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## Why We Resist "Leading the Horse": Required Tutoring, RAD Research, and Our Writing Center Ideals

Jaclyn Wells

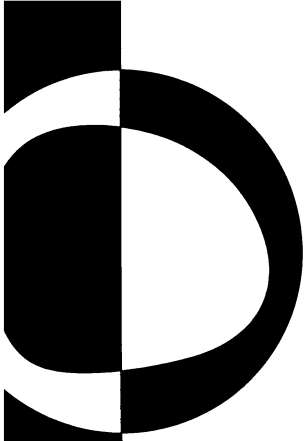
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## Why We Resist “Leading the Horse”: Required Tutoring, RAD Research, and Our Writing Center Ideals

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### Abstract

This article takes up the long debated issue of required tutoring in writing centers while responding to the relatively recent call for the writing center community to rely less on anecdote and lore and to push for more research-driven practices. Prompted by a heated conversation on the WCenter listserv, this article explores how reactions to required tutoring can unearth some enduring ideals individuals have about writing center work and how these ideals may shut off potential improvements to the field of writing centers. Results from a survey study of one semester of developmental writing courses and then interviews with students at the writing center provide strategies for framing required tutoring productively. The article concludes by asking readers to reflect on, recognize, and renegotiate their own writing center ideals in order to raise new questions about best practices and develop stronger studies that look at longstanding dilemmas, such as required tutoring, in a more nuanced way.

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Writing center practitioners have long debated the efficacy of mandatory tutoring. In her seminal article on required tutoring, Irene Lurkis Clark (1985) begins by arguing, “[w]hether or not students ought to be required to go to the Writing Center has always been a problematic issue” (11). Three decades later, a recent conversation on the WCenter listserv shows that the dilemma is far from resolved. The conversation began with the following email:

Though I do have my own research about requiring students to come to the Writing Center, I was curious if any of you would share research which discusses why making Writing Center visits mandatory for all students *is* wrong for best practices and, in fact, *does not* ensure student success [emphasis added]. (Fenton, 2014)

In response, many pointed to studies that suggest the benefits of required tutoring; respondents cited Clark’s study, as well as work from Barbara Bell & Robert Stutts (1997); Barbara Lynn Gordon (2008); and Rebecca Day Babcock & Terese Thonus (2012). Others suggested that few studies actually proved its disadvantages. Many other respondents, though, offered stories to illustrate why they did *not* allow mandatory tutoring in their centers.

As the conversation went on, it revealed more than just the continuing debate surrounding mandatory tutoring. Two groups seemed clear: those who were pointing to research, as the original poster had asked for, and those who were pointing to their experiences and feelings. Though not a neat breakdown, most in the former category defended mandatory tutoring, while those in the latter told stories to illustrate the problems that can arise when we require students to use the writing center. Many recent scholars have advocated for replacing the lore and anecdote that often drive writing center studies with research, and more specifically, research that fits Richard H. Haswell’s (2005) replicable, aggregable, and data-supported (RAD) criteria. Surely many of the people involved in this conversation, including those who were sharing stories, were aware of this push for research-driven practices. Surely many had read the recent scholars, including Isabelle Thompson, Alyson Whyte, David Shannon, Amanda Muse, Kristen Miller, Milla Chappell, & Abby Whigham (2009), Babcock & Thonus (2012), Dana Driscoll & Sherry Wynn Perdue (2012), and William Macauley & Ellen Schendel (2012), who have argued that writing center studies should rely more on such research and less on lore and anecdote. Surely many, myself included, even agreed that our field needs more research. And

yet, the question of required tutoring seemed to lead many posters back to their stories and their gut feelings.

During the time of this WCenter conversation, I was in the throes of rethinking my own writing center's longstanding tutoring requirement for students in developmental writing (English 091). I followed the conversation, watching closely as it played out but not weighing in with my own experience, research, or opinions. As I lurked, I found myself sympathetic to both of the camps. I wanted to put myself with the RAD research advocates, as I believe that good research should drive practice. Despite my efforts, I found myself drawn to my gut instincts: Requiring students to use the center did not *feel* right to me, no matter how many good RAD studies suggest its benefits and contradict the lore that students should only visit the center of their own self-motivation. I even found myself looking for research, as the original WCenter poster seemed to be, that would confirm what I already believed.

Eventually, I did my own limited study that used two rounds of data-gathering—surveys of 140 students in the first round and interviews with 15 students in the second—to investigate student perspectives on required tutoring. The findings, mirroring those of several other studies, contradicted my assumption that required tutoring automatically destroys student attitudes toward the center. When I continued to bristle at the thought of mandatory tutoring, even in the face of my own research findings, I began reflecting on why the idea bothered me so much. I came to realize that my gut reactions to required tutoring say a lot about my idealized version of the writing center. In truth, I don't like the *idea* of required tutoring because it conflicts with my ideal writing center—a community of writers willingly trying to improve (not get better grades or fulfill a requirement or make an instructor happy). The conversation on the WCenter list, as well as conversations I've had in conferences, tutoring practica, and staff meetings, suggest that I am not the only writing center practitioner who reacts negatively to required tutoring. Even those of us who have thought a lot about the realities of student motivation might still have that deeply-buried hope that students float into our centers willingly and excitedly.

In this article, I explore how reactions to required tutoring can unearth some of our enduring ideals about the writing center. I argue that while RAD research *should* drive our practices, no amount of well-formed studies will help us solve important dilemmas and make important decisions before we figure out for ourselves what ideals might be influencing our practices. The question of required tutoring provides one example: Multiple RAD studies could suggest the benefits of mandatory tutoring (and indeed, several do), but if requiring students to use

the writing center simply *feels* wrong, we may ignore those results. We may hold fast to ideas about the writing center that no longer work or conflict with students' needs, perceptions, and motivations. As Jeanne Simpson (2010) reminds us, "Clinging to a fixed idea of a writing center, whatever each of us thinks that idea is, shuts off opportunities" (p. 4). The idea that students should come of their own self-motivation rather than to fulfill a requirement is only one example, but it is a good example. And clinging to it may very well "shut off opportunities" in the way that Simpson cautions.

