How Important Is the Local, Really? A Cross-Institutional Quantitative Assessment of Frequently Asked Questions in Writing Center Exit Surveys

Pam Bromley

Kara Northway

Eliana Schonberg

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

Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1755

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.
How Important Is the Local, Really?
A Cross-Institutional Quantitative Assessment of Frequently Asked Questions in Writing Center Exit Surveys

by Pam Bromley, Kara Northway, and Eliana Schonberg

About the Authors

Pam Bromley is Assistant Director of College Writing and Assistant Professor of Politics at Pomona College. There, she coordinates the writing center and teaches courses in writing and international relations. Her research empirically examines the work of writing centers and international institutions. Bromley, Northway, and Schonberg met at the 2009 IWCA Summer Institute, where they began their collaborative research.

Kara Northway is Assistant Professor of English and Writing Center Development Director at Kansas State University, where her work involves increasing the reach of the Writing Center’s services. Her interests include undergraduate research, the relationship between tutoring and teaching, and early modern rhetoric. In 2010, Bromley, Northway, and Schonberg published a piece in Praxis related to this article, entitled “Bridging Institutions to Cross the Quantitative/Qualitative Divide.”

Eliana Schonberg is the founding director of the University Writing Center at the University of Denver, where she is also a Senior Lecturer in the University Writing Program. She is the co-founder and former co-editor of Praxis: A Writing Center Journal. In addition to her collaborative cross-institutional research, her ongoing work examines writing center practitioners’ and translators’ relationships to authors. She has also recently started a project theorizing community writing center initiatives through a Burkean lens.
Much writing center assessment literature focuses on the deep importance of local, institutional context. Still, a tension exists in the field more generally, and in assessment research specifically, between a reliance on local practice and a reliance on shared lore (Driscoll and Perdue; Thompson et al.). This tension can be fruitfully examined through exit surveys because they are one of the most common writing center assessment tools. Many surveys ask similar questions about satisfaction and demographic assessment for similar reasons: (1) to refine practice (Gillam 6); (2) to “test [the field’s] key assumptions” (Bell 8); and (3) to ask whether we are helping to improve student writing (Lerner, “Counting” 1; see also Lerner, “Choosing”; Donnelli and Garrison; Thompson). Despite these important and largely disciplinary reasons for conducting exit surveys, no one has examined the quantitative results of surveys across institutions to see if commonalities, beyond the anecdotal, exist among writing centers.2

We—three researchers at three very different institutions—designed a cross-institutional student exit survey to examine the tension between local context and shared practice in order to interrogate the presence, nature, and extent of any similarities and differences. We created and administered the same survey at a large, public land-grant university, a medium-sized private university, and a small liberal arts college. This study falls within a tradition of scholarship on student perceptions and student satisfaction, including the work of Muriel Harris, Neal Lerner, Peter Carino and Doug Enders, Terese Thonus, and Julie Bauer Morrison and Jean-Paul Nadeau. In shaping our research, we sought, in agreement with Dana Lynn Driscoll and Sherry Wynn Perdue, to move beyond lore and analysis of local context in order to build on previous studies to arrive at “evidence-based practice” (32; see also Babcock and Thonus).

In our cross-institutional study, we ask whether and how universal and local factors (such as the type of institutional home or makeup of the student body) affect student usage of and attitudes toward writing center sessions. Like many writing center exit surveys, ours poses three types of questions: (1) demographic; (2) those related to motivation for visit and therefore not influenced by the session; and (3) those related to satisfaction and therefore influenced by the session. We find broad agreement in student responses about writing center consultations
across our three institutions. Our quantitative data demonstrate that our institutions see as many or more racial and ethnic minorities and multilingual writers than our campus populations would suggest, our students are motivated to use our writing centers for similar reasons, and our students are generally satisfied with their writing center experiences. Our findings therefore contribute to the continuing debate about the importance of local institutional context versus larger disciplinary identities (Driscoll and Perdue 11-12; Fitzgerald 84). Explaining away differences among writing centers as merely due to local context can keep us from advocating effectively for ourselves in the university (such as when making funding requests) and from articulating a shared position in our disciplinary conversations (such as when considering potential accreditation for writing centers). In fact, the overwhelming similarities in student demographics, motivation, and satisfaction that we find, despite our institutional differences, suggest the need for a new disciplinary focus beyond the local.

