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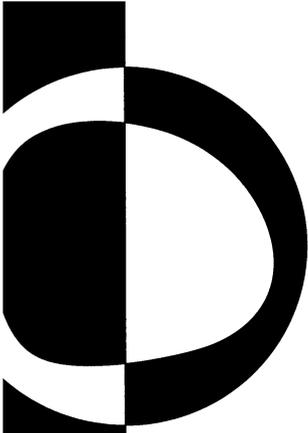
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Melissa Bugdal, Kristina Reardon, & Thomas Deans

## Summing Up the Session: A Study of Student, Faculty, and Tutor Attitudes Toward Tutor Notes

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### Abstract

This study considers five different tutor note styles and reports on how the three primary audiences for such notes—student writers, faculty, and tutors—assess their efficacy in terms of length, voice, purpose, and content. Surveys and focus groups reveal that all stakeholders take tutor notes seriously and that collectively they prefer notes that are about a paragraph long, address students directly in the second-person, maintain an institutional rather than colloquial voice, and include a detailed summary and revision plan. To put this study in context, the article also traces the history of writing center scholarship on session reports.

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Tutors at our center spend the last 15 minutes of each hour-long tutorial slot composing a summary of each session, one that includes a quick recap of the revision plans that the tutor and student writer had discussed. That note gets archived in our online scheduling/record-keeping system and emailed to the student—and, if the student specifically requests so, to their instructor. Given the size of our center, this means we collectively spend more than 1000 hours each year writing tutor notes. In a focus group we conducted for this study, one of our tutors reflected, “Sometimes I just wonder that we allot 15 minutes for a tutor note—that’s 25% more time that we could be spending actually in a session. I think it’s something to think about.” The tutor was questioning whether a full hour of tutor-student conversation might be a better use of time than our current practice of ending tutorials at 45 minutes and reserving 15 minutes for the tutor note. He had a point—and the spirit of his question resonates with a contention that Anne Geller, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll, & Elizabeth Boquet (2007) highlight in *The Everyday Writing Center*: “What passes for the mundane in our writing centers may be precisely the site at which the disjunctions between our pedagogical principles and foundational hopes and dreams about our profession and our professional lives might be observed and parsed—not for resolution necessarily or cleaning up, but for learning more, in deeper, more satisfying ways” (p. 121). In many writing centers, tapping out tutor notes—or what others have called session reports, session notes, tutor logs, tutorial summaries, or session records—has become habitual, one of those mundane practices about which we felt called to observe, parse, research.

We have some evidence that students at our university value tutor notes. At the end of each semester, we send a survey to the approximately 1500 students who have visited our center that semester, and one of the questions asks them to rate how helpful they find the notes.<sup>1</sup> Over the last five semesters, students selected “Helpful” at rates ranging from 76% to 82%. Given that strong student endorsement, we have never seriously considered doing away with tutor notes. But we do see the need to know much more about the ways tutors write them, how students use

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1 We regularly have 2000+ tutorials each semester but 1200–1600 discrete users. We get 250–450 responses each time we administer the survey. The specific question on tutor notes reads, “You should have received a Tutor Note in your email following your visit. How would you rate your Tutor Note?” Multiple-choice responses are *Helpful*, *Not helpful*, *I told the tutor not to send one*, *I wanted one but did not receive it*, *Not sure/I can’t remember*. There is also an open field that allows respondents to type in comments.

them, and whether or not they have value to faculty. This is the driving exigency for the study we report on in this article.

Another exigency was that despite being trained to write one-paragraph notes that summarize the session and sketch a revision plan in a clear, third-person voice, some tutors deliberately departed from that model. They adopted different modes of address and different styles. When we started noticing emoticons, exclamation points, and the occasional very chummy, colloquial voice in their notes, we had a staff-wide debate on our hands. Would emoticons alienate professors? Align students more closely with our tutors? How important is the third-person address? How do we best represent the center? Who are we writing these notes for, anyway? And what is the goal of writing these notes at all? As we discussed these questions together as a staff, we allowed tutors, within reason, to experiment and follow their preferences. While most still hewed closely to the template we had trained them in, enough adopted different styles that we saw an increasing need to evaluate the efficacy of the alternatives using systematic, empirical methods.

In order to determine who among our stakeholders found the notes useful and why (or why not), we culled five different styles of notes in use by our tutors to test in surveys and focus groups (for samples of each, see p. 24–25). The *Reporter Note* follows the traditional model in our center. We named the other four notes based on their most salient features. The *Bro Note* earns its name for its colloquial language and peer-to-peer (or perhaps better, dude-to-dude) style address. The *Coach Note* guides the student through the revision process in some detail. The *Cheerleader Note* features lots of encouragement. And the *Quick Note* delivers a reminder and summary just three sentences long. Using surveys and focus groups, we asked the three audiences who read tutor notes on our campus—students, faculty, and our tutors—to share their thoughts on the length, style, content, and purpose of these five sample notes.

Having already established that the majority of students surveyed found the notes valuable, our aim was to better understand how and why they found these notes helpful, to assess what professors saw in the notes they received, and to gauge what tutors thought about the new styles we had discussed as a staff the previous year. We would also need to consider how to best write notes for multiple audiences. While the *Reporter* and *Coach Notes* emerged as clear favorites, the stakeholders debated the style, content, and value of each—and more often than not, they agreed on the merits and shortfalls of each. After coding and analyzing the results of our surveys and focus groups, we have concluded that the ideal tutor note should be as long as the *Reporter Note*; be addressed directly to

students in the second-person “you” like the *Bro*, *Coach* and *Cheerleader Notes*; adopt a more institutional (rather than colloquial) voice; and include both detailed summary of the tutorial interactions and some explicit mapping of a post-tutorial revision plan.

