention, of one sort or another, is requisite for getting most students into a writing center. For the majority of centers this represents not a philosophical issue but a practical one. Though many directors may agree in principle that students should take responsibility for their own learning and decide for themselves when and how to use a writing center (Warnock 20), the facts of life on most campuses remind us that the faculty remain our chief source of students.

This reality, especially when combined with the history of misunderstanding between faculties and writing centers, underscores an important lesson—the need for writing centers to monitor faculty perceptions and see how colleagues across campus define the center's function. Despite the motif of growth and campus-wide acceptance that runs through such collections as *The Writing Center: New Directions* (1991) or the more recent *Writing Centers in Context* (1993), it's still prudent to double-check the view from the outside. Even Muriel Harris's 1995 article on the special nature of tutorial interaction assumes that many faculty are not clear about what actually goes on in writing tutorials. And if we consider Harris's primary audience in *College English*—other English faculty, a group presumably more aware of writing conference dynamics than colleagues in other disciplines—



then it's not unreasonable to suspect that misunderstanding continues between the writing center and the faculty at large. These two conditions—the faculty's impact on the writing center and the possibility (if not likelihood) that the writing center and the faculty operate from some different assumptions—make it imperative that writing centers determine how faculty perceive the center's role on campus. Knowing one's audience—its attitudes, its preconceptions, its priorities—is the first rule of persuasive discourse. And that rule certainly applies here. To communicate effectively with the faculty, a writing center needs a clear sense of the faculty's point of view, especially if their perspective is likely to clash with the center's. In our particular case, the faculty survey was a potent reality check that will help us shape how we present ourselves to the rest of the campus and how we encourage faculty to take a more expansive view of our work.

But the student experiments, especially those involving honors classes, constitute the most significant part of our study since they dramatically validate the central tenet of writing center theory—the belief that all writers can potentially benefit from discussing their work with a trained, sympathetic reader. However staunchly we may espouse this principle, it is not a belief readily embraced across campus, as evidenced by the disproportionately small number of good writers seen in most writing centers. Though faculty may acknowledge the value of writing centers for weak students, they seldom connect the center to the needs of the competent writer. This attitude apparently rests on two related assumptions, both contravened by the honors students in our research. Many faculty still hold a minimalist view of writing centers which assumes a focus on issues like grammar and mechanics that seldom trouble able writers. But in describing their work in the center, the honors students present a much different picture. According to their journal entries, questions of focus, of audience needs, of selection and arrangement of material, and of conceptual coherence dominate the students' conversations with their tutors. Our survey also suggests that faculty may assume that strong writers don't need extensive one-on-one tutoring, regardless of its focus; as one respondent put it, the better writer requires "only a quick suggestion or two" (which the instructor can presumably provide). But the honors students' vigorous approval of weekly tutoring belies this assumption as well. The students apparently value the tutoring as an opportunity to examine their thinking, to test out their ideas, to talk at length about their drafts—an experience quite different from the recommended "quick suggestion or two." Thus, from a practical point of view, the student commentaries, particularly the voices of the honors students, present a formidable resource for challenging and hopefully altering faculty attitudes. Because they are grounded in concrete experience, the student responses offer compelling support for writing center claims that faculty might otherwise consider unrealistic or even self-serving.

And the most telling of these responses remain the honors students' forceful endorsement of the tutoring since it directly counters the faculty's almost automatic association of writing centers with struggling students. Given the abundance of weak writers on many campuses, the traditional pairing of the term "tutoring" with catch-up work, and the historic connection of writing centers to developmental programs, it's hardly surprising that such perceptions persist and that faculty rarely refer able writers to the writing center. Our research, however, offers the kind of evidence that can help change this pattern since it challenges faculty to reassess their assumptions about the writing center and the type of student it should serve. In particular, the reactions of the honors students eloquently answer faculty skepticism about the center's relevance to the better writer and powerfully document the fact that writing centers can benefit all writers, including good ones.

From a practical standpoint, we have already begun using the research to re-educate our campus about the writing center and its goals. The study immediately prompted us to revise our standard publicity flyers and to eliminate terms like "writing difficulties" and "composition problems" which might evoke a remedial stigma. Although our flyers had always stressed the center's availability to all students, we realized that we had partially subverted this message by our negative terminology. So the first tangible result of the study was a careful editing of our own PR. In addition, we have directly communicated the research results to faculty through two different channels. One was a detailed memo to all faculty (sent in early September) which contrasted the reactions of the honors students to writing center "myths" uncovered in the faculty survey. This was, we hoped, a diplomatic way of asking faculty to re-examine their preconceptions about what we do. Later in the semester we wrote a more lengthy report for our campus WAC publication. Here we geared our commentary on the research to faculty already committed to student writing in their disciplines. And we've also incorporated the study into our tutor training since we know from experience that new student tutors generally share the faculty's limited view of the center. Besides expanding the tutors' perspective on their work, the research also boosts morale by showing inexperienced tutors how much students value their writing center conferences.

