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Creating a Research Culture in the Center: Narratives of Professional Development and the Multitiered Research Process

Abstract

This article examines the unique perspectives of nine writing center practitioners reflecting on the experience of conducting a collaborative and multi-tiered research project in their center. The focus of their work is on the process of conducting research rather than the product; therefore, much of the work is on how research is conducted and how it functions as an avenue for professional development, creating community, and benefitting the center. The article includes narratives from all of the researchers: undergraduate students, graduate students, and administrators/faculty members. Each narrative presents positive experiences, insights, and obstacles encountered for each group of researchers. The article concludes with recommendations that could benefit others conducting multi-tiered research.

Introduction

Almost twenty years ago, Elizabeth Boquet (1999) noted that peer tutors were often left out of the knowledge-making processes of the center, treated more as objects than as subjects. She wrote that

conclusions are drawn *about* peer tutors, information is produced *for* peer tutors, but rarely are these things created *by* peer tutors. Tutors are often objectified and essentialized in the literature devoted to them. In this way, tutors are disallowed a voice in the literature that pertains most directly to them. (p. 18)

While more scholarship produced by tutors has been published since Boquet wrote these words, her observations about tutors' voices still have relevance today as we think about professionalization. Christopher Ervin (2016b) highlights the field's lack of understanding about how students' engaging in research affects their professional development (pp. 39–40). Considering writing center research from a different angle, Stephen Ferruci and Susan DeRosa (2010) write that a sustainable history for writing centers is not one that follows a hierarchical model but instead “should be created democratically and allow participants' voices to effect changes in the writing center's structure and programs” (p. 22). Considering these methodological research gaps, we at the Michigan State University Writing Center wanted to create a project that included as many different voices as possible and helped promote professionalization; we thus included each of the different academic levels of people working in the center: an administrator/faculty member, graduate students, and undergraduate students. To ensure and promote equality, it was especially important that graduate and undergraduate researchers felt that their voices were heard and that they could provide input, ask questions, and challenge ideas. The following essay describes the *process* of conducting a research project, rather than a *product*, and argues that a key consideration of writing center research is that it must be completed by writing center practitioners of all hierarchical levels in the center. Projects that incorporate a broad range of researchers can result in mentoring opportunities, hands-on learning about the field, and the transfer of knowledge between researchers. We are calling this type of research *multitiered*, as it includes members from different academic levels and positions.

In what follows, we include three separate narratives: one by the administrator/faculty member, one by the graduate students, and one by the undergraduate students. We have chosen to separate the narratives, rather than create one narrative, to highlight the different experiences based on where a person might be in the center as well as the roles and responsibilities they may have. Each narrative presents positive experiences

and also obstacles encountered for each group of researchers; likewise, each narrative provides insights into the professional development and research process of this project from the unique perspective of the author(s). Rather than focus on the content of the research or the results, the narratives comment on the benefits and drawbacks of conducting research in writing centers. These narratives also recognize the importance of personal narratives when thinking about research, professionalization, and mentoring (Rowan, 2009, p. 15). In addition to recounting personal experiences, each narrative includes a list of recommendations from the specific group of researchers—recommendations we feel are broadly applicable, flexible, and useful in different institutions and centers. Last, at the end of each narrative, a section written collectively by all the article’s authors connects the individual narratives to relevant theory and scholarship.

Professionalization

Because of the wide variety of researchers working in the center, it was essential for us to have a broad view of professionalization. When thinking about the professional-development opportunities students might need, we prioritized professional development that could be learned and used within the writing center *and* in their own programs and majors. In doing so, we wanted to provide those who might have careers in writing center studies with skills they could use in the future, as well as to provide those who would work elsewhere with transferable skills to apply to their own disciplines, majors, and careers. Karen Rowan (2009) acknowledges that graduate-student administrators (GSAs) enter the writing center with a variety of backgrounds and argues they should learn more about the field, noting that even though most GSAs are not in rhetoric and composition (much less writing center studies), they should still be introduced to writing center scholarship and theory (p. 40). By introducing students—graduate and undergraduates alike—to writing center scholarship and theory, we were able to orient toward what “other disciplines define as evidence-based research” (Driscoll & Perdue, 2012, p. 36).

By centering consultants as researchers, we were able to learn by doing (McWey, Henderson, & Piercy, 2006, p. 261); furthermore, we could focus on Leonore McWey, Tammy Henderson, and Fred Piercy’s (2006) idea that everyone on the research team benefits from taking part in the research process (p. 258). We often talked about how this project not only benefits students who use the writing center for individual consultations but also benefits us through professionalization. By using research to highlight professional development, we were following Rowan’s (2009) recommendation that the writing center community must be more ex-

PLICIT in approaching professional development, especially through developing mentoring programs (p. 14). This type of professional development takes the form of learning research skills, learning how to mentor and be mentored, writing reports, and having opportunities to present and publish. Jennifer Courtney (2009) positions research at the core of writing center professionalization, suggesting that “professional community within a writing center (directors, tutors, work-study students) can be fostered through much discussion and immersion into writing center research combined with the agency of lived experience of tutoring” (p. 131).