### **Part I: The Literature on Tutor Notes**

In our center we see tutor notes serving multiple complementary purposes. For students, they deliver a recap of key points and ideally help scaffold their revision after the tutorial. For our tutors, the process of summing up the session forces them to document, and ideally reflect on, each session; the online archive of notes also provides tutors a history of past sessions for each incoming student. For faculty, notes help show that our tutorials are conversational and intellectual, not remedial or prescriptive. For our writing center administrators, tutor notes are one resource to consult when conducting mid-year, formative tutor evaluations because notes offer one window on a tutor’s typical practices. Finally, our tutor notes comprise a vast digital archive that can be used to justify the scope and value of the center or can be mined as a resource for quantitative or qualitative research.

Most of those themes have been discussed—to varying degrees—in the published literature on tutor notes. Since at least 1980, writing center directors and administrators have been discussing whether or not to record the events of a writing center session; how to summarize the work done in-session if they do; and with whom to share (and not share) such records. Fewer articles have focused on the student, tutor, and/or faculty perceptions of and uses of such notes, and fewer still have put their claims to any empirical tests. Historically, records were borne out of a need to communicate a writing center’s work with faculty and administrators, often to justify the center’s existence (Walker, 1980, p. 5; Cogie, 1998, p. 47). Writing centers quickly began using such records in-house because they allowed tutors to prepare for future sessions, and directors and administrators to reflect on praxis. Over time, writing centers became comfortable sharing reports within the center and with students. However, Michael Pemberton (1995) explains that sharing reports with professors became an ethical quandary because writing centers sought to protect student privacy and declare their space as distinct from the classroom. He coined the terms *sharer* and *seclusionist* to identify the two sides in the debate (p. 13), and that triggered a series of exchanges that we recap briefly below. But first it is worth noting that Danielle Cordaro (2014) has recently argued that the ethical quandary about whether or not to share reports is not especially pressing since

the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA) allows writing centers to furnish reports to instructors without students' permission (p. 2). Yet the question of what is legal is not the same as what is ethical—or even what is ideal for learning or for the viability of writing centers. Margaret Weaver (2001) notes that many contemporary writing centers have taken the pragmatic middle road of allowing students the choice of sending tutor notes to instructors (p. 41), thus eliding the sharer/seclusionist dichotomy. Our center follows Weaver's model: Once the tutor enters the note into WCOOnline, it is automatically emailed to the student, and the tutor sends it to the instructor only if the student checks a box on our intake form and supplies the instructor's email address.

The sharer/seclusionist debate that dominated the 1990s may have centered on the issue of privacy, but it reveals a related question: How should we communicate the work of the writing center via tutor notes to tutors, students, and instructors? Glenda Conway (1998) writes that sending reports to instructors erodes a writing center's claim of being politically and psychologically distinct from the classroom, virtues that she argues are "necessary and healthy" because they foster intrinsic rather than grade-based motivation (p. 10). On the other hand, Jane Cogie (1998) argues for the tutor note as a collaborative tool that links tutors, students, and faculty. She concedes that tutor notes often become a "messy form of communication" but nevertheless thinks they invite tutors and students to reflect on their time in the tutorial (p. 48). Cogie sees tutor notes as a valuable part of the writing process as circumscribed by instructors; she also endorses the way they allow tutors to communicate the virtues of writing centers. Most faculty interviewed in her study approved of the tutor notes, particularly when the tutors reaffirmed their views on a given student's writing by focusing on topics which the instructor also emphasized in critique (pp. 55–56). For their part, tutors registered a sense of awkwardness at being truthful in their reports if the session didn't go well but felt that notes would motivate students to work harder on revisions by passing along the tutor note to a faculty member (p. 57). Many tutor notes came to include not only a summary of the session but also plans for revision.

Communication through tutor notes among students, faculty, and tutors can help shape the image of a writing center in a university community. In a two-part article in *The Writing Lab Newsletter* that reflects on a series of WCenter listserv posts, Eric Crump (1993) emphasizes one respondent's articulation of the importance of the session report as a public relations device (p. 6). He also highlights comments from another respondent that point out that notes help communicate to instructors what the writing center can and cannot do for students (p. 7). Kim

Jackson (1996) links the idea of record keeping to the CUNY Writing Center's image across the university, writing that she wanted her records "to reflect our philosophy and the image we were attempting to create for the writing center," which was undergoing a shift from grammar fix-it shop to a collaborative environment (p. 11). The center implemented reports to ensure students took responsibility for their sessions and became active learners. In this way, tutor notes not only became revision tools for students but also communicative devices for all stakeholders.