Background

The writing centers we work with are located within different kinds of institutions: a large public land-grant university (Large Public); a medium private selective doctoral university (Medium Private); and a small private selective liberal arts college (SLAC). Our study fails to include 24% of the types of institutions (497 total) participating in the most recent survey (2005-06) of the Writing Centers Research Project (WCRP), including community colleges and secondary schools. Our institutions also do not capture other diversity within the university system, including historically black, Hispanic, and tribal universities, among others (WCRP; see Griffin et al. for a study of the 2003-04 data. Because the 2005-06 data is not publicly available, we refer throughout to Griffin et al.'s study and note any significant variations between 2003-04 and 2005-06; see Holland). While our institutions do not fully represent the range of the writing center field, they are quite different from each other, as shown in Table 1.

Regarding the number of consultations, the latest study of the WCRP reported that writing centers conduct from 30 to 5,624
consultations in an academic year (Griffin et al. 25), while the 2005–06 data show that the number of consultations ranges from 45 to 19,000; the number of consultations at our institutions positions us in the middle of the range.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Large Public</th>
<th>Medium Private</th>
<th>SLAC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of students eligible to use the writing center</td>
<td>18,800</td>
<td>10,500</td>
<td>1,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate-student users in addition to undergraduate users</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes, except law students</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Required visits</td>
<td>Yes, from students enrolled in a lab course</td>
<td>No, though there are a few exceptions</td>
<td>Yes, from students in courses with attached writing fellows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of consultations</td>
<td>~1000</td>
<td>~3000</td>
<td>~900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing center staff</td>
<td>5 master’s students in English</td>
<td>18: 13 master’s and doctoral students from humanities and social science disciplines; 5 undergraduates from across the disciplines; occasional help from writing program faculty</td>
<td>25 undergraduates (sophomores through seniors) from across the disciplines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff training in addition to regular staff meetings</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Tutor education course</td>
<td>Tutor education course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff longevity</td>
<td>Minimum one-semester commitment; maximum one year; one-fifth return for a second semester</td>
<td>Minimum one-year commitment; maximum five years, one-third or more return each year</td>
<td>Minimum three-semester commitment; maximum six-semesters; two-thirds return each year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Writing Center Differences in Student Population, Clientele, and Staff, AY 2009–10

Griffin et al. found that 22% of writing center staffs are exclusively undergraduate, 4% are exclusively graduate students, and 68% are
mixed (including faculty, professional tutors, and volunteers) (19–20); the 2005–06 survey shows that 20% of centers are staffed exclusively by undergraduates, 5% exclusively by graduate students, and 62% are mixed. One of our centers is staffed exclusively by undergraduates, one exclusively by graduate students, and one by a mixed staff. Since we collected our cross-institutional data, and in response to this research, the Large Public has experienced substantial growth and changes in all of these areas. The broad differences in size, staff makeup, and clientele across our three institutions make our many common findings relevant to the larger field.

Methodology

In examining student exit surveys, our goal was to create replicable, aggregable, and data-supported (RAD) research. As recently noted by Driscoll and Perdue, such studies share “a common research language,” which enables scholars to empirically examine common writing center practices and allows others to trace a study’s steps and retest its claims (35). As other scholars have noted, quantitative studies are one way to conduct this work though they have limitations (Gofine 44-45; Lerner “Counting” 2). However, the benefit of quantitative over qualitative data is that it can help us make discipline-wide claims that otherwise we could not (Carino and Enders 84; Driscoll and Perdue 35; Gofine 47). Of course, we should not believe in statistics as “necessarily a more reliable way to measure complex realities; . . . they are one way of knowing, helpful in illuminating . . . ‘dark knowledge’—lore” (Carino and Enders 85).

Because exit surveys can be a replicable assessment tool, in line with our RAD approach, we designed an exit survey to collect student responses to the same, frequently-asked questions at all three of our institutions. Our survey grew out of our assumption that some questions were common among centers; to get a sense of what these questions might be, we checked the archives of the writing center community’s unofficial listserv, WCenter, and found that questions about exit surveys assessing student satisfaction are asked at least once a year. Posts often share exit survey questions and reference previous WCenter discussions (see, for example, Elder; Smith). We
confirmed that our survey asks many of the questions that appear in the forms posted on WCenter. Of these exit survey questions, we classified as “frequently asked” those that appeared in a third or more of the posted surveys.