By encouraging students to find their voice in the research conversation, we found we can leverage the dual position of our consultants: they are both consultants *and* students, and including them across research processes empowers them to contribute their own knowledge while shaping discourses about themselves. This approach allows consultants, according to Sarah Liggett, Kerri Jordan, and Steve Price (2011), to explore different research methodologies, thus preparing them to be critical thinkers within the research and work they see clients bringing into the center, through their classwork, and within the jobs they will be doing in the future; furthermore, tutors (or, in our case, consultants) are in the best position to understand the workings of the center. Ferruci & DeRosa (2010) and Ervin (2016a) argue that peer tutors are uniquely positioned to comment on writing centers and have insights administrators may overlook; and Renee Brown, Brian Fallon, Jessica Lot, Elizabeth Matthews, & Elizabeth Mintie’s work (2007) provides proof of this. Additionally, consultants have a vested interest in improving the center because doing so may improve their own work environment and may enhance their specific consultations. The writing center administrator or consultant-as-researcher may provide additional agency for writing center studies scholars who may often feel marginalized in their institutions, and perhaps in their disciplines. Additionally, it is important for students to know that serious research can be, and is, conducted in writing centers. According to Ferruci and DeRosa (2010), institutional administrators and faculty members (outside of the center) have a better idea of writing center praxis when centers conduct research (p. 31). This type of research can make explicit for others the often invisible work we engage in within the center and beyond; all of this validates the center as a place of research, which can serve to provide more legitimacy in the eyes of the institution, rather than only as a student service.

Background and Methods

The Writing Center at Michigan State University employs nearly 100 undergraduate and graduate-student consultants, twelve graduate-student coordinators, two associate directors, and a director. Research has long been a staple within our center, undertaken both by administrators and consultants; however, our research focus has become even stronger as we seek to train graduate and undergraduate students to work not just as consultants in our center but within the field of writing center studies more broadly. In an attempt to increase professional-development opportunities for all students, especially for graduate coordinators (who hold assistantships through The Writing Center), we created a more formalized project featuring a broad group of researchers; this project included an associate director of The Writing Center, six graduate-student coordinators, and two undergraduate students.

This Institutional Review Board (IRB)-approved project focused, broadly, on diversity and inclusivity in The Writing Center. We wanted to know why some students use the center and others don't. We also wanted to provide concrete ways of improving relationships with different stakeholders on campus because of our desire to create a better writing center for all students. We administered a survey to students who completed writing center consultations that consisted of between 17 and 20 questions (based on how specific questions were answered). Surveys were collected over a two-week period. The results from this research were compiled into a series of reports featuring different groups of students on campus, such as English-language learning (ELL) students and Spartan Success Scholars (a program that provides students individualized support as they transition to Michigan State University); students grouped by demographics like gender and ethnicity; and students grouped by academic focus, such as by major and discipline. Each report consisted of data analysis as well as conclusions and recommendations. The reports will be used in both the center and institution, while recommendations will be reviewed for implementation in the center through policy changes and additional research projects. Our research was supported by The Writing Center and the Michigan State University College of Arts and Letters Undergraduate Research Initiative. The narratives that follow, then, describe the process of this diversity and inclusivity study.

Narratives

Administrator's/Faculty Researcher's Narrative

Joseph Cheatle. At the time of this project, I was an associate director of The Writing Center at Michigan State University. I have previously worked as a professional consultant at the Case Western Reserve University Writing Resource Center and as a graduate-student consultant at Miami University's Howe Writing Center. I am interested in how writing center assessment can improve the center, as well as how methods of professional development can enhance consultant learning outcomes.

The chance to participate in a multitiered writing center research project was a unique opportunity to combine aspects of research, professional development, and mentoring. For me, this project had many benefits as well as unexpected challenges. The benefits included the chance to mentor students while also creating a stronger sense of community in the center; meanwhile, the challenges included negotiating my own role in the project, addressing the difficulties that arise when working with a research team that encompasses a wide knowledge set, and managing practical and logistical issues. I believe that, overall, I was able to learn alongside the consultants, which will serve to prepare me for more of this type of research in the future.