Additionally, some scholars have considered the image of writing centers more globally, assessing the use of such reports across the U.S. and examining how they communicate the nature of the collaborative work between tutors and students. Anneke J. Larrance & Barbara Brady (1995) collected 163 relevant responses from the 484 institutions they queried in 1995 and noted 35% of centers did not have tutors write reports,<sup>2</sup> though the majority of institutions (65%) did. Among centers that wrote reports, 91 out of 104 centers reported sending such notes to faculty, while only 19 of the 104 schools reported sending copies of the notes to students (p. 6). While some centers relied on checklists or summary/check-list combinations, most used individualized letters or summaries. Tutors generally authored the reports, while a few centers saw tutors collaborate on notes with students. Student/tutor collaboration opens opportunities for using notes as something like mini session ethnographies, an approach Weaver endorses (2001, p. 36). Weaver writes that we should not understand the authors of tutor notes as objective observers but instead as participant-observers who may at some moments be perceived as having positions of authority over the students about whom they are writing. Ultimately, she as well as Larrance & Brady advocate for jointly authored tutor notes, hoping to reestablish students' authority as writers and to diminish the hierarchical gap between tutor and tutee (Weaver, p. 50). Because these two studies are nearly 20 years old—and because three focus groups with writing center directors and tutors from across the country that we conducted at the 2015 International Writing Center Association Collaborative showed us that tutor note practices still vary widely—it would be worth repeating a larger scale survey to get a more comprehensive view of current practices.

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2 Larrance & Brady (1995) identify three main reasons that centers do not write notes: 1. time, budget, and/or staff constraints; 2. they believed that reports "diminish students' sense of self-direction and authority"; 3. a desire to protect students' privacy (p. 5).

In the most recent scholarship on tutor notes, Rita Malenczyk (2013) and Danielle Cordaro (2014) comment on the relationship-building functions of tutor notes in university cultures. Malenczyk has extended the conversation on tutor notes by exploring the “community-building function” of reports at her center (p. 75). These reports, which are not shared with students or with faculty, present a form of organizational rhetoric that allows her to note how “reports are not just exchanges between the tutor and one or more people but are, rather, part of an institutional network of relationships, given that a writing center is typically part of a larger educational context” (p. 77). Malenczyk considers the storytelling function of tutor notes by analyzing the way they reveal the institutional identity in her center. Cordaro, on the other hand, sees value in widening the circulation of tutor notes by sending them to students and faculty, as she sees their potential for prompting further reflection and revision. Beyond the notion of institutional storytelling, Cordaro outlines five functions that tutor notes can serve: as feedback for faculty on students’ comprehension; as talking points for enhancing student/faculty conferences; as evidence of session attendance; as a springboard for classroom discussion; and as source material for writing reflections (p. 4). While the majority of the 36 instructors she surveyed indicated that they would be willing to consider engaging with tutor notes, she also notes that faculty may need guidance and support as they begin to do so (p. 5). She concludes by suggesting that such active engagement with tutor notes “may help to build bridges between the support offered in classrooms and in writing centers” (p. 6). Our study considers just what kinds of bridges these notes might help build by testing how students, faculty, and tutors perceive tutors notes, assessing which kinds of notes they prefer, and analyzing what each constituency reports about how they use such notes.

## Part II: Study Design

To assess student, faculty, and tutor attitudes toward and typical uses of tutor notes, we used five different notes as the basis for questions in online surveys and in-person focus groups. All five notes come from actual session summaries that our tutors have written, though we changed the students’ names and in some cases combined the features of two notes written by the same tutor to best represent that tutor’s style. The *Reporter Note* is closest in style and content to what we have long trained our tutors to write; the four variations—*Bro Note*, *Coach Note*, *Cheerleader Note*, and *Quick Note*—have emerged organically over the last several years as some on our staff appropriated and adapted the genre.

<p><b>Reporter Note</b></p>	<p>Sam brought his Writing in Environmental Policy W course research proposal into the Writing Center to formulate an outline for his project paper. We first looked at the proposal with the existing research question and thesis. We talked about the purpose and structure of a thesis, and Sam found a way to utilize more research with a thesis encompassing all environmental and economic threats to ocean acidification. The broader thesis also evaluates current policies, which better fits Sam’s research question. We created an outline for his introduction and body paragraphs, and then briefly discussed how to create an effective conclusion. Leaving the W Center, Sam plans on doing additional policy research, and finishing his outline to include sources and relevant evidence. I welcomed Sam to make a second appointment at the Writing Center.</p>
<p><b>Bro Note</b></p>	<p>Hey Dom! This is just a reminder of what we talked about today, just in case you get stuck. With your thesis, you were going to use your professor’s notes on the back of that paper to say how Ross is kinda right about Ariel and Disney cartoons, but that she goes too far and that many cartoons have good morals. We also talked about how you have to recognize that Ross is right in some ways, but then talk about she’s wrong in other, bigger ways. Good luck, bro! See ya around. –Billy</p>
<p><b>Coach Note</b></p>	<p>Hi Danielle—This is just a reminder that you stopped by the Writing Center to go over your three-page Journalism Ethics paper. We read through the paper out loud—you read to me—and we came up with a plan of attack. Here it is: You planned to make the edits we discussed on the first page and a half of the paper, re-formulating the argument to express a desire for truth-telling above all other concerns. (Above, for instance, the safety of the community or the safety of a particular individual.) Then, you planned to cut the last two paragraphs and replace it with a paragraph organized thusly: 1.) You make a statement about how truth-telling empowers individual community members, enabling them to make their own choices. 2.) You talk about how this responds to utilitarian theory. 3.) You talk about how this responds to Sessila Bok’s theory. 4.) You return to the value of truth-telling as community empowerment, despite potential negative consequences. You said you planned to make these revisions before turning your essay in tomorrow. Good luck!</p>