As with all decisions we make in the writing center, decisions about mandatory tutoring are not "yes-no" or "good-bad." In the second half of the article, I present results from my study that suggest strategies for framing required tutoring productively. The complication, however, is that these framing strategies may require us to confront even further our idea of the writing center.

Just as reflecting on our gut reactions to required tutoring can help us unearth our ideals, thinking about how to frame required tutoring productively can help us further confront ideas and assumptions we have but may skip over in the day-to-day work of the center. My goals in the article, then, are twofold. I want to further the conversation about required tutoring by offering some ideas for framing it productively. Beyond this, I want to show how common reactions to required tutoring illustrate how idealized notions of the writing center may continue to drive our work. These ideals may even shut off opportunities for improving our writing centers if we fail to implement what we learn from RAD research. Not all writing center directors will share my gut reactions to mandatory tutoring; however, many will have other pet issues that make them ignore research in favor of their feelings and experiences. In the article's conclusion, I reflect on how my grappling with required tutoring may provide a model for others who wish to identify and question their own ideals about the writing center.

### **Searching for Answers on Required Tutoring: Some Literature**

When I started as director, my university's writing center was primarily functioning as a support for developmental writing. Students in the course were required to visit the writing center regularly throughout the semester (weekly when I began the position and eight times per semester at the time of the study). I learned quickly that this course requirement challenged my goal of expanding the writing center's reach and usage, as well as my desire to reframe the center as a resource for *all* student writers at the university. Like Valerie Pexton (2012), who

writes about encouraging first-year students' use of the center without overburdening its resources, I worried about practical constraints in the center's staffing and hours. With so many developmental writing students required to visit so frequently, the writing center had few sessions available for anyone else. We also saw problems with "angry students and exhausted tutors," as Bell & Stutts (1997) describe. Like Gordon (2008), I also observed that required tutorials sometimes created long waits for appointments and busyness that could create rushed sessions and little flexibility for walk-ins.

Though these practical problems mattered greatly, the perception of the center mattered even more. Faculty and students often talked about the writing center only as support for developmental writing, which made promotion to other populations of students difficult. Dennis Paoli (2010) argues that such problems with perception can happen when the writing center is attached to developmental English.<sup>1</sup> These problems can go beyond the idea that the writing center only serves developmental writing students (problematic as that idea is). If the developmental writing course is viewed as "punishment," as such courses often are, the writing center could be guilty by association.

In reality, all of these reasonable concerns were overshadowed by my gut feelings. Of everything that worried me—the staffing issues, potential tutor burnout, and even student resistance and perception—nothing was more salient than my general *feeling* that the requirement brought an unwanted identity to my writing center. As a new writing center director, I was thinking constantly about the identity I wanted the center to have. While far from a blank slate, the center clearly needed reshaping and rethinking. I was told this when I was hired and again when I started. With a clear directive—"whip this place into shape!" one colleague joked—it's no wonder that I gave a lot of thought to what I wanted the center to *be*, not just what I wanted it to do. My thinking

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1 The developmental writing curriculum at my university has been revised extensively in recent years under the leadership of the Director of Composition. The writing center requirement is only one part of those revisions. One could argue the impossibility of thinking about the writing center requirement in isolation from the developmental writing course. In this article, my goal is less to analyze fully my university's existing or evolving developmental writing curriculum, including the writing center requirement. Rather, my goal is to show how the longstanding debate surrounding required tutoring unearths some of the idealized notions we may still have about writing centers and how implementing RAD research findings necessitates our addressing those notions. As an example, I provide my own experience wrestling with the debate while rethinking my writing center's practices.

often returned to a dilemma over whether I should make the case for eliminating the requirement or for reframing the requirement and the center in ways that would make developmental writing support merely one valuable part of everything we offer.

As I considered the requirement and made decisions about the center, I turned to the research on mandatory tutoring. If I am honest, I mainly (though not consciously) hoped for studies that would support my gut instinct that requiring writing center use was counterproductive. Instead, I found several scholars actually arguing the benefits of mandatory tutoring. These scholars include those cited in previous paragraphs; many who discuss the potential problems with mandatory tutoring ultimately argue its value. Gordon argues that when they are required to use the writing center, “students come to appreciate a service that many would not otherwise have tried” (p. 161). Further, Bell & Stutts (1997) claim that “the potential benefits outweigh[ed] the predictable drawbacks” they experienced when they required whole classes to visit the center (p. 7). Other scholars have addressed mandatory tutoring less directly by investigating student motivation. Both Wendy Bishop (1990) and Heather M. Robinson (2009), for example, challenge lore about the ideal reality of a writing center and suggest that we can use that which we have regularly fought (for Robinson, the perception of the writing center as remedial; for Bishop, mandatory tutoring) to get what we want (for both, self-motivated students).

Several scholars even more directly and vehemently defend mandatory tutoring. For example, Clark (1985) recommends that entire departments require writing center use and argues that the number of times students visit is relative to the number of times they are required. Perhaps ahead of her time, Clark also argues that the advice that students should visit the writing center of their own accord is “based primarily on anecdotal information” (31). Based on Clark’s and Gordon’s findings, as well as on research from three doctoral dissertations (Krista Stonerock, 2005; Gwendolyn Denise Osman, 2007; Allison Smith, 2010), Babcock & Thonus (2012) recommend that the writing center community reconsider common lore against mandatory writing center visits (p. 85). They also recommend that writing center directors consider requiring the writing center for students in developmental writing courses (p. 92). In sum, I discovered in my research no shortage of scholars shaking up the anecdotal and lore-based maxims against required tutoring; further, many of these scholars based their arguments on RAD research, something I claimed to believe should drive practice.