We found ten such questions: (1) Who visits the writing center? (2) How do students hear about the writing center? (3) Why do students come to the writing center? (4) Do they feel welcomed? (5) How satisfied are students with their relationship with their individual tutors? (6) How do students view the writing center/Are they satisfied with their visit to the writing center overall? (7) Would students consider returning/Would they would recommend the writing center to a friend? (8) Did students learn something new to apply in the future? (9) Did students feel like they had a clear sense of next steps? and (10) How could the writing center improve?

In this article, we draw on our survey results to look at the first seven of these ten common student-exit-survey questions, examining demographics, motivation for visit, and overall satisfaction. We are examining in our continuing research the last three common questions, including satisfaction based on demographics. We did not pre-test our survey with students to assure validity.

During the 2009-10 academic year, we placed links to the survey on computers in each center. We obtained approval from each of our institutional review boards prior to administering the survey. Using writing center computers, students completed the survey immediately after their appointments. Students had the option of responding to every question or checking a box noting that a question did not apply. As a result, we are reasonably certain that the responses we got to each question are a clear indication that students felt a particular question was applicable to a particular session. This strategy also enabled us to get responses from many students; we collected over 2,000 survey submissions across our institutions (n = 410 at the Large Public; n = 1481 at the Medium Private; n = 393 at the SLAC).4

Scholars have acknowledged the inherent limitations of exit surveys as a data collection method (see Gofine 42; Neuleib 12). Certainly, asking students to evaluate their sessions immediately might result in students reporting overly positive perceptions of their visit that obscure variation, as, for instance, James Bell has
cautioned (9). However, we subscribe to Sarah Liggett, Kerri Jordan, and Steve Price’s recent non-hierarchical taxonomy of writing center research methodologies in which they identify exit surveys as not just a means of data collection, but as a community-sponsored and valued “methodologically distinct way of making knowledge” (68). We chose to use online surveys because they were a convenient way to collect data and an easily replicable methodology.

We asked all consultants to ask every student with whom they met to complete the survey. We received survey responses from 38–48% of the appointments conducted at each of our centers. While there is potential for selection bias, we believe it is relatively limited. From talking with consultants, we found that some asked every writer with whom they met to complete the survey while others did not ask any writers to do so. When most students signed up for an appointment, they did not know which consultant they would meet with; as a result, students were just as likely to meet with a consultant who would ask them to complete the survey as not. Nor did consultants’ perceptions of how well a session went seem to influence whether they asked students to complete a survey. With respect to frequent visitors, while some opted not to complete the survey because they had done so already, others asked to complete the survey at the end of each appointment.

Below, we statistically assess student responses to typical writing center exit survey questions. We use two statistical tests (ANOVAs and t-tests) to determine whether any differences seen across institutions were meaningful, i.e., statistically significant. In conducting these tests, we evaluate differences across our institutions at the 0.05 level of significance. This means that if the significance level (p) is less than or equal to 5%, we are at least 95% confident that the difference observed is statistically significant and not simply the result of chance. When comparing results across institutions, we first conducted a single-factor ANOVA, a test that determines whether there is a statistically significant difference somewhere across institutions. If the ANOVA found that \( p \leq 0.05 \), then there is a statistically significant difference somewhere across the three institutions. If we found a significant difference using an ANOVA, we then conducted pairwise t-tests for each pair of institutions to determine where, across the three
Institutions, the significant difference was located. Pairwise t-tests compare the results from two institutions to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference between the two institutions’ results. Because conducting multiple t-tests increases the possibility of seeing a significant difference by chance, we used the Bonferroni correction to compensate for this increased likelihood of seeing a significant difference by chance; this required us to divide the significance level by the number of t-tests to arrive at an adjusted significance level for pairwise t-tests \((0.05/3 = 0.0167)\).

**Results and Discussion**

We find statistically significant commonalities across student responses to our shared exit survey. Our study focuses on three categories of frequently asked questions: demographics, motivation for visit, and satisfaction. We begin by analyzing those questions that do not change because of the session. In terms of demographics, we find that our writing centers see more students of color, English-language learners, and women than institutional demographics would suggest. When considering other questions that are not affected by the session itself, we focus on why students visit the writing center. Our most notable finding is that grades are not the only reason students do so; and in two of our centers, grades are not even the most common reason. Finally, we examine questions that are affected by the session itself. We find that student satisfaction was somewhat lower at the Large Public than at the other two institutions. Our overall findings, however, point to strong similarities across different kinds of writing centers and their student-users.