Though this project did not necessarily meet the traditional view of a "successful" research project (i.e., peer-reviewed publication of the data), the project was successful in many different ways; in the case of this project, it was the process that was more valuable than the end product. Consultants were able to speak back to The Writing Center and the institution by generating reports regarding findings, which included conclusions and recommendations about different student populations. The researchers also had professional-development opportunities in two forms: presenting at our regional writing center conference and composing this work. The project helped create a sense of community; through the process of meeting on a biweekly basis, exchanging numerous emails, and working collaboratively on documents, we were able to develop a camaraderie that may otherwise have been lacking. Part of this sense of community was that consultants had additional buy-in to the success of the center and its initiatives: consultants felt they were part of the center and its success, rather than just employees.

One of the most difficult aspects of this type of research, for me, was determining my role as an administrator/faculty member: mentor, primary investigator, collaborator, facilitator, and so forth. Although I assumed numerous roles throughout based on the circumstances, I ultimately decided on the primary role of a guide or facilitator, which allowed the consultants

to create their own project and to enhance their agency; furthermore, as a facilitator, I tried to shift authority across the project by placing the student researchers at the center. They completed the research project and wrote the reports as the principal agents while I provided advice and guidance. Rather than reining in their ideas and ambitions, I encouraged them—allowing students to follow their own lines of questioning, adopt their own processes, make mistakes, and experience successes. It also meant emphasizing teamwork and collaboration among the different students. As a mentor and guide, I stepped in to provide explanations of the research process to students and, occasionally, provided more direct instruction. For example, I took a more active role in explaining what type of questions could be used in surveys to get the desired results, and I provided more direct instruction about how to disseminate the work to The Writing Center and the institution. I also tried to scaffold the work into manageable and distinct parts, with many moments and drafts when I could provide feedback to the students. Through a process involving experimentation, overt instruction, and trial and error, students were able to take ownership of the research process by creating multiple drafts of each component and, ultimately, a completed research project.

Another difficulty, and something I learned from, concerned the logistics related to this type of project; specifically, I learned about the importance of flexibility and adaptability. Nine different schedules had to be accommodated. Because these students are active and engaged, we also had to work with numerous other commitments beyond academic classes, including clubs, jobs, and service. These commitments made it so that, among the graduate consultants, there was only one hour that worked to meet each week; the undergraduate students also had one hour they could jointly meet each week, but it was not the same hour as the graduate students'. Therefore, I had to meet with each group separately and rely on online collaborative documents to foster communication between graduate and undergraduate students, as well as task one graduate student to provide comments and feedback to documents created by the undergraduates.

Based on lessons I learned during this project, I have a few key recommendations for other administrator/faculty members who want to create collaborative research projects in writing centers:

1. Understand consultants have a diverse set of knowledge and skills. For this project, none of the students specialized in writing center studies and, of the eight consultants that participated, only four were from the Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures Department (our institutional composition and rhetoric program). The other four students were from Student Affairs Administration, Public

Policy, and Music. Because of the broad experiences of students, knowledge about how to conduct quantitative research could not be assumed; for many, this was the first time they were engaging in quantitative research and assessment. The broad experiences meant that throughout the course of the project, I needed to introduce many research principles to the students, including the best ways to gather, analyze, and disseminate information. Because we used a survey as our research instrument, we had lengthy discussions on how to create a survey, how to word survey questions, how to order the questions, how the types of responses (multiple choice, scale, open ended, etc.) allowed for different questions; how to administer a survey; how to analyze the results of a survey; and how to disseminate that knowledge to the institution and community.

2. Have a flexible idea of success. The idea, for an administrator/faculty member, that a successful project is publishable (for renewal, promotion, or even tenure) can come into potential conflict, and be at odds with, the goals of the center that often include generally improving the center, developing consultants' professionalism, and creating community. Likewise, the desired outcomes of a research project such as this may be different for faculty/administrators, graduate consultants, and undergraduate consultants. By having a flexible idea of success, administrators and faculty members can tailor the benchmarks for a research project to a particular group of student researchers.

3. Embrace learning opportunities and cross-disciplinary ways of meaning making. As researchers come together, they bring a wide variety of research methodologies used by different fields throughout an institution. While administrators and faculty members may function as facilitators and mentors for students, there are also numerous learning opportunities for them, especially when a variety of disciplines is represented and there is a chance to learn more about interdisciplinary work in the writing center. This also provides an opportunity to introduce the field of writing center studies to researchers from other disciplines.

Collective reflection on the narrative.

