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# Stereotypes or Validation: Lessons Learned from a Partnership between a Writing Center and a Summer Academic Program for Incoming Students of Color

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## Abstract

This article presents findings from a two-year mixed-methods study examining a partnership between a writing center and a community-building summer academic program for incoming students of color at a large Midwestern university that is a predominantly white institution (PWI). The study implemented surveys and follow-up interviews with students in the program to discover the benefits and drawbacks of requiring writing center visits for this student population. Building on extant research on required visits and how writing centers can contribute to social justice, this article uses frameworks from psychology and higher education scholarship on stereotype threat and validation theory respectively to explore how writing centers can provide academic and interpersonal validation to students of color who visit. Pairing stereotype threat and validation theory as lenses illuminates how writing centers can avoid othering students of color and instead affirm their senses of belonging within their institutions.

At the 2013 Midwest Writing Centers Association conference, Ta Leasa Johnson made a blunt statement in her presentation, “Breaking Down the Stigmas: Why Is It That Black Students Do Not Utilize the Campus Writing Center.” Johnson, an African American undergraduate at Kansas State University, said candidly that unless writing center leaders tell Black students they want them as consultants, those students will not necessarily think it is something they can do. Many writing center scholars have called for diversifying writing center staffs (Condon, 2007; Davila, 2006; Faison & Treviño, 2017; Johnson, 2011; Valentine & Torres, 2011), but what Johnson put into stark terms was just how much the onus is on writing center administrators at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) to be proactive, specific, and deliberate in recruitment efforts.

Particularly for those of us who work in U.S. writing centers, given our current political climate, it is imperative to put any commitments we have to social justice into action. Although oppression and exclusion take myriad forms within colleges and universities, I examine here the relationship between students of color and writing centers at PWIs. While individual recruitment efforts are vital, as Johnson teaches us, I argue writing centers should create opportunities for such individual connections by collaborating with other units on a larger scale. Specifically, carefully framed required visits can help begin meaningful relationships with students of color, setting the stage for changing the “face” of PWi writing centers (Denny, 2010).

While there has been ongoing debate in writing center studies regarding required visits (see, for example, Rendleman, Livingston, & Rose, 2019), less attention has been paid to how such requirements affect students of color specifically. The fields of psychology and higher education, specifically stereotype threat and validation theory, can illuminate where required visits fall in the spectrum of practices that contribute to—or detract from—the likeliness of students of color to persist and thrive. I apply stereotype threat and validation theory in interpreting findings from an IRB-approved (20151115618EX), two-year, mixed-methods study of a collaboration involving required writing center visits for students of color in a summer program at a large Midwestern PWi.

First, some background: both the writing center and summer program at the institution in this study are housed in Student Affairs. The summer program is designed to give incoming students of color a head start on acclimating and building relationships on campus. Crucially, while the program is academic in nature, it is not remedial. Rather, the intent is to help incoming students of color develop a sense of community, with the ultimate goal of greater retention and persistence. The application process is competitive.

During the semester leading up to summer 2014, the first session under review in this study, the writing center director—a person of color—served

on the planning committee for the summer academic program. The director proposed a collaboration, and another committee member, a graduate student in Student Affairs, suggested requiring program students to visit the writing center; the director agreed. The organic nature of this collaboration thus places it squarely in the “grassroots” category identified by Eliot Rendleman and Judith Livingston (2017) in their synthesis of writing program administration scholarship on collaborations.

Over the course of the study, writing center visits changed from required to optional for program students. Near the start of the summer 2014 session, students were introduced to the writing center via an outreach presentation delivered by the writing center director. They were subsequently required to visit the writing center for a specific assignment, a goal-setting essay, during a study-skills class all program participants were required to take (the Student Affairs graduate student was one of the instructors). In 2015, the second summer of the study, the writing center director had departed; program students were again exposed to a writing center outreach presentation, but they were not required to visit.

This change afforded me the opportunity to compare outcomes between optional and required visits, as well as to consider the relationship between writing centers and students of color at PWIs more broadly. I focus here on two interrelated questions:

- Do prior findings about the effectiveness of required writing center visits hold true for this particular population—that is, students of color who are new to a PWi?
- Do the benefits of requiring these visits outweigh the potential drawbacks? How might programs deploy required visits for students of color without making them feel targeted because of their race/ethnicity?