**Demographics**

Demographic questions in our survey respond to current scholarly concerns about working with diverse student populations (e.g., Greenfield and Rowan). As Harry Denny has recently written, “regardless of whether we have a diverse writing center or not . . . we still must create a space to dig into how racial identity politics play out in writing centers and beyond, and how they affect the myriad issues around learning to write” (37–38). Following Denny’s call, we
find that, consistently across institutions, a diverse group of students uses our writing centers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Large Public</th>
<th>Medium Private</th>
<th>SLAC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>48.9</td>
<td>72.0</td>
<td>60.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multilingual*</td>
<td>38.0</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
<td>37.7</td>
<td>51.3</td>
<td>44.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African-American</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>22.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other*</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to specify</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Demographics of Students Making Writing Center Visits (%), AY 2009–10
*Students who reported that English was not one of their first languages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Large Public</th>
<th>Medium Private</th>
<th>SLAC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>48.2</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>49.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonresident aliens*</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>81.9</td>
<td>65.2</td>
<td>45.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>38.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial / ethnic minorities</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian or Pacific Islander</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Institutional Demographics (%), AY 2009–10
*For the Large Public and SLAC, we include only undergraduate students, as those are the only students these writing centers serve. For the Medium Private, we include undergraduate and graduate students, as the writing center serves both populations (but does not serve the law school).
*We used non-resident aliens as the best-available proxy for multilingual students. We realize that this is far from an exact parallel.
*’Other’ includes American Indian or Alaska Native and Other.
Table 2 shows the demographic breakdown of students visiting our writing centers while Table 3 shows that of our institutions. While the findings related to demographics do not address student attitudes, the data reveal significant cross-institutional similarities. As shown in Tables 2 and 3, all three institutions see substantially more racial/ethnic minorities and multilingual writers than their institutional demographics would suggest. This is a major similarity.

Despite this important similarity, an unexpected apparent difference still exists across our institutions with respect to the gender of writing center users. Several single-institution studies show that at least some writing centers see more women (Tipper; Leit et al.). This is certainly true of the Medium Private and the SLAC, but not the Large Public. Comparing the gender of writing center users, an ANOVA finds a significant difference across our institutions (p<0.01). Pairwise t-tests also show a significant difference across all pairs of schools (p<0.01). One contributing factor may be that, in the fall of 2009, the Large Public institution collaborated with the athletics academic support office, and tutors saw ten male athletes who were required to come to the writing center weekly; at the Medium Private and at the SLAC, no particular force pulled male students toward writing center visits. In terms of the differences in usage between the Medium Private and the SLAC, a larger percentage of the student body at the Medium Private is women, which may explain the larger percentage of women using its center. Despite the partnership with athletics at the Large Public, our data demonstrate that women are more frequent visitors than their demographics would indicate; this apparent difference actually reveals our underlying similarities.

With respect to usage by multilingual writers, a previous study of the WCRP data produced mixed results. On the one hand, the study reports “only 21% of survey respondents were able to answer a question about the number of ESL students served by their writing centers” (Griffin et al. 15), though in 2005–06 the response rate had increased to 35%. On the other hand, the 2003–04 study notes that no empirical research has shown that these students are less likely to use the writing center and that, at least at one institution, multilingual writers made up more than half of all writing center visits (Griffin et al. 16).
We find that all three schools see more multilingual writers than their campus demographics would suggest. That all of our campuses see more multilingual writers is an important finding because other empirical research on this topic is lacking. As numbers of international students, and thus multilingual writers, continue to increase across the country (Institute of International Education), writing centers can expect to see growing numbers of multilingual writers among their clientele.

Despite this overall similarity, the Large Public and the Medium Private see significantly more multilingual writers than the SLAC. Comparing usage by multilingual writers across our institutions, an ANOVA shows a significant difference in the percentage of non-native speakers we see ($p \leq 0.01$). Pairwise t-tests show a significant difference between the SLAC and both the Large Public and the Medium Private ($p \leq 0.01$), but not between the Medium Private and the Large Public ($p > 0.05$). One possible explanation for this difference is that while fewer students at the SLAC reported that English was not their first language (16% at the SLAC compared to 38% at the Large Public and 39% at the Medium Private), many more students at the SLAC reported that English was one of their first languages (20% of students at the SLAC compared to 6% at the Medium Private and 2% at the Large Public). Even though a higher percentage of SLAC students reports English as one of their first languages, students' language identity is complex; in responding to our survey, students might select English as one of their first languages because students identify with both English and their home language in different ways (Chiang and Schmida; Nero).