A central component to this narrative is the chance to create an intentional approach to mentoring graduate and undergraduate students through research (Rowan, 2009); an aspect to this intentional approach is considering the type of collaborative models to employ, that is, faculty driven, faculty mentoring, and student driven (McDorman, 2004). Mentoring writing center consultants helps develop a sense of community,

prepares the next generation of writing center administrators, and provides numerous learning opportunities. Developing this sense of community through mentoring empowered the researchers and resulted in a more egalitarian writing center. Throughout this process, Joseph recognized that graduate and undergraduate consultants may have, as Ferruci and DeRosa (2010) point out, unique insights administrators might overlook. By including peer consultants in knowledge making, Joseph deliberately positioned consultants to fill the gap—wherein conclusions about peer tutors are not made by peer tutors—that Boquet (1999) noticed; additionally, this inclusivity also provided numerous opportunities for collaboration, which is central to writing centers (Harris, 1992). By applying the concept that everyone learns and benefits by working as a team (McWey, Henderson, & Piercy, 2006), this narrative shows how learning can occur for everyone: undergraduate students, graduate students, and, in this case, faculty/administrators.

Graduate researchers' narrative.

Kenlea Pebbles. At the time of this project, I was a first-year student in the PhD program in Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures. Specifically, I am interested in cultural rhetorics and linguistic frameworks to research how culture and history intersect with environmental studies around water-based issues. My background is in composition, English as a second language (ESL) pedagogy, writing centers, education, and the social sciences.

Colton Wansitler. At the time of this project, I was a third-year doctoral candidate in the College of Music focusing on flute performance. My research background is based in music performance, inclusivity, and the ways in which pop culture displays different demographics.

Autumn Laws. At the time of this project, I was a first-year MA student in Critical Studies in Literacy and Pedagogy, in Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures. My research focuses on disability studies, multi-modal composition, and pedagogical development. I am interested in the ways writing centers work with marginalized communities by assessing both quantitative and qualitative data and working directly with members of those communities who are using the center.

Michael Carroll. At the time of this project, I was a second-year MA student in the Student Affairs Administration Program within the School of Education. I am interested in studying disability services, first-year student experiences, and higher education policy/advocacy.

Rohitha Edara. At the time of this project, I was a graduate student in Community Sustainability and Public Policy. My background is in

political science, development policy, and nonprofit education work. My research interests are at the intersection of public policy and international development, specifically related to poverty, inequality, education, and governance.

Julia Shapiro. At the time of this project, I was an MA student in Critical Studies in Literacy and Pedagogy, focusing on historical rhetorics, classical reception, institutional rhetorics in the university, and gender and embodied rhetorics in political discourse. I am interested in the ways The Writing Center supports and subverts the university's rhetorical self-presentation to students and the public.

Three of us (Colton, Rohitha, and Michael) are from disciplines that would not often be considered "typical" areas of study for graduate assistants in a writing center. As graduate students on this research team, we collectively worked towards a common goal and, through our research processes, learned skills that can be applied to our future careers; collectively, we gained a number of transferable skills we could apply to our own research areas. After having first-hand experience designing the quantitative survey for this research project, Rohitha was able to answer questions and provide insights about survey design in her research-methods courses. Overall, she feels more confident in designing and analyzing surveys, an important skill in social science and policy fields; she also feels she has an advantage compared to other graduate students at her level in understanding quantitative research methods. Colton was able to gain inside knowledge of working directly with people and learned how to go about forming questions and approaches to be as inclusive as possible, which has a direct correlation to his research. This skill will be incredibly useful in the completion of his doctoral dissertation, which involves creating a survey for multiple musicians about small ensembles and their effectiveness. In addition to the above skills, Michael learned important analytical and assessment skills when it comes to reviewing survey results and conducting research. Specifically, he learned how to organize and review the research data and to consider critically how these results could affect The Writing Center in the short and long term. This analytical knowledge and experience are important for careers in various functional areas within higher education, especially work related to assessment. Because Michael is interested in conducting assessment in the future, working collectively to use the data we gathered to formulate improvements to writing center policies was valuable.

Those of us who are in more traditional writing disciplines (Julia, Autumn, and Kenlea) or had previous writing center experience (Kenlea) also learned new skills transferable to our studies. Specifically, we learned how to conduct research projects with other graduate and undergraduate

consultants as well as how to undertake research about students who utilize the center. Kenlea gained valuable insights about survey design and focus, collaboration, guidance, and mentoring. She also learned by working with colleagues how a project is designed: developing a subject, designing a questionnaire, analyzing data, presenting findings, writing a collaborative research paper, and mentoring undergraduate researchers at various points along the way. In working on this research project, Autumn transferred these skills into other projects for The Writing Center. For instance, she is interested in better understanding the ways writing center policy affects not only student perceptions of the writing center but also faculty perceptions of the center as a student resource. Her current project builds upon this research project; she is working on developing a language inclusivity statement for The Writing Center to emphasize that the center will honor differences in language and dialect. After having worked to develop a comprehensive survey to assess the ways diverse populations use the center, the inclusion of a language-statement policy can clarify the role of the center as a space for multilingual students. Exploring this kind of research within the center can prepare her for a diverse array of professional work, as she not only learned skills applicable to academic spaces but also practiced working as a team member and researcher; additionally, Autumn intends to take these skills into the classroom as a teacher.