My analysis builds on previous work on required visits, as well as on social justice in writing centers. As I demonstrate, listening to student experiences and using stereotype threat and validation theory to interpret these experiences can help writing center staff make more equitable choices when reaching out to students of color via cross-unit collaborations. Furthermore, looking closely at the partnership in this study helps answer larger questions about the role writing centers can play in helping students of color cement their senses of belonging at PWIs.

### **Required Writing Center Visits: What Does the Research Say So Far?**

The debate over whether or not to encourage (or even allow) required visits is long-standing. As Jaelyn Wells (2016) makes clear in her recent

exploration of required visits and RAD research, these discussions reflect a stark divide between lore and data: lore cautions against required visits, while empirical research has demonstrated that students generally benefit from being compelled to visit the center (Bishop, 1990; Clark, 1985; Gordon, 2008; Pfrenger, Blasiman, & Winter, 2017; Runciman, 1987; Van Dam, 1985; see also Kjesrud, 2015, on the lore/data divide). In their 2013 *Researching the Writing Center: Toward an Evidence-Based Practice*, Rebecca Day Babcock & Terese Thonus review the work of Irene Clark and others on required visits for “basic writers,” ultimately recommending that “writing center administrators should consider recommending mandatory consultations for students in developmental writing classes” (p. 92). Such findings are echoed by Wendy Pfrenger, Rachael N. Blasiman, & James Winter (2017) in their study of required visits for writers in developmental courses: they found students were more likely to visit during future semesters after having been required to attend, and pass rates in second-semester composition courses were improved.

Crucial to note, however, is that these studies almost always involve “basic” writers or developmental courses. Less apparent is the value of required visits outside these specific contexts. And while the decision to require visits at all may still seem contentious, the stakes are even higher where students of color are concerned, given that writing centers are far from immune to larger structural issues of race, power, and agency. A growing chorus in writing center studies has been calling for practitioners to recognize race and ethnicity are central, not peripheral, concerns for writing center work (e.g., Barron & Grimm, 2002; Condon, 2007; Denny, 2010; Diab, Godbee, Ferrell, & Simpkins, 2012; Faison and Treviño, 2017; García, 2017; Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, & Boquet, 2007; Greenfield & Rowan, 2011; Villanueva, 2006). In particular, a number of scholars have cast a critical eye on the overwhelming whiteness of writing centers at PWIs, a critique neatly and memorably summed up in Neisha-Anne Green’s (2018) call for transforming the “white-as-hell space” of writing centers in her IWCA keynote address (p. 28). But how do we do the work of flipping this script, particularly considering the relative lack of extant research on “diversity” among directors, tutors, and tutees, including diversity of racial/ethnic identity (Valles, Babcock, & Jackson, 2017)?

Thanks to Lori Salem’s (2017) empirical study of who does and doesn’t use the writing center, we know writing centers are, in fact, serving students of color and other minoritized students; as Salem points out, however, this does not guarantee writing center pedagogy is the best fit for all students. Further, Wonderful Faison & Anna Treviño (2017) articulate the ways writing centers may not, in fact, be welcoming spaces for students and consultants of color, and these authors adapt LaShawnda Lindsay-Dennis’s (2015) work to call for writing center scholars to

begin to undo the hidden curriculum of the WC by (1) conducting re-

search that focuses on the experiences of historically marginalized bodies working and receiving assistance/services in the WC, (2) by valuing those experiences of POC within a cultural context, and (3) by considering the experiences of POC both valid and measurable. (para 50)

If we want students of color to envision themselves not only visiting but also working in PWI writing centers, how can writing center administrators encourage contact without making individuals feel they are being singled out solely because of their race or ethnicity—even tokenized? Requiring visits certainly ensures students will come, but can such visits be deployed safely for students of color? The present study follows up on Faison and Treviño’s call to pay attention to the experiences of people of color by listening carefully to stories told by students of color, some of whom were required to use the writing center, and others who did so by choice.

Importantly, the required visits in the present study were part of a cross-unit collaboration—a key strategy for working toward racial justice, as Lisa Zimmerelli found in her 2015 study of required service learning for tutors. Zimmerelli’s study, however, focused primarily on tutor learning rather than student experiences. Moreover, investigating current rather than prospective students raises different questions: students of color in the present study had been admitted to and had joined the university community, but what could help them feel they truly belonged, personally and academically, both in the writing center and in the larger (PWI) university? My research considers how writing centers might help solidify these feelings of belonging, as well as the pros and cons of using required visits to connect with students of color.