Recent interest in anti-racism work in writing center scholarship suggests writing center usage by racial and ethnic minorities as a fruitful area for further research (Condon; Geller et al.; Greenfield and Rowan; Villanueva). Our study provides empirical evidence to support Denny's claim that, across the US, writing centers "more often than not" work with students of color (3); we find that all of our centers see students of color in numbers greater than or proportionate to our campus populations. Comparing the racial/ethnic distribution of visitors across our centers, an ANOVA does not show a significant difference across schools in the percentage of racial/ethnic minorities
who use the writing center ($p$>0.05). Thus, while differences in the breakdown of writing center users by race and ethnicity exist (see Table 2), these differences are not statistically significant across campuses. Still, we offer a tentative observation: 17% of visits at the Large Public's center were from African-American students, though they make up just 4% of the student body; the other institutions see African-American students in numbers relatively similar to the student body. This may be the result of the fact, mentioned above, that the Large Public required a group of male athletes, most of whom were African-American, to visit the center, while few required visits occurred at the other centers.

**Motivation**

In addition to demographics, we asked other questions unaffected by the individual session. Like many writing center practitioners, we wanted to know how students learned about the center and why they came for help with a particular assignment. Once again, our findings revealed important cross-institutional similarities.

We were not surprised to find that students learned about the resources available at their campus’ writing center in a variety of ways. However, even here, some important commonalities exist. Learning about the writing center from an instructor was the most prevalent response across institutions (60–79%), followed by recommendations from a fellow student (23–29%), and class visits by writing center representatives (11–32%). However, institutional context seems key. Comparatively more students at the Medium Private learned about the center from a brochure (18%), resource fair (14%), and website (9%). At the SLAC, there was no brochure, though 12% of students learned about the center from a resource fair and 14% from the website. At the Large Public, just 4% of students learned about the center from a brochure, 3% from a resource fair, and 2% from the website. These differences may be explained by the extremely limited budget for promotional materials at the Large Public and this writing center’s lack of integration into the institutional electronic portal.

Turning to the issue of student motivation for visiting the writing center, we find broad similarities in responses across institutions.
Most students selected multiple reasons for their visits, a finding in line with Mike Matthews's previous study (6). However, five primary reasons for student visits are consistent: improvement of writing in general, improvement of grades, instructor recommendation, challenging assignments, and assurance that students are on the right track, as shown in Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why did you come to the Writing Center for help with this particular assignment?</th>
<th>Large Public</th>
<th>Medium Private</th>
<th>SLAC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I thought visiting the writing center might help me improve my writing in general</td>
<td>45.7</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>40.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I thought visiting the writing center might help me get a better grade</td>
<td>48.7</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>43.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My instructor recommended it for this assignment</td>
<td>43.7</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>43.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I just wanted someone to read through what I had to make sure I am on the right track</td>
<td>39.9</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>42.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is a particularly challenging assignment, and I thought I could use additional feedback</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td>41.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visiting the writing center is a regular part of my writing process/routine</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My friend recommended it for this assignment</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students selecting multiple responses</td>
<td>60.9</td>
<td>59.7</td>
<td>58.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Student Motivations for Visiting the Writing Center (% selecting yes)*

* Students could select multiple responses.

Some noteworthy differences across schools appear in the reasons students give for their visits. As with our findings on gender, these differences underscore our fundamental similarities. First, while an instructor's recommendation is an important motivating factor at both the SLAC and the Large Public, it is less important at the Medium Private. Perhaps the smaller percentage of students from the Medium Private who selected this response may be the result of the large percentage of graduate student visitors (who made up 45% of users at the Medium Private in 2009–10). While some faculty members do recommend that graduate writers come to the center, faculty recommendations are likely more common with undergraduates.
Second, relatively fewer students from the Large Public visit the writing center when faced with a challenging assignment. At the Large Public, 35% of students reported this as one reason for their visit, and 3% as their only reason, compared to 39–41% and 6–7% at the Medium Private and SLAC, respectively. Required visits may be at the root of this difference; the Large Public had 30 students enrolled in a course consisting exclusively of required writing center visits, while the Medium Private and the SLAC do not have such a course. The required visits at the Large Public are also reflected in the higher percentage of students there who view their visits as part of their writing routine; 27% reported this as one of the reasons for their visit and 9% as their sole reason, compared to 14–16% and 2–4%, at the Medium Private and the SLAC, respectively. Third, word of mouth, through friends’ recommendations, seems a more important reason for visits at the Large Public, perhaps because of a very small promotional budget.