## Searching for More [or, Different?] Answers: A Survey

Despite what I found in my research, I also discovered that gut feelings are hard to fight. Even after poring through the many studies described in the previous section, I continued to feel negatively toward required tutoring. In response, I decided to test the issue myself and designed my *own* two-part, IRB-approved study to investigate developmental writing students' views on mandatory tutoring. For the first part of the study, I surveyed students enrolled in developmental writing during the fall semester; in the second part, I interviewed roughly 10% of survey participants during the spring semester, after they had completed developmental writing and were enrolled in first-year composition. My goals for the study were twofold: I wanted to learn what students thought about being required to use the writing center, and I wanted to figure out how we<sup>2</sup> might productively frame such requirements if we decided to use them. In the first half of the study, I conducted paper surveys in all sections of the developmental writing course during the last two weeks of the fall semester. Of the 169 students enrolled in the course, 140 (around 83%) participated. The survey included questions about students' prior knowledge of the writing center, initial reactions to the requirement, satisfaction with tutorials, and likelihood to return to and recommend the center. Students were also asked point-blank if they thought writing center use should be required in developmental writing.

Survey results suggested a range of reactions to the requirement but a consistently positive outlook on the writing center itself. Mean scores were positive for questions about how much tutoring sessions had helped with students' writing, their writing process, and their work in the course. Mean scores were also positive for questions about students' overall satisfaction and likelihood to return to and recommend the writing center. Finally, in response to the "big money question"—Should the writing center be required for the course?—nearly 70% of participants responded yes. Further, many participants praised the center on the survey's two open-ended questions, and some even praised the requirement itself.

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2 As mentioned previously, the developmental writing curriculum was under review and is undergoing ongoing revision. The Director of Composition is leading this work and is responsible for making all final decisions regarding the curriculum. The "we" in this sentence refers to both my immediate context at my university and the larger field of writing center studies. In my institution, the "we" includes the Director of Composition, the Composition Committee, and me. At the time of the study, the group's general decision was to continue the requirement but consider how to shift and reframe it.



Despite the positive findings, I realize now that my initial need was not just *research*—or at least not the survey research that I did. Several studies, as cited above, already investigated student reactions to mandatory tutoring. Unlike those studies, my survey research focused specifically on developmental writers, but this difference actually created a limitation in arguing that required tutoring does not ruin student attitudes toward the center. Specifically, this participant group may be more likely to report positive feelings toward the center and the requirement because of how being placed into developmental writing affects student self-perception. Instead of just research, I really needed to figure out why the idea of required tutoring bothered me so much that I dismissed the RAD studies that I professed should drive writing center practice. In the next section, I reflect on how the idea of mandatory tutoring conflicts with my ideal writing center, to the degree that even the RAD studies I encountered (and conducted) did little to counter my feelings against requiring writing center use.

### **“Well, We Don’t Want to *Drag Students In*”**

Initially, the survey findings made me feel relieved in some of the ways that Margaret Weaver (2004) describes in “Censoring What Tutors’ Clothing ‘Says’: First Amendment Rights/Writes within Tutorial Space.” Weaver reflects on her own and her tutors’ concerns about another tutor’s potentially offensive “fuck” t-shirt, and her dilemma about how to respect tutors’ individual rights while creating a comfortable writing center. Despite Weaver’s and the tutors’ concerns, end-of-semester evaluations suggested that the questionable t-shirt did not dramatically damage students’ perception of the writing center as a comfortable environment. That semester, the tutor had worn the shirt several times, but only two of 1,357 student evaluations responded negatively to a question about whether the center had created a “comfortable learning environment” (p. 25). At first, Weaver felt relieved when the evaluations suggested that the t-shirt didn’t destroy her “safe house” ideal. This relief was short-lived, as many of the tutors maintained that the t-shirt was unprofessional when Weaver shared the evaluations with them.

Like Weaver, I experienced initial relief in response to the survey findings, but that relief was quickly complicated by further reflection and the tutors’ comments. The survey findings seemed like good news at first, as most participants reported positive attitudes toward the center and requirement. Despite this, I continued to question how the tutoring requirement was affecting my writing center overall, especially

as I continued to hear comments from tutors like, “I got to tutor a [non-required] student today who actually *wanted* to come in!” Similar to Weaver’s dilemma over the t-shirt, my dilemma about required tutoring represented much more than a question about how to handle one specific aspect of the writing center’s practice. Instead, it represented the center’s larger identity. Where Weaver sought a safe house, I sought a community of self-motivated, dedicated writers not unlike the community Stephen North pines for in “The Idea of a Writing Center” (1984). Weaver wrestles with how to uphold the safe house ideal while dealing with realities of tutor clothing; I wrestled with how to uphold my writing community ideal while dealing with realities of student motivation.

When I talked with tutors about issues like student motivation and challenging sessions, I learned quickly that many of them shared my writing community ideal. During the tutoring practicum, a new tutor exclaimed laughingly, “Well, we don’t want to *drag* students in!” As happened during many of our conversations, we had come around to how student motivation could influence tutoring sessions. The tutor had been reflecting on challenging sessions with the developmental writing students. She claimed—and the other tutors agreed unanimously—that it was often far easier and more enjoyable to work with students who visited the writing center on their own. She went on to speculate that “dragging students in” through requirements could challenge our work because students would not be self-motivated to improve their writing. At the time, the tutor’s comments went unquestioned by the other tutors and me. We all agreed automatically that the best sessions happen when students come to the writing center of their own motivation, rather than to fulfill a course requirement.

During staff meetings, practicum sessions, and casual conversations, this belief permeated the conversation, despite formal and informal evidence that many required students did benefit from and enjoy their sessions. Throughout the semester, tutors talked about many positive sessions with these students, and many even talked about building good relationships with those who had become regular clients. Further, we received highly positive results from an end-of-semester evaluation with students from the developmental writing course. And, of course, my survey suggested that the students held largely positive views of both the requirement and the center. Though we all agreed that working with these students could be a joy, and that many of them seemed to benefit from and enjoy their sessions, we also agreed that *ideally* students come in on their own. Further, we looked for loopholes for required tutoring (to borrow Weaver’s language) that focused on encouraging the

self-motivated ideal we wanted. We talked, for example, about creating policies for handling students who appeared only to be going through the motions of writing center visits. In another example, we talked about steering conversations with students away from the requirement and grades and toward writing improvement.