But these are only the first steps in a much longer process. We will, of course, continue to cite this research in subsequent faculty mailings; but we also envision using our study to forge closer links with the college's relatively new WAC program, which to date has focused exclusively on faculty development. Although our research included only freshman English classes, the results demonstrate how fully our writing center philosophy supports the writing-across-the-curriculum agenda. As noted earlier, our experiments involved process-oriented writing classes that allowed students to revise and resubmit their work. This approach clearly favors WAC's emphasis on

writing as a way of learning and its concern with getting students to explore their ideas in depth. Also, since the students we studied covered a broad range of abilities, our results take into account the academic diversity that WAC must necessarily consider. Exactly how the writing center will work with the WAC program is yet to be decided, but our research results should make the writing center especially appealing to faculty committed to WAC principles. And this, we hope, will significantly broaden the range of students we now see.

In several years we plan a follow-up study to determine if we have effected any noticeable change in faculty perceptions of the center and in the types of writers we typically work with. This study will also try to address some questions that our current survey left unanswered. In particular, we'd want to know more about how faculty use writing in their classes. What are the faculty's goals for the writing they assign? Do they look at student drafts? Do they allow students to revise and resubmit their work? To understand more clearly the faculty's view of the writing center, we need a better fix on how they go about incorporating student writing into their teaching. But these are issues for another day. Our present task is to see that the research we've already completed is put to practical use and that we exploit its potential for challenging faculty attitudes about the writing center and the clientele it should serve.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>I would like to thank my colleagues Nancy Schultz and Donnalee Rubin for their valuable comments on early drafts of this piece.

## Works Cited

- Bishop, Wendy. "Bringing Writers to the Center: Some Survey Results, Surmises, and Suggestions." *The Writing Center Journal* 10 (1990): 31-44.
- Carino, Peter. "Early Writing Centers: Toward a History." *The Writing Center Journal* 15.2 (1995): 103-115.
- Clark, Irene L. "Leading the Horse: The Writing Center and Required Visits." *The Writing Center Journal* 5 (1985): 31-34.
- . *Writing in the Center: Teaching in a Writing Center Setting*. 2nd ed. Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt, 1992.

- Davis, Kevin. "What the Faculty Know About What We Do: Survey Results." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 17.5 (Jan. 1993): 6-7.
- George, Diana, and Nancy Grimm. "Expanded Roles/Expanded Responsibilities: The Changing Nature of Writing Centers Today." *The Writing Center Journal* 11 (1990): 56-66.
- Harris, Muriel. "Talking in the Middle: Why Writers Need Writing Tutors." *College English* 57 (1995): 27-42.
- . *Teaching One-to-One: The Writing Conference*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1986.
- . "What's Up and What's In: Trends and Traditions in Writing Centers." *The Writing Center Journal* 11 (1990): 15-25.
- Hayward, Malcolm. "Assessing Attitudes Towards the Writing Center." *The Writing Center Journal* 3.2 (1983): 1-10.
- Hobson, Eric. "Where Theory and Practice Collide: Beyond Essentialist Descriptions of the Writing Center." Diss. U of Tennessee, 1992.
- Kinthead, Joyce, and Jeanette G. Harris. *Writing Centers in Context*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1993.
- Leahy, Richard. "What the College Writing Center Is—and Isn't." *College Teaching* 38 (1990): 43-48.
- Meyer, Emily, and Louise Z. Smith. *The Practical Tutor*. New York: Oxford UP, 1987.
- Moore, Robert H. "The Writing Clinic and the Writing Laboratory." *College English* 11 (1950): 388-395.
- Murphy, Christina. "Writing Centers in Context: Responding to Current Educational Theory." *The Writing Center: New Directions*. Ed. Ray Wallace and Jeanne Simpson. New York: Garland, 1991. 276-286.
- North, Stephen A. "The Idea of a Writing Center." *College English* 46 (1984): 433-446.

Wallace, Ray, and Jeanne Simpson. *The Writing Center: New Directions*. New York: Garland, 1991.

Warnock, Tilly, and John Warnock. "Liberatory Writing Centers: Restoring Authority to Writers." *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration*. Ed. Gary A. Olson. Urbana, IL: NTCE, 1984. 16-23.

Wiener, Harvey S. *The Writing Room*. New York: Oxford UP, 1981.

---

**Frank Devlin** co-directs the Writing Center at Salem State College (MA). He has written articles for *Freshman English News*, *English Record*, *Papers on Language and Literature*, and *Film/Literature Quarterly*.