The most exciting, and shared, result, however, has to do with grades. Grades were only one among many reasons prompting student visits, and grades were not even the most frequently chosen motive for student visits at two of our institutions. A study by Morrison and Nadeau assumes that grades alone “are of substantial, if not primary, interest to most students” (37). Our study provides a more complex picture, showing that students select a broad range of reasons to describe their motivation. While over 40% of students from each institution did report that they came to the writing center, in part, because they thought it might help them get better grades, less than 4% of students selected this as their only reason for their visit. Instead, several factors motivate students to come to the writing center: an instructor recommended that they do so (the only reason for visiting reported by 9–17% of students); they see the writing center as a place where they can improve their writing in general (the only reason for 3–7%); they want to make sure that they are on the right track with their assignment (the only reason for 5%); and they see their visit as a regular part of their writing routine (the only reason for 2–9%). These motivations not related to grades demonstrate that students are using the writing center not only for extrinsic rewards, such as grades, but also for their own intrinsic reasons, such as general writing
improvement. Thus, students, including regular visitors, come to the writing center for many reasons, grades being the sole motivating factor for only a small minority.

**Satisfaction**

Writing center exit surveys, of course, frequently ask students questions about how the session went, whether they will return, and whether they will recommend a friend. Below, we examine responses to these questions. We also address more specific questions about whether students felt welcome at the writing center, thought their session was productive, worked well with their consultant, and believed their concerns were addressed. The responses to the two more general questions are shown in Table 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Large Public</th>
<th>Medium Private</th>
<th>SLAC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I would recommend the writing center to a friend</td>
<td>99.8</td>
<td>98.0</td>
<td>99.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I plan to return to the writing center*</td>
<td>99.8</td>
<td>98.0</td>
<td>99.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Student Responses to Standard Writing Center Exit Survey Questions (% selecting yes)
*Difference is statistically significant between the Large Public and the Medium Private (p<0.05).

Across our institutions, almost all students plan to return to the writing center and would recommend it to a friend. Although it is not a frequently asked question, we were interested in knowing whether students were repeat visitors. At each institution, most students indeed were: 63% at the Large Public, 70% at the Medium Private, and 65% at the SLAC. Using an ANOVA, we find no statistically significant difference cross-institutionally (p≥0.05). Thus, approximately two-thirds of visits are by repeat customers, consistent across our institutions.

A second ANOVA test shows no statistically significant difference in the percentage of students who would recommend the writing center to a friend (p≥0.05). However, a third ANOVA reveals a significant difference among schools in the percentage of students
who plan to return to the writing center ($p \leq 0.01$). Pairwise t-tests do not reveal a significant difference between the Large Public and the SLAC or between the Medium Private and the SLAC ($p \geq 0.05$; recall that the p value must be 0.0167 or less to be significant at the 0.05 level with the Bonferroni adjustment). However, there is a significant difference between the Large Public and the Medium Private ($p \leq 0.05$): a slightly larger percentage of students plan to return to the writing center at the Large Public (99.8%) compared to the Medium Private (98%).

One possible explanation for this difference is institutional size. Students at the Large Public may feel less supported than their peers at the Medium Private. In fact, the most recent National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) shows that students at larger schools experience a less supportive campus environment, less student-faculty interaction, and less collaborative learning than students at smaller schools. Our student-faculty ratios likewise offer a proxy for student alienation; using the Common Data Set, we find that the ratios at the Large Public, Medium Private, and SLAC in 2009–10 were 20:1, 9:1 and 7:1, respectively. As a result, the potentially less supportive campus environment at the Large Public may make a return visit to the non-alienating atmosphere of the writing center especially inviting—though, as noted above, we find no statistically significant difference in the percentage of return visitors across all three campuses. Another explanation is curricular: 30 students at the Large Public took a class that consisted exclusively of weekly writing center visits, so these students, naturally, reported that they would return; the other institutions had no such course. Since the Large Public had just 410 students fill out surveys over the course of the academic year, these 30 required, repeat visitors likely constitute a substantial portion of these responses.

Four somewhat more pointed questions may help us to understand better what makes a session successful. Table 6 shows student responses about satisfaction with writing center sessions and the relationship between students and their consultants.
The first question examines how welcome students feel in their writing center. Most students agree or strongly agree that they feel welcome (85% at the Large Public, 99% at the Medium Private, and 100% at the SLAC). This consistency supports Carino and Enders’ single-institution study, which shows that consultants were usually courteous and supportive of students (97). Our strong, consistent, cross-institutional finding concerning student reception suggests that, despite concerns voiced in the literature about particular populations (Denny 51, 136), the vast majority of students do feel welcome in their writing centers.