These were not necessarily bad moves. Problematic, though, is the persistent fear of what the writing center might become if we give in to certain realities of why some students use us and where we fit into the larger institution. When North (1984) argues that “we are not here to serve, supplement, back up, complement, reinforce, or otherwise be defined by any external curriculum. We are here to talk to writers,” he suggests that tying writing center visits to a course contradicts something fundamental to our identity (p. 440). Numerous scholars have countered North’s idealistic notions (including North himself), but persistent is the idea that writing centers exist outside certain bounds of student and institutional realities. Part of this idea is the hope that students come in of their own self-motivation. If they come in for other reasons (like a course requirement), our loophole becomes using those reasons just to get them in the door so we can then convince them to return for the “right” reasons. Part of this idea is also that we can *just* talk to students about their writing without acknowledging things like grades and course requirements. And finally, part of the idea is that the writing center is not tied to one course any more than another: We are here for *all* writers equally, including those outside any course at all.

Letting go of any of these ideals elicits a fear response that is at the root of our negative reactions to required tutoring. With anxiety, we wonder what might happen to our writing center’s identity if we accept that some students will only come when required. Referencing Elizabeth H. Boquet (2002) and James McDonald (2003), Weaver (2004) argues that many writing center practitioners continue to hope for a community and feel frustrated when they fail to create it in their centers (p. 24). While we may accept that we cannot always create the community we long for in our centers, most of us feel we should continue trying. We may wonder, even if the community of writers ideal is just an ideal, is there any harm in pursuing it?

The problem with continuing to pursue the “community of writers” ideal is that it presents only one possible version of the writing center. The center may be a community of writers to some students. To others, the center may be an important source of support for one course. Clinging to one idealized version of the writing center may shut off opportunities (borrowing again from Simpson [2010]) to make our centers better for all students. Continued resistance to required tutoring

illustrates how clinging to the self-motivated-writers-community ideal has shut off our opportunity to learn from and act on RAD research, much of which tells us that required tutoring has its benefits. Further, we lack research on how to effectively frame required tutoring, perhaps because clinging to that ideal has shut off opportunities to research and improve a version of our writing centers that might work perfectly well for many students. In the next section, I proceed with the idea that required tutoring can fit into a valuable version of the writing center. From there, I share findings from the second half of my study, the interview portion, about how we may frame required tutoring productively.

### **Framing Required Tutoring: Some Interview Findings**

Despite the study's limitations and questionable motivations, findings from the second half proved fruitful. During this portion of the study, I interviewed 15 students, chosen from the survey participants, to gather more in-depth views on the writing center requirement. All interview participants had successfully completed developmental writing and were enrolled in first-year composition when interviewed<sup>3</sup>. To select interview participants, I first excluded all survey respondents who reported that they had completed no writing center sessions. Future research may investigate students who do not use the writing center even when required, but for this study, I was interested in gaining perspectives from students who had attended at least one session. Next, I selected interview participants with representative responses to the most direct survey question: "Do you think UWC tutorials should be required in English 091?" In interviews, I hoped to gain more in-depth perspectives on the survey findings, so I wanted to capture a similar mix of views I gathered in the survey—but to examine those views further by sitting down with students face-to-face. After excluding the survey participants who had not completed any writing center sessions, I was left with 130 potential interview participants. Of these, 94 (72%) had selected "yes," 35 (27%) had selected "no," and one selected both "yes" and "no" (1%) to the survey question of whether tutorials should be required. To generally reflect this breakdown, I interviewed 10 participants who had responded

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3 Interviews took place over the course of a semester, so some participants were interviewed early in their first-year composition course and others were interviewed later. This is one limitation of the interview portion of the study, as the students' perspectives may have certainly differed based on how far removed they were from their experience in the developmental English course and how far along they were in the first-year composition course.

yes and 4 who had responded no. I also interviewed the participant who selected both yes and no; even though only one participant responded this way, that ambivalence represented many of the survey responses (particularly to open-ended questions) that implied that the requirement was both good and bad.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in the writing center and were transcribed. Participants were asked questions about how they first learned of the writing center and the requirement, how they initially reacted to the requirement, what they thought of their tutorials over the semester, and whether they thought English 091 should require writing center use. I also asked students if they had returned or were planning to return to the writing center now that visits were no longer required. After completing and transcribing all interviews, I sifted through the interview transcripts to identify the major themes that emerged. When identifying major themes, I looked for comments that came up most regularly but also for those that came up most vehemently. To count as a major theme, at least half of the interview participants must have addressed the issue *directly* (though all 15 interview participants at least hinted at all of the themes I ultimately identified). The four themes I identified are grades, time, tutor fit, and instructor influence. After identifying the themes, I went back through interview transcripts to identify what participants said within them.

The interviews yielded interesting findings about how writing center directors, tutors, and even instructors might productively frame required tutoring by becoming more attuned to students' concerns with grades, time, tutor fit, and instructor influence. However, like required tutoring itself, these framing strategies may require confronting ideals about what the writing center is and what it does. Many of the strategies focus on presenting required tutoring on the students' terms, a move that requires us to consider the realities they face in our institutions and to quit hoping for the "ideal student"—unhurried by deadlines, unconcerned with grades—to walk through our doors. While the findings I present here are limited, I hope that confronting our ideals about the writing center may push scholars to conduct additional research on framing required tutoring. In this sense, my goals in this section are twofold: I hope to present useful framing strategies for required tutoring, and I also hope to bring to light particular ideals in a way that pushes readers to conduct more nuanced research about required tutoring and other writing center issues that may be shaped by our hidden ideals. While so many studies pose required tutoring as good-bad, confronting our ideals may push us to conduct more RAD studies that question how to enact required tutoring.