<b>Cheerleader Note</b>	Nora came to the Writing Center to work on her wonderful personal statement for pharmacy school. We read through it together and made some sentence level changes to help her highlight her excellent skills and qualifications. Nora and I discovered that her paper had a clear voice and that adding just one more clever anecdote that might help her essay to stand out. We focused mostly on changing a few phrases around to create more professional tone that also reflected Nora's own voice. We also worked on incorporating a few more of Nora's personal skills and awesome attributes that she would bring to pharmacy school!! :-). Good luck with grad school Nora!!! :-)
<b>Quick Note</b>	Jake came into the Writing Center to discuss his thesis statement. We made some adjustments based on the points he makes later in his paper. He left ready to continue drafting based on his new thesis.

**Table 1. The 5 tutor note models used for this study. The Reporter Note is the closest to the genre we teach our tutors, while the others have emerged within our center.**

To test stakeholders' reactions to each note, we created three online surveys: one for students, one for faculty, and one for tutors. The surveys were similar in that they presented the respondents with the five model notes and prompted them to evaluate the length, content, style, and value of each, and state which note(s) they preferred; respondents were also invited to comment on anything else they wished to. We invited students who visited our writing center during the 2014–2015 academic year to participate. 227 responded, with approximately 35% of them freshmen, 20% of them sophomores, 10% of them juniors, 25% of them seniors, and 10% of them graduate students. We also invited faculty and graduate instructors involved in teaching English and writing-intensive courses at our university during that same year to complete a survey. Seventy-three faculty responded, with 24 instructors from English forming the largest constituency (33%); other respondents were widely distributed across 20 different departments. All 33 of our own writing center tutors (79% undergraduates and 21% graduate students) completed a survey as well. Each survey invitation included the incentive of a drawing for a \$50 gift certificate.

In addition, we invited students, faculty, and tutors to 45-minute focus groups, where we presented each note in turn and asked participants to comment on the style and content. It proved difficult to recruit students: five students (four undergraduates and one graduate student) participated across four focus groups, effectively rendering them interviews. We had better luck with faculty and tutors. We held

five focus groups with faculty, and were able to recruit 17 participants from 9 departments, ranging from political science to math to civil engineering. We held six focus groups with our staff, and 22 of our 33 tutors participated. We also conducted three more focus groups as part of a presentation we gave at the 2015 IWCA Collaborative at CCCC, each with five to six people from a range of different colleges and universities. The focus groups at the Collaborative affirmed for us that tutor note practices vary widely across institutions and that few have formally assessed the efficacy of their tutor note practices. However, because our current study is focused on student, faculty, and tutor attitudes at one institution, we set aside those transcripts for future research.

Transcribing all the focus group recordings and pulling all the open field comments from the surveys resulted in 60+ single-spaced pages of student, faculty, and tutor discourse. We then used verbal data analysis (Geisler, 2004) and collaboratively segmented these responses by topical chain (p. 35), splitting responses wherever multiple topical chains existed in the same response. We used grounded theory (Neff, 2002; Farkas & Haas, 2012) to construct our coding scheme for each category, and collaboratively coded each topical chain into one of the four categories that emerged as most interesting and relevant: *purpose/use/value*, *style/ethos*, *content*, or *length*. We set aside utterances that did not fit into those categories. We coded each segment only once, and conducted this data analysis collaboratively: that is, the three of us met to work through each transcript, discussing each segment and assigning it to one of the five categories (that is, the four in italics above plus a fifth “did not fit any category”).

That process resulted in four new documents: one that included all segments related to *purpose/use/value*, which ran 7,050 words; one that included all segments related to *style/ethos*, which ran 9,623 words; one that included all segments related to *content*, which ran 9,428 words; and one that included all segments related to *length*, which ran 1,145 words. Because those are four quite different traits to evaluate, we used a different coding scheme to analyze the discourse in each of those four documents. The rationales for those four coding schemes and explanations of how we applied them are detailed in the sections that follow. We should note that because no one has asked quite the same questions about tutor notes as we have, the categories and coding schemes we developed tended to avoid what Roberta D. Kjesrud (2015) labels the “lore bias” of many coding systems employed in writing center research. For example, none of our measures hinge on the familiar directive/non-directive binary. Likewise, our research questions and data steered

us away from the commonplaces of past scholarship on tutor notes, such as the sharer/seclusionist debate.

**Length.** We wanted to know if stakeholders had an opinion on the ideal length of a tutor note. As we read through our focus group transcripts and open-field survey remarks, we considered comments pertaining to length relative to each note. We coded comments as *positive* if respondents agreed a particular note was an appropriate length or *negative* if they thought it was either too long or too short. For example, we coded this instructor's response to the *Coach Note* as *positive*: "I like the detail that's there and I agree with [professor] with saying that if there's more detail there, you can always not read some of it if you want to, but it's nice that it's there." We then tallied the codes pertaining to each note.

**Voice/Style.** Since the emoticons and use of "you" in our tutors' notes originally sparked our inquiry, we decided that the two most important topics we wanted to investigate were *point of view* and *voice/degree of formality*. We coded those in two domains. For *point of view* we coded expressions of preference for third-person, second-person, or no preference. For example, if a respondent expressed a preference for the point of view in the *Reporter*, *Cheerleader*, or *Quick Note*, we coded that as a preference for the third-person point of view; if someone registered a preference for the point of view in the *Bro* or *Coach Note*, we coded that as a preference for the second-person point of view. Sometimes people in focus groups also commented on point of view independent of any particular note, and those comments were also coded.