While all three writing centers had high student satisfaction, there are, however, some statistically significant differences in terms of how welcome students feel. We find a statistically significant difference across schools with respect to the question about feeling welcome, as shown by an ANOVA (p<0.01). Pairwise t-tests confirm this difference exists across all three pairs (p<0.01). Students at the Medium Private responded more positively than those at the Large Public, and students at the SLAC responded most positively of all. Though, as we have shown, there is no statistical difference across campuses in the proportion of students who plan to return to their writing center and would recommend it to a friend, students at the Large Public did not feel as welcome at their writing center. The
required visits at the Large Public may be a contributing factor here; Morrison and Nadeau, as well as Gordon, show required visits negatively affect student satisfaction (36; 157).

It is possible that institutional size is the main factor explaining the differences among all three schools since satisfaction declines as institutional size increases, a relationship that mirrors the findings of the NSSE. Using the Common Data Set, we find that the total approximate number of students in 2009–10 was 23,600 at the Large Public, compared to the Medium Private’s 11,600 and the SLAC’s 1,500. An additional factor, beyond size, may be the writing center’s sense of community, which might be linked to tutor longevity. Even though our survey did not tie tutor longevity with specific survey responses, we note that students’ sense of feeling welcome increases in centers that have the largest proportion of returning staff. Only occasionally did a tutor at the Large Public return to work for more than one semester, compared to approximately one-third of tutors returning each year at the Medium Private and two-thirds at the SLAC. Consequently, at the Large Public in particular, new tutors did not have the benefit of learning from more experienced peers, nor was there much possibility of building a strong writing center community among a staff of only five consultants, with only one tutor working during any given shift.

The last three questions in Table 6 focus on how beneficial students found a particular writing center session. These questions address the nature of the writer’s relationship with the consultant, a fundamental issue in tutoring. For all three questions, ANOVAs show a consistent pattern of statistically significant differences across all three institutions: students felt that the consultations were productive, that they and their consultants worked well together, and that the consultants acknowledged and focused on writers’ concerns (p<0.01). Pairwise t-tests show no significant difference between the Medium Private and the SLAC (p≥0.05). However, there is a significant difference between both the Large Public and the Medium Private and the Large Public and the SLAC (p≤0.01).

As with the differences in how welcome students felt, the factors of institutional size and the effect of tutor longevity on writing center community may help explain why the Large Public is the outlier in
these last three questions. An additional factor may be different modes of tutor training used at the Large Public, although we note that our survey did not examine the relationship between tutor training and survey responses. The tutors at the Large Public did not have regular exposure to writing center theory and research, as staff meetings were largely focused on logistical matters and problem solving of day-to-day tutoring questions. These tutors thus did not have an opportunity to learn in depth about the relational aspects of tutoring or to develop their own individual pedagogical philosophies in a structured format. At both the Medium Private and SLAC, however, consultants were required to enroll in or audit a class in writing center theory and practice during their first term of tutoring, providing a formal setting for reading scholarship and reflecting on applications to tutoring practice. Both institutions also had more experienced tutors who could advise and model consulting practices for new tutors while working side-by-side.

Conclusions

Our findings reveal overwhelming similarities and relatively few differences across our three diverse institutions in the areas of demographics, motivation, and satisfaction. In terms of demographics, most striking is that all three institutions see as many or more students of color and multilingual writers compared to institutional demographics. For example, while our centers saw 16–39% multilingual students, non-resident aliens (the best-available but still problematic proxy) accounted for just 4–7% of campus populations. Looking at the data on students of color, it is harder to make broad statements because 7–11% of students selected more than one racial or ethnic category. However, we find that our writing centers see a similar or higher proportion of students of color compared to the overall campus population. We propose, then, that high usage by these students may be an important commonality across many writing centers and not an issue influenced by institutional size or other local differences. Perhaps scholars can increase attention on how best to work with the diverse students who are already using writing centers.

In terms of motivation, we learn that students generally come
in for the same reasons across our different institutions. Thus, our quantitative data support Denny’s assertion that “What drives students is quite similar from campus to campus whether they live in Jamaica, Queens; Bensonhurst, Brooklyn; or in Madison, Amherst, or Eugene” (3). We find that, across our own campuses, more often than not (59–61% of the time), students visit for multiple reasons. Among responses that note a single reason for a visit—including instructor recommendation, improving writing in general, making sure a paper is on the right track, and that such a visit is a regular part of that student’s writing process—less than 4% of students identify grades as the sole reason for their visit. Therefore, the field should take into account that students’ motivation is predicated on a wide range of issues, not just grades. Practitioners may need to reexamine writing center priorities in terms of pedagogy, research, and publicity to reflect the diversity of students’ motivations for visiting writing centers.