**Talking about grades.** Interview findings suggest that many students feel concerned with grades. Even though they were never specifically asked about grades, nine out of the 15 participants commented directly on them. Only one of these nine participants talked about grades in a way that was potentially negative toward the writing center. Specifically, this participant said that she did not initially want to come to the writing center because she preferred getting help from the teacher who would actually grade her papers. The other eight participants who talked directly about grades expressed that they felt best about the writing center and the requirement when they saw their grades improving. They also commented that they received higher grades on papers they had brought to the writing center, and two even claimed that the grade they received on an assignment was relative to the number of times they had been to the center. Finally, one participant commented that she did not initially want to use the writing center but changed her mind when she received high grades on her papers after attending. This participant also reported receiving an A in the course, which she attributed partly to using the writing center. Overall, these eight students—again, over half of the participants—shared that they felt most amenable to the requirement, happiest with the writing center, and most motivated to return in the future when they saw a clear improvement in their grades.

None of this is surprising. Anyone who has tutored or taught knows that students are concerned with grades, and the idea that students would be motivated to use a service that improves their grades is a no-brainer. Further, it is understandable that students would be concerned with grades and motivated to earn higher grades. For better or worse, this is the system in place for students to judge their worth and improvement, and they understand that grades are essential to competing for scholarships, internships, admission to graduate school, and even jobs. And yet, we often shy away from directly discussing grades in the writing center. In classroom visits and promotional materials, we do not suggest that using the writing center may improve students' grades. (We don't want to make that promise.) In consultations, we are careful never to tell students how we would grade their papers. (We don't want to interfere with the instructor's authority.) Our resistance to required writing center visits—or even visits encouraged by extra credit—stems partly from our resistance to tying what we do up with grades. (We want students to see that there are reasons beyond receiving credit to visit the center.)

Every parenthetical in the previous paragraph has merit. Writing centers should not make promises for higher grades or interfere with the instructor's authority, and despite research that supports mandatory

tutoring, students coming to the center *only* for course credit raises concerns. Still, the idea of the writing center as a “grade-free zone” divorced from the reality that students are evaluated semesterly, weekly, and sometimes even daily is problematic. Stubbornly refusing to talk about grades squashes opportunities to connect with students and communicates to students that we do not understand or care about the realities they face in our institutions. We might make good use of the knowledge that students are motivated to improve their grades and of the understanding that grades simply form a part of students’ reality, but doing so requires that we confront our idea of the writing center as a neutral, grade-free zone.

I suggest that we can talk about grades with students without making inappropriate promises, interfering with instructor authority, or relegating the writing center to a service students only use when they are getting direct credit for it. When we talk about required tutoring, this could be as simple as framing mandatory sessions as an opportunity to get course credit for something that many other students, and many experienced writers, do voluntarily. For all students, claiming that consultations *might* improve paper grades or sharing feedback from students that the writing center helped improve their grades need not equal making inappropriate promises or implying that improved scores are the only (or primary) reason to use the center. We must trust that students are savvy enough to understand the difference between, “this service might help you improve your grades” and “we’ll get you a better grade—promise.” We must also trust that students can be motivated to both earn higher grades and improve their writing. Particularly if grades form only one part of how we discuss the writing center, students can understand that grades are only one reason to use the writing center, whether the visits are required or not.

**Talking about time.** Interview findings suggest one major resistance to required tutoring: lack of time. Of the 15 interview participants, nine directly commented on time. All nine of these participants talked about how the requirement added a burden to their already hectic schedules. Importantly, all nine of these participants expressed positive feelings about the writing center overall, and five of them even claimed that they believed the English 091 requirement should continue as is despite the time commitment it required. Of the remaining nine, two said the requirement should continue but with fewer sessions to accommodate students’ overcrowded schedules, and one said that the requirement should be eliminated for student athletes who were already busy with athletic tutoring. Only one of the nine said the requirement

should definitely be eliminated; he reasoned that students should get to decide whether to spend their limited time on the writing center.

Additionally, lack of time was the main reason participants cited for not returning or not planning to return to the writing center after completing English 091. Six participants reported that they had not returned to the writing center for English 101. Of these, two said that they planned to return but simply had not needed to yet. However, the other four explained that between their course loads, family obligations, work, athletics, and activities, they simply did not have time to use the writing center. One of these four participants even acknowledged that the center could help him with a future project but claimed that time constraints would prevent him from coming in: "I know I got a paper coming up that I might use some help on, but... I'm not going to be able to make it." These four participants expressed the least confidence in using the center in the future, and all of their reasons returned to time constraints. Even one of the participants who had returned to the center after English 091 talked about the role of time in her decision to continue using the center: She explained that she had been back, but that she did not have time to use the center as frequently as she had for developmental writing. This student even remarked that she wished the center were required for first-year composition so that she would be forced to make the time to visit more frequently.

Related to the issue of time is that of need. Interview findings suggest that required tutoring can feel burdensome when students feel they are squandering their limited time on help that they do not need. Comments about need came out mainly when participants discussed whether the English 091 requirement should continue. Of the 15 interview participants, eight responded that it should continue as is. Of the remaining seven, two responded that the requirement should be eliminated, and five responded that it should continue but with fewer required sessions or with an exception for student athletes. Not all of these seven participants cited time directly (see previous paragraphs), but all seven did talk about need, often in ways that suggested their limited time. Essentially, they expressed that they should be able to use the writing center when they felt they needed to and implied that using the writing center when they did not need it seemed like a poor use of time.

One participant who made this point very adamantly actually had returned to the writing center since completing developmental writing. When asked if he would continue using the center, he responded simply, "I will go when I need to go." A different participant explained that he was already required to work with a tutor through the athletic department, so he found the writing center requirement burdensome



and did not return when no longer required because he did not feel the additional tutoring was worth the time. This participant's criticism of mandatory tutoring was more specific than criticisms by the other four participants who were against the writing center requirement, only two of whom were also student athletes. Still, the rationale behind his criticism mirrors that of the other participants: When students do not feel they really need the writing center (because they have other tutors or some other reason), they believe that going to a consultation anyway wastes their already limited time.