As a group, we agreed that the *Bro* and *Cheerleader Notes* were colloquial and informal. We also agreed that in contrast, the *Reporter*, *Coach*, and *Quick Notes* carried an institutional voice (even if to different degrees) because they seemed relatively formal. As participants endorsed or critiqued particular notes, we were able to code their comments as preferring an *institutional voice*, a *colloquial voice*, or *no preference*. We recorded those codes as meaningful relative to the note they were referring to. At times, participants also made general comments about style, voice or formality, and those were coded as well.

**Purpose.** We used a nested coding scheme (Geisler, 2004) to account first for whether or not respondents found the notes useful/purposeful and then accounted for how they put the notes to use. We began by coding all segments related to purpose as suggesting (directly or indirectly) *useful/purposeful* or *not*. Then we further coded the useful/purposeful segments for how they were useful: *providing information on the student's writing process*; *providing information on the writing center's practices*;

*encouraging the student to take follow-up action; or being useful for ambiguous reasons.*

For example, we coded the following comment by an instructor about the *Reporter Note* as *purposeful* and further as *providing information on student's writing process*: "This note would help me to understand how well the student was following through on research requirements for the assignment and incorporating revision." In another case, we coded a faculty member's comment on the *Reporter Note* as *purposeful* and further as *providing information on writing center practices*: "It would be useful to me because it lets me know what went on in the session and what the student plans to do beyond the appointment." And we coded the following general comment on notes by a student as *purposeful* and further as *encouraging students to take follow-up action*: "I go over the tutor note just in case, like I said before, in case I miss something, or in case I need some more ideas of what to do with the revisions. Sometimes the tutor notes include additional details." Finally, we coded comments such as the following tutor comment on the *Quick Note* as *not purposeful*: "The note is both uninformative and (seemingly) curt.... The note also provides no context for future tutors."

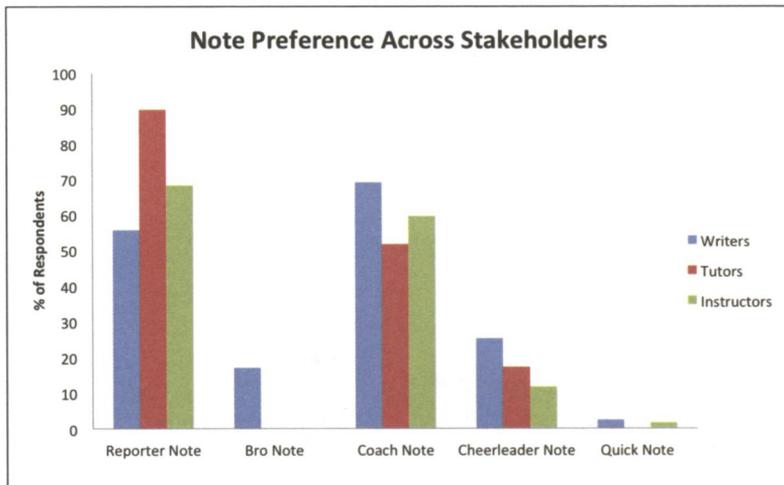
**Content.** Of course, we also wanted to know what specific information stakeholders thought a tutor note should contain. We again used a nested coding scheme to account first for the stakeholders' sense of whether or not they thought the content of the note was *appropriate*, *lacking* in some way, or whether they had *no opinion*. Some of our stakeholders used our questions on content to register *objections to writing center practices* that the content of the notes reflected, so we also accounted for these segments in our coding scheme. In the categories of *appropriate* and *lacking*, we further coded for specific preferences related to the following topics that came up frequently in conversation: use of *summary*, the tutor's *diagnosis* of a student's problem, articulation of *future goal setting*, signals of *relationship building* that took place in-session. We coded other, less specific comments as *general*.

For example, we coded the following comment by a student on the *Reporter Note* as *appropriate summary*: "I would definitely find this as a good summary of what happened during session. It would help me, it would remind me of what I should do.... I think it's a healthy amount, it's a good summary." We determined that the following comment by a faculty member on the *Reporter Note* was *lacking* in the area of *diagnosis*: "I also would have liked to hear more about any specific difficulties, challenges, or lack of understanding [about the assignment or the writing process] the student may have. Identifying trouble spots so that the instructor can help or make teaching adjustments." We

coded the following comment from a faculty member on the *Reporter Note* as *objections to writing center practices*: “It assumes far too much about what a paper ‘should’ do. It discusses writing as a series of functional abstractions, [such as] outlines, research questions, thesis, rather than as a communication of ideas or proposals. It is evaluative . . . rather than analytical.”

### Part III: Findings

The surveys were particularly useful in revealing basic preferences and behaviors. Among the most important take-aways is that all three constituencies favor the *Reporter* and *Coach Notes*. Yet there are some interesting variations. Students prefer the *Coach Note* by a small margin, whereas both faculty and tutors prefer the *Reporter Note*—tutors by the largest margin, perhaps because they were trained to write their own notes in that genre. These patterns are largely affirmed by what students, faculty, and tutors shared in the open field survey comments and in focus group conversations, although with some important qualifications.