All of us learned about research processes while developing critical research skills. Research is very important to us as graduate students because so much of what we do and work on in our fields is research based; we are learning to create and design our class projects—as well as independent projects—that will become our theses, dissertations, and publications. And, through this project, we had the opportunity to gain many rhetorical *and* technical skills, including designing surveys, analyzing quantitative data, presenting at conferences, and completing reports. Initially, we had to complete the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process to work with human subjects. Completing the IRB was important because many of us are conducting research involving human subjects for our graduate work, and it was beneficial to understand the process by which research projects are approved by the institution. For the writing-oriented graduate students, the valuable skill of learning how to begin working with quantitative data taught us the ways these kinds of data can be analyzed and assessed in the settings in which we work. As writing-oriented scholars, we tend to deal primarily, if not exclusively, with qualitative data in our research practices; by using quantitative data, we became familiar not only with the process of reading the data but also with resources such as SurveyMonkey and Excel spreadsheets to break down and analyze the data to answer our research questions.

Another important set of tools we learned from this project was the social skills required to work in a research team. Some of us had never experienced working on a research team before and appreciated this opportunity to work with professors and experienced peers. We learned the importance of communication and collaboration in administering surveys, collecting data, and completing research projects. Although most of us, as graduate students, will work individually on a thesis or dissertation, one of us will be completing a dissertation on the importance of working with other individuals in small groups. We also know that when we enter positions as faculty, staff, or administrators, much of our work—including participating in or directing assessment efforts; identifying, selecting, and training staff; and continuing to be engaged in research—will be completed as a member of a group.

This project offered us as graduate students an opportunity to engage in assessment and contribute to writing center scholarship. These skills will help us market ourselves to employers as future administrators; for example, analyzing survey data can help an administrator make arguments for increased funding and resources. This skill, therefore, allows us the opportunity to advertise that we can offer employers (both academic and alternatives to academic) a means of understanding and expanding their organization. In addition, academic publications, in this case related to professional-skill development, can contribute prestige and clout to the center, likewise demonstrating its value to the university. Access to the data set has allowed us to pursue independent scholarly analyses. Three people presented individual papers analyzing our data at the East Central Writing Centers Association Conference, and another will present at the International Writing Centers Association Conference—this is not an opportunity students always obtain through coursework. Last, our work, at its best, has the possibility of revealing previously unrecognized problems at our center, which can be more readily addressed or raise questions for further study.

We have three recommendations from our perspective as graduate consultants that could benefit this type of multitiered research in the future:

1. It would be helpful to build upon previous research projects or existing data within the center. For example, our writing center has kept data on its clients since 2009. Our research group collectively chose our topics without necessarily drawing on these data. We might have more profitably started out with a deeper investigation into what past and more recent data reveal. It would also have been helpful to draw upon existing research in our center, but this was the first large-scale project we had conducted. Consultants beginning their writing center research in the next school year might return

to past data gathered, and research engaged in, and will also be able to use our group's results as a starting point from which they can conduct further explorations on the topics they identify as most pressing.

2. It would have helped to meet as an entire team, face to face, more frequently. While knowing how difficult it was to align all nine participants' schedules, we believe it would have been beneficial to set biweekly meetings with the entire research team to better collaborate instead of using only regular staff meetings where, inevitably, there would be other things to discuss. We think meeting as an entire team would have helped us better include the undergraduate students and learn more from them. For example, we used the term *first-generation students* in our survey and did not include an explanation for it. For all of us, the meaning of this term was quite clear, but as our clients were responding to the survey, we realized most of them needed clarification. If the entire research team had participated in the survey-creation sessions, there is a chance we would have recognized this issue earlier and addressed it. Overall, a more consistent meeting time dedicated to the creation and assessment of the survey could have been beneficial for the administrator/faculty member, graduate students, and undergraduate students involved in the research.

3. Considering how many of the students involved in this project were based in the humanities, several of us had not worked on developing and analyzing such a comprehensive survey. With that in mind, it could have been beneficial to learn more about how these sorts of studies are organized and assessed before trying to develop our own project. This research could have been better executed if we, as researchers, had been more cognizant of the conversations surrounding how surveys are best designed and administered; how survey data can be analyzed and presented; and how writing center administrators and scholars converse about quantitative research.