As with the finding that students are motivated by grades, the finding that students are conscious of their limited time is hardly surprising. Clark (1985) notes that students cite lack of time, rather than the idea that the center will not be helpful, as the most common reason for not using the writing center (p. 33). Clark finds, as my interview findings also suggest, that even students who use the writing center are concerned with time. Bishop's (1990) survey research further supports this idea. Of the students Bishop surveyed, over half (53%) who had not used the writing center cited time as the main reason. The second-most cited factor was need: 38% claimed that they did not go because they did not feel they needed it. When we talk about promoting the writing center, we often guess that students do not visit because they are afraid to go or that they do not know to. Bishop found that a small minority—3% and 5% of participants, respectively—cited these reasons. Bishop's study suggests that time and need dwarf these reasons by a large margin, and my interview findings suggest that time and need are closely related.

We know that students care about time, but we may hesitate to talk about time directly when framing required tutoring or the writing center generally. As teachers and tutors of writing, we make great efforts trying to convince students to be more patient with the complexity of writing, to start assignments earlier, and to take more time with revisions. To suggest that the writing center could ultimately save students time feels weird, like we are giving in to many students' desires to "get through" the most terrible act of writing. Similarly, while we talk about need with students, we may talk about it largely in our own terms. Everyone needs feedback on their writing, we may offer. Even the best writers can get better, we say. To students who think they do not need the writing center, we may argue, "but everyone can get something out of a consultation!" We are not wrong, of course, when we make these comments. But, to what degree do these comments fit into an ideal of the writing center instead of the students' reality? When we fail to acknowledge this reality—a reality of tight semester calendars, demands from several classes, and pressures to balance work and school—we miss

opportunities to connect with students and to frame tutoring on their terms.

When framing required tutoring, what might it look like to talk about time and need on the students' terms? I suggest that we talk candidly with students about parts of the writing process that cause them the greatest difficulty or, in perhaps more student-friendly terms, take up the most time. Without urging students to rush through these parts of the process, we can talk about how using the writing center is worth the investment of their time. Nearly all teachers of writing have witnessed a student write a fantastic paper that does not do what the assignment asked. In this scenario, the student has typically skipped a crucial part of the process—fully understanding the assignment—and ultimately created more work (and cost more time) by writing a paper that must be completely rewritten. A 30-minute writing center consultation would have proven a great investment of time in this scenario, as the student could have left the consultation with a better sense of the assignment and written a paper to begin with that better fit the guidelines. In a different example, most students will furiously nod their heads when asked, have you ever spent hours staring at a blank document? In this example, a 30-minute brainstorming session could prove a very worthy investment of time, as brainstorming with an experienced tutor will likely help the student writer come up with ideas and get unstuck quicker than sitting alone, frustrated, in front of a computer.

Of course, we already talk to students about how the writing center can meet the needs discussed in both of these scenarios. However, talking about that help in terms of making good use of their limited time may more productively frame required tutoring. We can say to students, “We know you’re busy. We know you’re stressed and limited for time. We know that being required to use the writing center adds one more thing to your to-do list. But, these required sessions will likely be worth the time they will take, many times over. We can help you meet specific needs that will ultimately help you find more time in your day.” Such a move would require us to get past the ideal of the writing center as a community of unhurried students working to improve their writing at whatever pace is needed. Ultimately, though, framing required tutoring in this way would show students that we understand their realities and want to meet them where they are.

**Finding the right tutor.** Interview participants were never directly asked about tutors, but all 15 commented at least generally on writing center staff. The most interesting comments, for framing required tutoring, had to do with finding a tutor who fit the student's preferences, needs, or even personality. Of the 15 interview participants,

six specifically described finding tutors with whom they preferred to work. One participant described a highly negative experience with a tutor and explained how the session left her with a bad feeling about the writing center overall. This participant claimed that during her very first session her tutor appeared annoyed with her. The student had come to the writing center specifically looking for help with understanding the writing assignment (and said so in the session). Despite this, the tutor seemed frustrated that the student did not immediately understand what the assignment was asking her to do. The student explained that the experience affected her so greatly that she probably would not have returned to the writing center if not required: “I was required to come back anyway, which, honestly, I probably wouldn’t have if it wasn’t required, but since it was, I tried someone else. The other person was great.”

The other five participants, fortunately, offered less negative experiences, but they did talk about finding tutors they preferred to see. One, for example, suggested that he liked working with more directive tutors. Of the tutors he saw initially, the participant remarked: “They say a lot of ‘I think,’ and I’m the one thinking. I’m not sure. And they say, ‘I think.’ ‘I think you should do this.’ I need the security [...] because I think, I have no idea.” An English as a Second Language student, this participant went on to say that he continued to use the writing center regularly and felt happy overall with the services, but that he only saw tutors who he thought could confidently answer his questions. Finally, one participant remarked that she initially felt hesitant about using the center but became more comfortable when she saw that the tutors were friendly and encouraging.

No writing center director wants to tell students that some tutors are more qualified or skilled than others. Further, explaining to students that tutors may gravitate toward different methods may feel complicated or as if the center is winging it; will students wonder, why don’t all tutors just use the same effective methods? Some students, like the ESL student described in the previous paragraph, may dislike methods that we often encourage our tutors to use. While I did not observe the sessions he described, the student seemed to be describing tutors who were less directive, more collaborative, and more likely to provide the student with options instead of absolute answers. All of these methods may have been perfectly appropriate choices given the situation, but the student did not respond well to them. The findings suggest that we may need to acknowledge to students that some of our sanctioned methods may not appeal to everyone. Finally, writing center directors may find it hard to talk freely with students about the reality that sometimes, a tutor will

have a bad session or a bad day. However, the interview findings suggest that such conversation may be crucial to getting students to return. Students' attitudes toward the requirement and their eagerness to return to the center both rely on finding a tutor with whom they work well, and a poor experience with one tutor may seriously jeopardize their likelihood to come back. In talking about required tutoring, can we have honest conversations with students about finding a good fit and responding to a disappointing session?