**Figure 1. Note preferences (in percentages) across all stakeholders from survey data. Respondents could select more than one note as a preference. According to this survey, overall note ranks as follows: *Reporter*, *Coach*, *Cheerleader*, *Bro*, *Quick*. In focus groups, however, the *Coach* note seemed to be preferred as much as, and by many more than, the *Reporter* note.**

All stakeholders seem to take tutor notes seriously. Students do read them: 90% report opening the email and reading the note *at least half the time*, and 71% read them *most of the time*.<sup>3</sup> Further, students use the notes while continuing to write/revise. 81% report finding the note *useful* to their revision, while 71% report consulting it during their writing process *more than half the time*, and 23% refer to it *frequently*. While 25% of students report regularly requesting to have their notes emailed to their instructors, we know that the true percentage is closer to 50%.<sup>4</sup>

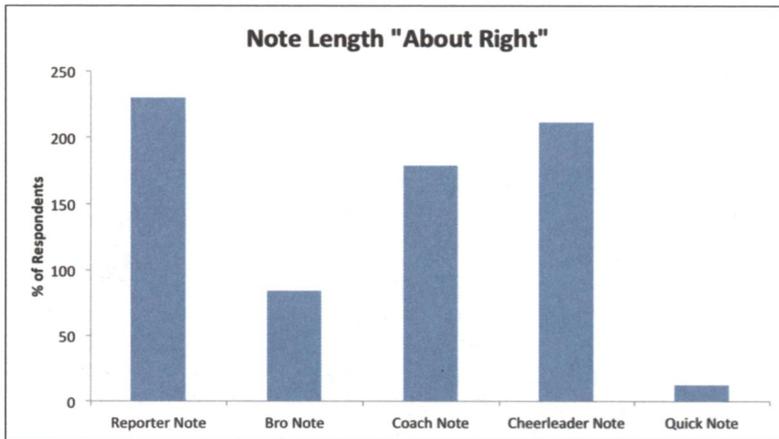
When faculty receive tutor notes, they read them. 72% reported reading them *frequently*, and 5% reported reading them *occasionally*. Though 23% reported *never* reading them, some faculty informed us in focus groups that they selected *never* on this question because they had never received a tutor note from the writing center, so this percentage may be overestimated. We interpret the student and faculty reading rates of tutor notes as a strong endorsement of our practice of sharing the notes with these two audiences.

We discovered preferences about note length from the surveys, which asked participants to score each note on a Likert scale. Most people scored the *Reporter*, *Cheerleader*, and *Coach Notes*—in that order—as “about right” in length. More than 70% of all respondents scored the *Quick Note* as “much too short.”

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3 These percentages, and those that follow, are likely amplified by self-selection bias: people who open an email for an online survey and complete it are the same people more likely to open an email from the writing center and read a tutor note.

4 We used a random number table to sample 100 of the 1500+ Spring 2015 notes we have in a database and discovered that exactly 50% of the students in that sample had opted to have us email their instructors a copy of the note.



**Figure 2. Cumulative preferences for note length being “about right” for all stakeholders. Note: Respondents could pick more than one note for this response.**

Our focus group findings affirmed survey results about length preferences. Respondents commented most on degree and usefulness of detail. One undergraduate captured a common sentiment: “I would want them to give as much information, or relevant information as possible as to how I can fix this essay or how I thought I should fix this essay, as long as it’s not like a page of a note.” Even the longest, most detailed note (*Coach Note*) was received positively by a majority of faculty and students. The lack of detail in the *Quick Note* was perceived as very negative.

Many more people commented in survey open responses and focus groups on voice than on point of view. Based on the 219 discrete comments we coded for voice, all stakeholders preferred *institutional voice* to *colloquial voice* at a rate of 5 to 1. Based on 29 discrete comments, participants preferred, at a rate of about 2.5 to 1, the second-person/direct address (“you”) point of view over the third-person.

While the survey responses strongly suggest that students and faculty find tutor notes purposeful and useful, no clear quantitative trends for purpose/use emerged from coding the transcripts. However, when we analyzed the content findings note by note, we discerned several subtle patterns. First, faculty think the *Reporter Note* is useful because it provides information on the student’s writing process; to a slightly lesser degree, they also believe it encourages follow-up action. Further, faculty and tutors think that the *Bro Note* is not useful, and neither tutors

nor students would be comfortable sending the *Bro* or *Quick Notes* to faculty. Some faculty were concerned that the *Coach Note* may have been too directive, and that same limited number of faculty questioned its usefulness. Finally, findings from all three stakeholder groups strongly suggest that the *Cheerleader Note* and the *Quick Note* were not useful/purposeful in general.

In terms of content, no clear quantitative trends emerged across the dataset. However, as with the purpose/use comments, when we analyzed the content findings note by note, we could discern several subtle patterns. For the *Reporter Note*, students like the amount of summary, and faculty like the content generally; faculty and students both find the amount and nature of goal setting appropriate. For the *Bro Note*, faculty feel that there is not enough future goal setting or summary. For the *Coach Note*, faculty praised the summary and goal setting; students expressed a general praise for the content and (to a somewhat lesser degree) found the goal setting good. For the *Cheerleader Note*, faculty scored this negatively on diagnosis, and students thought there was not enough goal setting. For the *Quick Note*, faculty had a generally negative reaction, and especially found the summary wanting. Tutors also rated this note as negative in general for content.