In terms of student satisfaction, the overwhelming majority of students at all three institutions report satisfaction with their visits; 98–100% of students would return to their campus writing center and would recommend it to a friend. However, the center in our study with the lowest student satisfaction also had the highest staff turnover and the least structured training for tutors. Our findings imply that while many staffing models have value, what may be most important for staffing is longevity: the number of terms consultants work in the writing center. Staff turnover appears to impact the quality of the tutoring dyad, perhaps because there is less of a sense of writing center community. Additionally, at least in the case of our three centers, and, we would argue, across the field as a whole, consultants’ support of students’ larger writerly goals seems most successful when consultants have been immersed in writing center theory and research-informed practice. Our findings suggest that structured pedagogy for writing consultants, rather than injections of theory at points of need, encourages more attention to scholarship and the relational aspects of tutoring. While we can only extrapolate from our findings, we advocate for some form of a consistent, theory- and research-based, rigorous training environment as a way to establish centers shaped by knowledgeable consultants, making writing centers more welcoming to both students and consultants.
Moreover, our findings demonstrate that the same factors that contribute to university-wide student satisfaction actually match the priorities of commonly accepted writing center pedagogies. While we cannot change the size of the institutions in which we find ourselves, writing centers can create spaces within campuses that might help counteract feelings of campus alienation. Local factors, while still important in terms of reaching out to our particular student populations and determining resource allocation, seem to play a smaller role. Our study's common cross-institutional findings provide quantitative support that might help writing center administrators reimagine the missions for their writing centers and clarify their place in the university when making a case for resources.

Our exit surveys share largely similar results, even though our three centers are guided by writing center practitioners with markedly different backgrounds and staffed by consultants with varied pedagogies and experiences. These results provide empirical, quantitative evidence for the assumptions about writing center lore found in the work of Thompson et al. and others. Our study supports the existence of wider, shared interests in access, collaboration, and the importance of writing center pedagogy across a diverse range of institutions and begs us to reconsider the extent to which local factors actually wield exclusive influence over writing center practice. We believe it is essential that writing center practitioners think more disciplinarily, even about what goes on in individual centers. Our common results suggest new directions for local practices such as how we publicize our centers, institute policy, build alliances across campus, and train staff. Acknowledging the philosophical and tangible commonalities that underpin writing center work provides a foundation for engaging in rigorous inquiry when differences do arise in pedagogies and practices.
NOTES

1. We would like to acknowledge the International Writing Centers Association, both for the 2009 Summer Institute and a 2011 Research Award. We are grateful to Neal Lerner, Lori Salem, Sue Mendelsohn, and anonymous reviewers for their feedback. Our thanks also to participants at the 2010 IWCA Conference’s Research Network Forum, especially Harry Denny and Brad Hughes.

2. As has been noted elsewhere, much writing center research has been qualitative in nature, based on case studies, interviews, and anecdotes (see Harris). Many of these studies focus on a single institution and often on relatively small samples of students (see, for example, Morrison and Nadeau; Robinson; Nakamaru; Thonus). However, there are some important larger-scale quantitative research projects (see, for example, the Writing Centers Research Project; Gladstein and Regaignon; Hughes et al.), as well as strong calls for more quantitative research (see, for example, Driscoll and Perdue; Gofine; Lerner “Choosing”; Lerner “Counting”).

3. We searched WCenter headers for the following terms: exit; student survey; satisfaction; student assessment; and wc assessment. From 2008–2012, twelve responses included copies of student exit survey forms. While this is a small sample size, many queries referred back to previous discussions. See the WCenter archives for the following relevant threads: “How Do You Survey Student Writers?”; “Writing Center Assessment”; “Writing Center Assessment Rubrics”; “WC Assessment”; “Request for Exit Survey Questions”; “Writing Center Assessment Question”; “Online Satisfaction Surveys Versus Exit Surveys?”; “Student Outcomes Assessment”; “Exit Surveys”; “Assessment in the WC”; “Student Surveys”.

4. Survey instrument and data are available from the authors by request.
WORKS CITED


Greenfield, Laura, and Karen Rowan, eds.