Collective reflection on the narrative.

Central to this narrative are the research, mentorship, and professional development graduate consultants engaged in through this project. In general, this project provided graduate consultants an opportunity to learn more about the field (Rowan, 2009); for those who were inclined, the project provided them a chance to prepare as future writing center administrators (Liggett, Jordan, & Price, 2010). Additionally, the skills gained from this project, particularly as they relate to empirical research, speak to the recommendations outlined by Neal Lerner (1997), Rebecca

Day Babcock & Terese Thonus (2012), and Dana Lynn Driscoll & Sherry Wynn Perdue (2014). In addition to preparing graduate students for potential writing center jobs and conducting persuasive research, this project allowed the graduate consultants an opportunity to explore different facets of mentoring in the center. By being mentored, and doing the mentoring Ervin (2016b) encourages, we can see how easily the work can be measured and quantified by relationships and community building. These mentor/mentee relationships are measurable in the sense of productive output in the form of internal as well as professional development.

Undergraduate Researchers' Narrative

Rachel Wahl. At the time of this project, I was a senior in the Professional Writing Program at Michigan State University. I fell in love with the Professional Writing Program as a first-year student when I was trying to discover what I wanted to pursue in school. I completed the peer-tutor training course in fall 2015 and have worked in the center since spring 2016. The Writing Center is the one job I actually enjoy coming to, and it's such a great feeling to know I can be of use to others.

Alexis Sargent. At the time of this project, I was a sophomore undergraduate student in the James Madison College and Honors College at Michigan State University, studying Social Relations and Policy, with aspirations to be a policymaker or federal judge in the future. I completed the peer-tutoring course in spring 2016 and started working at The Writing Center at the beginning of the 2016–2017 school year. Mentoring students through their writing and working as a writing consultant are parts of the job I as a student find fulfilling.

The research project The Writing Center facilitated was the first kind of research project we had ever been a part of, and we enjoyed the work. Although we were not involved in the creation and implementation of the survey (because of time and funding issues), we were involved in the work that followed: looking at the data, analyzing the responses of the students, writing reports, and disseminating our work. Because of the wide range of issues covered by the survey, we chose to investigate a specific group of students: ELL students. Our goal was to find out whether The Writing Center is meeting the needs of ELL students and, if not, how we can improve the center to better meet the unique needs of this student population. To do this, we created reports based on the results from the survey and disseminated those results to the center.

Being a part of a project like this was a new and exciting opportunity for us, and it gave us the chance to learn research skills we hadn't been taught in class. When we first attempted to critically analyze the

data, we found ourselves unable to look beyond the surface because we were unaware of what to look for. For example, we assumed that the ELL students who came to The Writing Center were only a small number of the whole ELL population at Michigan State University (and that the ELL population mirrored the non-ELL population in size). It wasn't until working one-on-one with our graduate-student mentor, Kenlea, that we realized that wasn't the case. Kenlea showed us we may have had a biased view of how many students on campus are ELL students because we work with so many of them in the center. When we discovered that about 14% of the undergraduate student population are international students, but about 40% of The Writing Center's clients are ELL students, it changed our whole perspective. Kenlea helped us understand how our biases shaped the way we read the data and came to conclusions, as well as helped us realize we were making assumptions.

Working with Joseph, we learned essential skills in examining data, making graphs, and writing reports. For example, he showed us how, when looking at the data, to compare outcomes of distinct populations to find differences or similarities that either confirmed our assumptions or challenged them. We then learned how to sift through the results of the survey to determine what was meaningful to our goal and what could be discarded. Doing this allowed us to take what we discovered and compile it into a report.

The abilities to write tactfully and to package our data in a report were important skills to develop. For example, we chose to front load the most important information in the report's introduction so it would attract the attention of the reader and help them understand the purpose of the report. Then, for visuals, we had to think about the different types of graphs and charts we were using. Initially, we were going to use the charts generated by SurveyMonkey, but after consulting with Joseph, we began to think about how graphs and charts function as an extension of our words and should be effective rhetorical and communication tools. We learned that a recommendations-and-conclusions section is important to relay what we have learned and to discuss how to apply that learning to the future. Writing the report was challenging, as we had to condense so many ideas, explanations, and research; however, Joseph showed us examples of past narratives he and others had written to give us an idea of how to start, how to format it, what to include, and what not to include. These models gave us the tools we needed to be able to create successful narratives, which can prove useful for future research.