#### **Part IV: Conclusions and Recommendations**

From our focus groups we learned that almost no one doubted that tutors can write notes for three audiences—students, faculty, and tutors. They seemed to assume that tutors, with training, could handle that complex rhetorical situation. However, none of our five model notes emerged as the ideal response to that rhetorical situation. In terms of overall preference, the *Reporter* and *Coach Notes* were widely admired and clearly led the other three. However, when it came to specific features, preferences departed. More preferred the second-person address of the *Coach Note*, for example, even as they preferred the length of the *Reporter Note*.

Our absence of findings on certain issues may temper some common assumptions that circulate in the writing center community about tutor notes. For example, almost no one remarked on the value of tutor notes for educating faculty about the philosophy or practices of the writing center (we coded this under *purpose* as “providing information about writing center’s practices”); yet some center directors hope or assume that notes perform this function. Instead, most faculty in our focus groups focused on how notes should diagnose obstacles to progress and serve as markers of progress in the writing process. Many

students likewise tend to see good notes as documenting progress and/or motivation, as revealed in this typical comment: “Well, I think the one reason I would actually send them to the professor was to show that I’m actually working on my paper and to show them I care about the paper and I want a good grade.” Indeed, all three constituencies independently converged on the assumption that the chief purpose for tutor notes should be supporting student progress on particular projects or their broader development as writers—or both. In hindsight, this may seem obvious, but such insistence on how notes should reveal or prompt student growth is curiously absent from earlier strands of tutor note scholarship, which instead focus on the ethics of sharing, on bridging classroom and tutorial cultures, on communicating writing center mission and philosophy, or on assessing institutional culture.<sup>5</sup>

**The optimal note.** While none of the five sample notes emerged as a clear ideal, we can propose a kind of Frankenstein note based on the most pronounced preferences of faculty, tutors, and especially student writers. Such an optimal note should foreground the following features:

- Both students and faculty appreciate, and will read, detailed notes. Even if the *Coach Note* runs too long for some, most would much rather see that than the lack of detail in the *Quick Note*.
- Students, faculty, and tutors prefer that notes adopt a more formal, institutional voice to those that adopt a less formal, colloquial voice.
- Second-person point of view is the preferred form of address. This is symptomatic of an assumption that emerged almost universally across focus groups: that students should be the primary audience for tutor notes. Even most instructors believed this. Notes can successfully balance those two previous priorities. See, for example, the *Coach Note*, which is addressed directly to the student but that most stakeholders perceived as appropriately formal/institutional.
- Notes should include both detailed summary of what happened in the tutorial and explicit attention to goal-setting/next steps.

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5 This finding aligns with John Nordlof’s (2014) recent claims for how student growth should be our field’s governing theoretical concern. In our case, however, that notion emerged inductively and empirically from what students and faculty reported in focus groups rather than as a contention about how writing center researchers should deploy theory.

- Faculty appreciate diagnosis moves—even if expressed very briefly in the note.
- All three audiences appreciate relationship-building gestures (i.e., “Good luck!” or “I look forward to seeing you again at the Writing Center!”). While a majority did not comment explicitly on such gestures (nor did any questions prompt them to), all who did spoke of them positively.

Despite the affirming news that students and faculty read and use our tutor notes—and especially that students find them helpful in their revision process—we should not overestimate their importance. Both common sense and our student survey respondents (all of whom have come to our writing center at least once) tell us that much more important than the quality of the tutor note is the quality of the in-person tutorial experience. Tutor notes have relatively little effect on the student’s reported willingness to return to the center, with the exception of the *Quick Note*, which dampened motivation to return for some students. From the in-house assessment surveys we have been doing for eight years, we know that about 80% of the students who come to our center for one tutorial report that they plan to use the writing center again in the future. When we combine those earlier survey results with survey data from this study—as well as with what we documented in focus groups—we know that it is the quality of the tutor and the warmth and relevance of the 45-minute tutorial experience that affect inclinations to return far more than the nature of the follow-up tutor note. Tutor notes matter—and the specific features of the note matter, as this study suggests—just not nearly as much as tutorials themselves.

**Recommendations for replication.** This study was designed to be replicable, both at our own institution and others, and while we believe our basic approach as well as our categories and coding schemes will hold up well, we also have come to recognize several methodological shortcomings that should be addressed in any future studies. As noted earlier, there was low participation of students in focus groups. Despite email campaigns, offers of free pizza, and personal requests to dozens of students studying in the library that they join us for a conversation, we found it difficult to recruit students. The five students who did participate had much to share; and the 227 student survey responses, many of which included substantial narrative comments in addition to multiple choice responses, allowed us to assess student attitudes reasonably well. Moreover, 22 of our own tutors participated in focus groups, and they are students too, even if they were invited to speak primarily from their vantage as tutors. We hypothesize that paying students with cash or

gift cards would likely have been a more effective recruiting incentive, though we also know that incentives are largely symbolic and may vary across student populations (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p. 78–79). Were we to run this study again, we would pursue funding and consider other recruitment methods.