As with talking about grades and time, we can have these conversations with students, if we do so carefully and on their terms. We might best frame conversations about finding the "right" tutor as an opportunity to show students how the writing center experience differs from the classroom experience. For many students, one-with-one learning may be new, and they may be surprised at how closely they work with tutors. The idea that they must be able to trust and feel comfortable with their tutor may catch them off guard. Also new may be the idea that they can "try out" different tutors, and that doing so is expected, not cause for offense. With students who are required to use the center, we can even encourage them to come back by saying that once they find tutors with whom they work well, they can return to those tutors in subsequent semesters. By having these conversations, we frame required tutoring as an opportunity to build relationships that prove valuable beyond the semester's end.

During classroom visits, we can talk candidly with students about how they may respond better to some tutors than others, and we may encourage them to find a tutor with whom they work well. We can explain that does not mean that one tutor is more qualified than another; it simply means that we're all people, and in this highly collaborative context, different personalities may mesh better than others. In sessions, tutors can reinforce this idea by speaking positively of one another and encouraging students to work with other tutors. This final suggestion may get tricky—we clearly do not want tutors to "pass off" students or justify inflexibility by telling themselves that students can simply work with someone else if they don't like their methods. By keeping the conversation positive—"Hey, Jessica is fantastic with these types of assignments, and I know she has openings next week!"—tutors can reinforce the idea that students are welcome to work with different tutors and find a good fit. Finally, students must know that they have a voice for registering complaints about disappointing tutoring sessions and that their concerns will be taken seriously. Post-session evaluations provide a great way of collecting student feedback throughout the semester, but they may be less useful for immediate problems. A better move may be

for writing center leaders—including directors, assistant directors, and lead tutors—to make their information available for students to contact them with concerns.

**Instructor influence on student attitudes.** Research from Bishop (1990) and others tells us that instructors strongly influence students' views of the writing center. Interview findings support this idea and also suggest that instructors play a critical role in shaping students' view of the requirement. Instructor comments strongly influence whether students come to see mandatory tutoring as a burden or as an opportunity to improve their writing and writing process. When asked to describe what their instructor said about the writing center, the majority of participants, 11, claimed that their instructors focused on the requirement itself. One participant, for example, remarked that his instructor talked about the writing center, "Only when she was reminding us that it was a requirement for us to go." Many of these 11 interview participants mentioned later in the interview or in passing that their instructors also said that the writing center was helpful. However, three of these 11 participants remarked that their instructors deliberately avoided talking about the writing center at all, aside from reminders about completing required sessions. For example, one participant explained that his instructor "didn't know what exactly we were talking about in the writing center, how that would coincide with how she was teaching [...]. She tried not to talk about it too much."

Four participants stood out when asked what their instructor said about the writing center. These four participants responded that their instructors spoke enthusiastically about the writing center, explained throughout the semester how writing center use could help the students to improve their writing (and in two cases, their grades), and encouraged students to increase their usage of the center if they needed more help. None of these four participants focused on the requirement when describing their instructors' comments. One participant's comment is representative of all four participants: "He [the instructor] just basically stressed that you should go because it is a good resource, not only just because you have to go but because it is a good resource for your papers [and] for you to get a better grade." These four participants expressed the most positive feelings for both the writing center and the requirement. First, they argued strongly that developmental writing students should be required to use the center, and two commented that other English courses, like first-year composition, should also require writing center use. Second, they spoke very positively about the help they had received from the writing center. Third, all four had returned to the writing center multiple times since completing the developmental writing

course. In contrast, only four out of the other 11 interview participants had returned.

These findings are clearly limited, but they provide an important reminder that instructors play a critical role in shaping how students view and use the writing center. Students will only come to view required tutoring as opportunity instead of punishment if instructors frame it effectively by emphasizing reasons to use the writing center and talking about it in the students' terms. Generally, conversations about required tutoring and instructors have focused on whether writing center directors should encourage (or even allow) instructors to require tutoring. We might ask, instead, how we can help instructors productively frame required tutoring for students.

In program-wide mandatory tutoring, like my institution's writing center requirement for developmental writing, strategies for framing may come from curriculum descriptions or in meetings with all instructors, where writing center directors have the opportunity to provide suggestions about how instructors can present required tutoring. When individual instructors wish to require writing center use, those conversations may work best one-with-one. Perhaps the best way to approach these conversations is to ask instructors first: "What do you hope to achieve by requiring students to use the writing center?" Depending on the response, a director might find that mandatory tutoring is not the right move. In this case, we may encourage the instructor to consider other options, like simply encouraging writing center use in ways that students will respond to well. If we agree with the instructor that requiring sessions would benefit students, we may then talk to the instructor about presenting required tutoring in the ways described in the previous sections. Most importantly, instructors should be encouraged to frame required tutoring as opportunity to build a habit that strong writers have, not as punishment for deficiencies. In order to push for these conversations, writing center directors must accept that getting students to use the center productively is often a team effort with instructors. In our ideal world, we may envision our work as entirely student-centered and our conversations as happening directly with the student. In reality, we must work with the instructors, as they most influence students.

### **Conclusion: Confronting Our Ideals and Implementing RAD Findings**

Writing center studies is currently experiencing a much-needed push for more research to inform our practices. Several scholars have argued

recently that our field relies more on lore and anecdote than research. These scholars include Driscoll & Perdue (2012), who analyzed 270 articles published in *WCJ* and found that only a small minority report findings from studies that fit Haswell's (2005) replicable, aggregable, and data-supported (RAD) criteria. Though writing center studies will almost certainly benefit from more, and better, research, I have tried to show in this article that research alone will not help us improve our practices. We must also figure out what ideals hold us back from implementing new findings and make us cling to old approaches to writing center work. Research evidence may be strong, but long-held beliefs may be stronger, particularly when they come from writing center directors' and tutors' observations and experiences day in and day out in the center.

