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Leading the Horse: The Writing Center and Required Visits

Irene Lurkis Clark

Whether or not students ought to be required to go to the Writing Center has always been a problematic issue, and often those opposed to such a requirement justify their position simply by that old maxim, "You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make him drink." Steve North, in "The Idea of a Writing Center," asserts that such a requirement usually does not produce the desired results. "Occasionally we manage to convert such writers from people who have to see us to people who want to, but most often they either come as if for a kind of detention or else they drift away" (440). Presumably, students should use the Writing Center when they themselves decide to do so; requiring them to come defeats the purpose.

This argument against requiring writing center visits derives from the prevailing belief that improvement in writing, or in anything, can occur only when the student is motivated intrinsically, and, indeed, few psychologists would argue that "intrinsic factors are more effective in a general learning environment than extrinsic ones" (Williams 102). Moreover, the popular quasi-romantic model of the relationship of motivation to writing postulates that a core of curiosity and excitement about the world exists within all students and that this core must be elicited before students will be motivated to write. The task of uncovering this often deeply buried core is usually assigned to the classroom teacher, and supposedly once the student is properly motivated, he will then visit the Writing Center on his own, use its facilities to maximum advantage, and willingly undertake the necessary work.

The problem with this model, however appealing it might be, is that it is based primarily on anecdotal information and that it presumes that composition students are homogeneous. Perhaps it would make the life of the Writing Center administrator a bit easier if all students functioned according to this model. However, according to Kolesnic, most of the things that we do cannot be neatly categorized as either intrinsically or extrinsically motivated (180), and the findings of Williams and Alden suggest that students differ widely in their motivational patterns. Certainly some students are intrinsically motivated and write for self-gratification. However, more students than we would like to believe are extrinsically motivated; such students write for grades, not for self-expression or pleasure. Moreover, according to Williams and Alden, even intrinsically motivated students are strongly influenced by the desire to get good grades. For both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated students in the Williams and Alden study, "grade was the single most important reason given for working hard on an assignment" (109).

Awareness that extrinsic as well as intrinsic motivational factors affect students' acquisition of writing skills has important implications for the question of whether or not students ought to be required to visit the Writing Center, a question with which we at the University of Southern California grapple every semester. In our quite large program (3500 students per semester, 155 instructors) the assignment of Writing Center visits are the province of each individual instructor. Some instructors require their students to visit the Writing Center several times a semester; some do not require any visits at all. And each semester, when we reevaluate the program, we consider whether or not required Writing Center visits ought to become a component of program policy. Debating this question, we are of course aware of the "lead a horse to water" philosophy; yet it seems equally sensible that if the horse has not at least been led to the water that he will be even less likely to drink.



Research Design

This year, we decided to conduct a study to assess student attitude toward being required to attend the Writing Center, to investigate the effect of such a requirement on student perceptions of the Writing Center as a useful facility, and to determine the relationship of teacher requirement to student attendance. Three hundred and twenty-nine students enrolled in composition classes at USC during the Fall 1984 semester were interviewed by means of a questionnaire. The sample was drawn from a systematically selected random cluster of class sections. Students from twenty-six of the one hundred and fifty-five class sections were selected to participate in the study.

The questionnaire was designed to assess student attitude toward the Writing Center in relation to motivation for attendance, teacher's requirement for mandatory visits, and perception of the Center's usefulness toward improving both writing skills and grades. Questions pertaining to student attitudes toward various Writing Center factors were asked in a closed-ended, Likert-scale format, which asked for a response in the form of "strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," "strongly disagree," or "does not apply." One half of the questions were written in the negative form to prevent the wording of the question from influencing the response. Questions of particular significance to the focus of this article were as follows:

- The Writing Center is valuable to my overall writing improvement.
- I am too busy to go to the the Writing Center.
- I am already a good writer and do not need extra help from the Writing Center.
- I appreciate getting feedback about my paper from someone other than my teacher.
- The tutors in the Writing Center are not helpful.

Two other points surveyed were:

- Teacher requirement of visits per semester (zero, once, twice, three times, or more than three times)
- Actual visits this semester (zero, once, twice, three times, or more than three times)

Thus, the study was designed to assess whether students' attitudes toward the Writing Center were influenced by their having been required to go and to calculate the effect such a requirement had on actual student visits.