Another limitation that we realized too late to remedy is that our survey design was static when it could have been dynamic. That is, even though our three surveys were customized to each audience, they all involved having respondents read one of the five tutor notes, then answer questions about it (about length, content, style, etc.), and then move on to the next note, about which they answered that same set of questions. In the online surveys, the five notes were always presented in the same order: *Reporter*, *Bro*, *Coach*, *Cheerleader*, *Quick* (in the survey we did not use those names but instead labeled them A, B, C, D, and E). Because the *Reporter Note* was always first, it may have primed responses that followed. That is, the first note that readers encounter can shape their perceptions of notes that follow, whether consciously or not. For example, if readers had encountered *Quick Note* (Note E) first, they might not have been as readily inclined to rate it as “much too short” as they would have been if they had not encountered *Reporter Note* (Note A) first. Note A may have implicitly set a standard in their mind for length (and other features). This problem could have been solved by designing the survey to randomize the sequencing of sections with each new respondent. However, because the *Reporter Note* was the standard, relatively neutral, style we taught (and the one most used in our center), using the *Reporter Note* as a starting place may not have affected respondents’ opinions as much as if we had started with, say, the *Bro Note*. In any case, future studies should randomize the order of sample notes for each respondent.

A change we might also make would be to choose a *Cheerleader Note* that focused on an academic assignment rather than on a personal statement. Some survey respondents and focus group participants questioned whether the length, voice, purpose, and content of a tutor note should be the same when a student brings in a self-sponsored project because in such cases, faculty have little or no real role. We continue to want students to bring such projects into our center (and they do, quite often), but for the purposes of this study, the personal statement example made for an awkward fit.

The limitations noted above could be corrected in future studies—and more importantly, our conclusions could (and should) be

tested.<sup>6</sup> Our methods can also be adapted to the exigencies of particular institutions. For example, researchers could add an option of “no note” if they wanted to test the usefulness of notes overall (and whether or not receiving no note influenced student perceptions of their session). In addition, different models of tutor notes, particularly ones that have emerged organically at other writing centers, could be swapped in for any of our five models. It would be interesting, for example, to see how students, faculty, and tutors perceive a code-meshed or non-standard English tutor note. We might presume to know how all three audiences would respond, but then again, they might surprise us.

**Final thoughts.** Many writing centers have tutor note policies similar to those of our center—indeed, we got started by imitating what other institutions we admired were already doing. Yet we know that policies and practices vary quite widely. Malenczyk’s recent study, for example, reflects on a system in which notes circulate only internally among center staff. And when we presented the preliminary findings of this study at the 2015 IWCA Collaborative, participants reported a diversity of procedures at their home institutions, including having no post-session reporting or reflection system of any kind (that is, beyond the basic tallying of appointment statistics).

Among the more fundamental things we learned through this study is that tutor notes matter. Of course the quality of the tutorial itself is paramount, but all three major stakeholders recognized value added in follow-up notes that summarized major interactions and reminded writers of revision plans discussed. Most importantly, students are inclined to read and *use* such notes as they continue to compose and revise.

Such a system is labor intensive—recall that our center’s tutors collectively spend 1000 hours a year on notes. Moreover, for tutors to become skilled and confident (and quick) in composing notes, they need both initial training and ongoing mentoring. We think all that labor is worth the payoff. Therefore, we encourage centers that do not do tutor notes to consider introducing a system. We likewise encourage centers that have systems in place to ensure that notes circulate to student writers, who should be imagined as the primary audience.

As noted in the section above on replication, we encourage centers to test our findings by conducting further empirical studies like this one. But we also see the value of informal, in-house user testing. For example, when we were conducting our study, we decided to use one of our regular monthly staff meetings to cluster our tutors into three

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<sup>6</sup> Upon request, we are willing to share the survey templates, the questions asked at the three different kinds of focus groups, and coding scheme.

separate focus groups, each led by a facilitator and charged with rating and discussing our five sample notes. The groups did that, but they also went off script into robust discussions about what we should do as a center and what they wanted to do individually as tutor note writers. By simply seeing the five sample notes and having the opportunity to discuss them, tutors launched into fresh inquiries of our center's policies and their own habits. The session also seemed to afford many of them permission to experiment with alternatives to the *Reporter Note* genre that we had long set as the norm.

We were curious about the aftereffects, so three weeks after our tutor focus groups, we sent our tutors a simple one-question follow-up online survey: "How much, if at all, have you changed the content or style of your tutor notes since we did our focus groups at our meeting in January?" Nine of the 24 respondents reported no changes in their habits; one reported changing "significantly," which we defined in the survey as, "something like switching entirely from third-person [John came in today...] to second-person [Hi, John!], and/or significantly changing typical length, tone, etc."; four reported changing their notes "moderately," which we defined as "more substantial changes, or you occasionally but not always depart from whatever was your former 'standard note'"; and ten reported "slightly," which we defined as "minor differences in length, punctuation, or tone." We were not seeking changes in behavior because we think our tutors already do a pretty good job with their tutor notes, but the focus groups seemed to prompt most of them to think more reflectively about their own practices, and later to compose their notes—in those final 15 minutes of each hour they work—more deliberately.

Resistance to center policies can happen organically—recall that one of the original exigencies for this study was that a few of our more confident tutors had been swerving away from the *Reporter Note* genre that we had prescribed and toward *Coach*, *Bro*, *Cheerleader*, or *Quick* styles. Local user testing of the sort we describe above can spark more open and reflective dialogue about such variation. Yet we also believe in evidence-based practice, and therefore future dialogues should account as well for what we have learned through systematic research on the length, content, style, and purpose of tutor notes.

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