The issue of required tutoring provides one example of the need for more RAD research but also—and perhaps just as importantly—the need to renegotiate the ideals that may prevent us from implementing findings from that research. While many articles published in the major writing center publications address required tutoring, most of these do not report findings from RAD studies. Further, most existing RAD studies on required tutoring use surveys. This follows the general trend reported by Driscoll & Perdue, who found that surveys constituted the highest percentage (27.5%) of the research articles published in *WCJ*. While surveys can be valuable, they also have their limits. Despite these limitations in RAD research on required tutoring—in both total number of studies and variety of methods—quite a few existing studies *do* investigate the issue; as discussed here, several scholars have researched the issue since Clark's 1985 study. Still, directives against mandatory tutoring persist. Writing center practitioners still refer overwhelmingly to gut feelings and anecdote, for example, when responding to listserv questions about required tutoring. In part, this may come from the ideal that students go to the writing center entirely of their own self-motivation. It may also come from the ideal that writing centers exist in a reality outside of coursework, with its tight deadlines and its grades. If my writing center is a representative example, directors and tutors may still assume that students who come of their own motivation are the ideal. They may also assume that we can (or at least should strive to) help students without paying great attention to some of the less desirable realities of our students' academic lives, like semester calendars, heavy course loads, and grades.

The example of required tutoring also suggests that our ideals may keep us stuck in one type of method for researching important issues. Our field has largely framed required tutoring as good–bad, okay–not

okay. It's perhaps unsurprising, then, that most of the research about required tutoring relies on surveys that seek to answer the question in those fairly simple terms: How do students react to required tutoring, and, based on that, should we allow it or not? My own research began in those same simplistic terms, perhaps in part because I was grappling with questions, based on my ideals, that are themselves simplistic: Shouldn't students come to the writing center on their own? Shouldn't the writing center be for improving writing, not for getting course credit? Fortunately, the interview half of my study pushed beyond these simplistic terms, but only after I reflected on how my ideals were shaping my research. Specifically, I could only see my interview findings as opportunity to frame required tutoring after I realized for myself the ideals that kept me reacting negatively to mandatory tutoring. To create better RAD studies and implement the findings from them, other writing center directors may need to renegotiate their ideals in the way that I did. Those ideals may have nothing to do with intrinsically motivated students or the writing center as existing outside of classroom realities, the major ideals that led me to ignore the research on required tutoring. But, most directors will have some set of ideals that may lead them to disregard new evidence or cling to old, comfortable practices. To research existing practices or implement new evidence, most of us will at some point be pushed to discover and renegotiate our ideals.

To do this productively, it may be useful to consider where those ideals come from. Upon reflection, I realize that many of my ideals come from two places: my graduate school preparation in writing centers and my day-to-day experiences as a writing center director. In graduate school, I fell in love with one-with-one tutoring and came to view the writing center as a special place. I remember saying to a friend in graduate school, a fellow tutor, that I loved working in the writing center because I could "just help students with their writing without having to grade it" (or respond to their frantic middle-of-the-night emails or ding them for poor attendance or any of the other realities classroom teachers face). Writing centers are special places, of course, and one-with-one tutoring provides students a unique learning experience and tutors a unique teaching experience. But, we can become too quick to romanticize the writing center as a place divorced from the less-than-desirable realities of tight semester calendars and grades. Further, I realize upon reflection that in graduate school, romanticizing the writing center combined in some ways with my training about writing center administration to develop my ideal about intrinsically motivated students. Specifically, we talked often about how to present the writing center as a space that offered something unique within the



institution. These conversations tie into the center's status, perception, and even funding. So often, proving our value and our uniqueness involves showing how we differ from other spaces in the institution, the traditional classroom being perhaps the greatest example. Here, in the writing center, students can get one-with-one attention, we say. They will be comfortable getting help from someone without the authority of a grade-wielding instructor, we offer. Students visit the writing center throughout their time in the university, we explain, so that they improve their writing at their own pace, as opposed to the sometimes-hurried nature of the semester-based classroom.

Further, as a writing center director, my day-to-day realities sometimes push me to particular ideals like intrinsically motivated students. I have changed my tune about mandatory tutoring overall, but undeniably, requiring students to visit the writing center presents challenges for me and for my writing center's tutors in the day-to-day. The schedule can get overcrowded; some required students resist or come with nothing to work on; and I still occasionally encounter faculty who think that we only work with students in developmental English. Sometimes, these day-to-day challenges can make the tutors and me feel as though things might be better if all students just came to the writing center on their own instead of for a course. When we vent about the challenges in breakroom conversations, those feelings can become even stronger. Ideals that are developed in the thick-of-the-semester experiences are so powerful partly because those experiences happen so much more regularly than encountering new research-based evidence.

More RAD studies would mean that encountering such evidence would happen more regularly, but implementing findings and researching issues in a nuanced light requires identifying and pushing past ideals like I have described here. I realized my ideals and their roots only after reflecting deeply, a process that included talking to tutors, raising questions about the research (including my own), and even writing this article. I offer my reflections in hopes that others will view this as a model for recognizing and renegotiating the beliefs that may drive their practice and even keep them from implementing useful research. I cannot offer a system for such reflection, but perhaps the most essential part of the process, for anyone, is to simply pay attention. Specifically, I argue that writing center directors should pay attention—during their reading, in conferences, over listservs, in hallway and breakroom conversations—to those practices that make them automatically bristle. Directors may pay particular attention to the practices that make them bristle even when research suggests their advantages. That knee-jerk reaction can signify deep-seated ideals based on gut, lore, and anecdote.

Such ideals often come from our early experiences in our writing center preparation and from our day-to-day experiences as directors. Reflecting on where the ideals came from, how they drive our current practice, and how they conflict with or are supported by research can help writing center directors develop a more informed practice by making better use of the evidence we have. Recognizing and renegotiating our ideals can also help us to raise new questions about our practices and develop better studies that look at some of our longstanding dilemmas, like required tutoring, in a more nuanced way.

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