Findings

Of the three hundred and twenty-nine students surveyed, eighty-five said they would go to the the Writing Center only if the teacher required such visits, forty-eight characterized themselves as self-motivated, one hundred twenty-eight characterized themselves as both teacher- and self-motivated (the largest group), and sixty-eight said that the question did not apply.

TABLE 1. Motivation for Visiting the Writing Center.

Reason for attending:	
Teacher	85
Self	48
Both	128
Not apply	68
Total	329

Concerning student attitude toward whether the Writing Center helps students improve their writing skills, the survey revealed that three-fourths of the students surveyed felt that the Writing Center does indeed improve their writing skills and that the center is a friendly, helpful, accessible, and needed component of the program. Moreover, over three quarters of the students surveyed disagreed with the statement that they were already good enough writers so as not to require additional help from the Writing Center. The students surveyed were quite aware of their own needs in this regard.

Almost half of the students also believed that the Writing Center improved their grades on writing assignments. One-quarter of the teacher-motivated students believed that visiting the Center improved the grades they received on their papers; nearly half of the self-motivated students felt the same; over half of those motivated by both teacher and self-motivation believed that the Writing Center improved their grades on writing assignments. Apparently, then, a majority of the students believed that going to the Writing Center improved both their writing skills and their grades, whether or not they had been required to come. One would presume, according to these findings, that if most students believed that the Writing Center improved both their writing skills and their grade and recognized their need for help in writing, that they would all flock to the Writing Center, without being required. Yet, as we all know, such is not usually the case.

Concerning teacher requirement, ninety-five of the students surveyed had not been required to go to the Writing Center at all, twenty-five to go once, eighty-three to go twice, forty-two to go three times, and eighty-two to go more than three times. At the time of the survey, four weeks before the end of the semester, eighty-seven had not gone at all, ninety-seven had gone once, seventy-five twice, thirty-two three times and thirty-eight more than three times.

TABLE 2. Number of Students Required to Attend the Writing Center Compared with Actual Number of Visits.

Visits	Students Required to Attend	Students Who Attend
0	95	87
1	27	97
2	83	75
3	42	32
more	82	38

What these figures suggest is a strong relationship between teachers' Writing Center requirements and actual visits to the Center. Based upon our experience in the Writing Center, even those students who had been assigned required visits and who had not done so at the time of the survey will eventually fulfill their requirements by the end of the semester, not the best use of the services we offer, yet perhaps better than no visits at all. What the figures also suggest is that unless teachers require their students to visit the Writing Center, the students are unlikely to go or perhaps to go only once.

Why don't students go to the Writing Center on their own if they are aware of their own needs for writing instruction and recognize that the Writing Center can be a source of help? Apparently, because they feel they are too busy. Approximately 65% of those who were motivated only by a teacher's requirement believed that they were too busy to go to the Writing Center, whereas only 40% of those who claimed to be self-motivated (the largest percentage of students) felt this way. Being too busy is apparently a prime reason students claim they do not attend the Writing Center rather than because they do not recognize the worth of going. What seems apparent,

then, is that to assign students to visit the Writing Center might indeed lead them to recognize that they weren't quite as busy as they thought.

Conclusions

The study concludes with a recommendation that a Writing Center requirement be instituted as a department-wide policy, with the understanding that the more visits required, the more times the student will be likely to go. And, assuming that the students at USC do not constitute a unique population (and it is unlikely that they do), this recommendation has implications for other colleges and universities as well. Since students already recognize their own need for additional writing instruction and already believe that the Writing Center can improve both writing skills and grades and since the environment in the Writing Center is designed to generate further motivation, it is likely that students will perceive their experiences at the Writing Center as positive. Robert Martin, in *Teaching Through Encouragement*, maintains that through encouragement it is possible to change behavior and that, "when behavior changes, self-image and attitudes are also likely to change." Requiring students to visit the Writing Center at least gives them a chance to be encouraged. And with the right encouragement, even the most recalcitrant horse, aware of his thirst and standing at the water's edge, might bend his stubborn neck and take a drink.

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Irene Lurkis Clark has published articles in *The Journal of Basic Writing*, *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, and *The Writing Center Journal*. She is currently the Director of the Writing Center at the University of Southern California. Her book, *Writing in the Center: A Resource Guide for the Writing Center Teacher*, was published this year by Kendall Hunt.