There were also opportunities for professionalization beyond the center, particularly in discussing and reflecting upon our experiences as members of this project. This was our first opportunity to present at a con-

ference, the East Central Writing Centers Association Conference, which was a good learning experience. Both of us were tasked with creating narratives similar to this one to relay our experience and learning to other people so they could be more knowledgeable about how to approach research within their own centers. The presentation we delivered allowed us another venue, beyond the reports we wrote, to disseminate our data and share our findings. The conference itself was much more casual and less intimidating than we expected, and it allowed us to feel less like we were presenting and more like we were having a conversation.

Not only were the skills we gained from researching The Writing Center presentation valuable, but the skills we gained from the presentation itself were also valuable. Presenting at a conference allowed us to cultivate many transferable skills directly applicable to our career interests. For Rachel, a student who works with content strategy, data-based research, and the design of digestible deliverables, creating a presentation and observing how the audience reacted to the research directly coincided with her career interests. For Alexis, a student with aspirations to be a public servant, the act of delivering research to a crowd was important to her future career of delivering information and responding to constituent opinions. For both of us, the conference offered an opportunity to practice our professionalism. Even though we were the youngest students involved in the project, we were expected to conduct ourselves in a manner similar to the graduate students and even to the administrator/faculty member. Last, meeting many other professionals and students involved in writing centers gave us additional experiences in networking, which can help us develop important skills for the future; having weekly meetings with Joseph made us feel as if we had a central role in the research The Writing Center was working on. All in all, we believe this project was an amazing experience for us because we had the ability to work in a professional research initiative that was broad in scope and meaningful.

Despite being our first experience with a research project, this was a great educational opportunity for us, and we look forward to participating in future research projects. We offer a few key insights and recommendations for others in our position completing research in writing centers:

1. We recommend everyone should be included in all parts of the project. Throughout, we realized the importance of participating in the entire project. It was difficult to come in after the initial survey development because we did not always understand or appreciate the scope and view of the project. It's not hard to jump in and start analyzing, but if all researchers don't have a clear view of the whole picture, it's easy to overlook information and details; likewise, it is easy to focus on aspects of the research that don't add to its purpose.

For example, in our own project, we would find ourselves delving into parts of the research we believed coordinated with our research topic, but then our mentors, Joseph and Kenlea, would have to redirect our focus. Also, being part of the early development process would have let us help shape the project based on our own interests and experiences.

2. We recommend that any sort of presentation be thoroughly practiced before it occurs. At the East Central Writing Centers Association Conference, because of the large number of people involved in the research, after each member read a personal narrative, there was hardly any time to reflect on and discuss our research and experiences with audience members. It would be beneficial for future groups to spend even more time preparing for conferences with practice runs to avoid time issues like this, and it would put newer members like ourselves in an even more comfortable position.

3. We also would have liked to work more collaboratively, in person and as a group, instead of relying on web resources and wireless tools for our work together. This approach was primarily due to how busy and contrasting the schedules were of the different undergraduate and graduate team members, but we do feel we missed a large part of the cohesiveness and teamwork facets of the project. If we had been able to meet more often, the research team would have felt more like a *team* we could approach with questions, problems, and solutions; additionally, we would have been more comfortable contributing our own voices to the conversation.

Collective reflection on the narrative.

This narrative highlights the importance of providing opportunities for undergraduate students to apply knowledge gained from experiences in the center to research. Through this experience, the different methodologies explored helped undergraduates develop and apply critical thinking, as encouraged by Liggett, Jordan, & Price (2012). Specifically, students were able to engage in the benefits of professional development through research (Rowan, 2009). These benefits included transferable skills and professional development in the form of conference presentations, reports, and this publication. The project also functioned as an introduction to what Courtney (2009) calls the “professional community” (p. 131) of writing centers; the administrator/faculty member and graduate consultants all helped the undergraduate consultants feel agency as they participated in work within the center. As members of this research team, undergraduate students had “a voice” in the research and work that came out of it (Boquet, 1999); however, their narrative also demonstrates the difficulties

of having an equal voice, which takes time, effort, and development. But, by the time the project was completed, they had not only an equal voice but also a better idea of how to get and gain authority in their own work (Ferruci & DeRosa, 2010).

Conclusion

While our experiences were primarily positive, it is important to recognize there are areas for improvement. One area is in the logistics of the collaborative process. Even though we all understood the difficulties of gathering as a full group, everyone (administrator/faculty researcher, graduate-student researchers, and undergraduate-student researchers) wanted more in-person collaboration opportunities and meetings. Because of the size of the team and busy individual schedules, collaboration often happened via email, during meetings with Joseph, and in Google Drive. More full research-team meetings would have helped prevent the miscommunication that can be common via email; additionally, they would have helped form a more cohesive team. A second area is also related to logistics and the timing of when the undergraduate students joined the project; it would have been ideal to have all members involved in all aspects of the research. These issues point out some of the many difficulties involved in creating collaborative multitiered research teams in writing centers.

For each tier of participants, unique benefits and drawbacks were presented in the individual narratives; however, there were also broader trends and conclusions we, as a group, want to share with others considering conducting or enhancing research in their centers:

1. Research projects can change perceptions of the writing center, whether those perceptions are the administrator's, the consultant's, or student-users'. The center is a place that provides necessary and much-needed consultations, but it is also a place that supports and lends itself to academic research that can be recognized on a larger scale. Because the center is a place of research, consultants can find topics of exploration by thinking about what questions they have about their own center and about writing centers generally. Furthermore, conducting research in the writing center invites both administrators and consultants to think critically about how research can improve the center. Research can lead to more investment from all consultants involved and, in turn, provide avenues for growth in the academic and support-services side of the center by encouraging consultant research and professionalization skills. As a result of this project, we have reports that make visible the work we do in the

center, we provide recommendations for improving the center, and we ask research questions for future research. We recognize not all writing centers may be able to complete the same type of extensive research in their center; however, considering the many benefits to various stakeholders, even a modest research project can lead to a change in perceptions of the center.

2. Research in the center can create a sense of community. According to Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford (2000), “Rather than a model based on highly competitive individual research, writing centers foster team-based and collaborative research . . . such research aims less toward individual advancement and more toward programmatic and institutional improvement” (p. 35). For Ede and Lunsford, the collaborative nature of writing center research fosters a sense of collaboration as well as, we argue, a sense of community and equality. In a collaborative atmosphere, everyone gets to have a voice while hearing voices not their own. Being able to leverage the strengths of each student involved in this project and the disciplinary knowledge they brought with them was extremely important. We had representatives from composition and rhetoric, music, professional writing, political science, and student affairs—with each disciplinary focus highlighting different strengths; overall, we provided support for each other and created a better collective than individual parts could have alone.

3. Research can also provide mentoring opportunities (McWey, Henderson, & Piercy 2006). Creating a more friendly research culture promoted mentoring across numerous lines. This mentoring was not necessarily hierarchical but happened in many different ways and across many different parts of the project. Because Joseph was the most experienced in writing center research, he often helped explain key concepts in writing center studies and processes related to completing quantitative research. Additionally, Kenlea helped mentor the undergraduate students in how to read the quantitative data generated from the surveys. Mentoring also occurred within specific groups. For example, graduate students mentored graduate students, and undergraduate students mentored undergraduate students. Graduate students learned from those more experienced in different aspects of the project, especially in terms of the conference presentation and reports that were completed. Meanwhile, undergraduate researchers learned from each other, and from their mentors, how to view and present data.

4. Consultants can learn and practice transferable skills and professionalization. As Ervin (2016b) points out, “Tutor researchers be-

come better researchers” because they learn transferable research skills (pp. 54–55). In our project, we learned how to design and distribute a survey for a particular audience. We engaged this work specifically to make the survey as inclusive as possible. We also learned transferable skills, like quantitative research methods, that we can apply to our work as future writing center administrators or to our own disciplines. This introduction to quantitative methods also had the added benefit of allowing us to speak the language of the administration and institution. As writing center graduate-student coordinators come from and will go to other fields, it is important for them to understand how qualitative and quantitative research enhance and support each other by providing different perspectives and orientations toward the same data.

5. Research in the center has the potential to help the individual writing center, the institution, and, in some cases, the broader writing center community. These projects offer the opportunity to explore what type of policies and procedures would best serve the center while making concrete recommendations for the future of the center. For example, we learned some populations of students feel comfortable bringing a wide variety of writing to The Writing Center; we also learned other students are apprehensive about bringing disciplinary writing to the center. These findings have prompted potential future research projects; for example, when thinking about ELL students, we want to know why faculty recommend The Writing Center versus the ESL lab. We also want to explore the type of training provided to consultants to work with students from different backgrounds and disciplines. Ultimately, this type of collaborative learning and research better reflects the type of work that occurs in many areas of academia (like student services) and within nonacademic workplaces.

Much like Lauren Fitzgerald (2014), we believe “there will be something to interest us all” in conducting research while preparing the researchers of the future (p. 18). This is especially true, as Fitzgerald points out, when undergraduates are included in the research process (p. 18). In the application of our work, we recognize not all centers have the chance to complete research projects (and not all centers have graduate or even undergraduate student consultants); but, because of the many benefits to the center and the people who complete the research, we encourage other centers to explore possible multitiered projects. We have seen the benefit of this type of research and hope to see it applied and developed in other writing centers; likewise, we hope to see other consultant/student populations benefiting from conducting research in their centers.

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