### **What Can We Learn From Attending to Stereotype Threat and Validation Theory?**

To fully appreciate the potential downsides of requiring visits for students of color, we must consider stereotype threat, “one of the most widely studied social psychological concepts of the past 20 years” (Inzlicht & Schmader, 2012, p. 3). Claude Steele & Joseph Aronson first described stereotype threat in 1995, positing that “widely-known negative stereotypes about one’s group” have measurable consequences, such that “anything one does or any of one’s features that conform to it make the stereotype more plausible as a self-characterization in the eyes of others, and perhaps even in one’s own eyes” (p. 797). In other words, stereotypes themselves can cause people to perform more poorly in educational settings since individuals often worry they will confirm existing stereotypes about their identity group to themselves or to others (either inside or outside their own group). Such concerns have serious consequences for whether people from marginalized groups can feel they belong in any given situation. In an edited collection on stereotype threat, Mary

C. Murphy & Valerie Jones Taylor (2012) elaborate on how “situational cues” can trigger this threat: subtle cues in an environment make people vigilant, which in turn makes them less able to function and perform.

These concerns are significant within a writing center context: in her study of a writing center/first-year writing collaboration, Julie Wilson (2018) cites Nancy Grimm’s (2011) call to frame students who use the writing center regularly as “hard workers” rather than writers in particular need of help, in the interests of avoiding stereotype threat. The risks are particularly acute when we consider the experiences of students of color in PWI centers: in all- or majority-White spaces where students of color do not see their own identities reflected, these students may become anxious about confirming White consultants’ possible prejudices, such as expectations that students of color are underprepared or “need” the writing center more than other students. Since required visits are most often deployed within “basic” or “developmental” contexts, mandating that students of color visit may well trigger stereotype threat, potentially doing more harm than good.

On the other hand, Murphy & Taylor (2012) discuss how institutional spaces can, in fact, avoid triggering stereotype threat “by signaling to people that their social identity is valued” (p. 24). They cite “critical mass” as one of the most powerful identity-safe cues: that is, being surrounded by enough individuals who share one’s identity to feel comfortable in that space. Additionally, Murphy & Taylor discuss how language and imagery about diversity, carefully deployed (i.e., not as lip service but as recognizable, actual commitment), can also create such feelings of safety. I contend here it is incumbent upon writing center practitioners to send such cues, albeit cautiously, as well as to think about who is serving as the “face” of PWI writing centers and what the consequences might be.

Moreover, what Laura Rendón first termed “validation theory” in 1994 provides a research-supported framework for identifying and interpreting interactions geared toward fostering feelings of belonging among minoritized students (in the case of Rendón’s study, low-income, first-generation college students):

Validation refers to the intentional, proactive affirmation of students by in- and out-of-class agents (i.e., faculty, student, and academic affairs staff, family members, peers) in order to: 1) validate students as creators of knowledge and as valuable members of the college learning community and 2) foster personal development and social adjustment. (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011, p. 12)

According to Rendón & Muñoz, students from historically marginalized groups often need someone in or out of the classroom to validate their presence and their abilities before they can fully develop a sense of belonging at their institution and perform to the best of those abilities. This validation can

be either academic or interpersonal: while the former typically takes place in and around the classroom, the latter, in which an agent “affirms students as persons,” can happen anywhere—though the latter role is often also played by a course instructor (p. 19).

Happily, everyone working in writing centers has the potential to serve as a validating agent; of course, they are not guaranteed to function as such. I was therefore interested in whether this particular collaboration succeeded not only in avoiding stereotype threat around required visits, but also in offering genuinely validating experiences for students.

## Methodology

I chose a mixed-methods approach to look both broadly and deeply at the collaboration in question, employing surveys during the first phase so all participants in the summer program would have at least the opportunity to respond. But while surveys could provide insight into the overall efficacy of required visits, surveys could say little about what meaning students made of these visits. I thus also chose to incorporate narrative inquiry, implementing semistructured follow-up interviews to delve into students’ affective experiences and explore the relationships they formed (or not) with the writing center.<sup>1</sup>

During the last two weeks of the summer academic program, I administered electronic surveys via Qualtrics, aided by program administrators. Both the 2014 and 2015 surveys asked Likert-scale questions on the following:

- students’ feelings about the writing center after an initial outreach presentation;
- whether students thought they would choose to use the writing center;
- how positive or negative feelings were after students visited the center (if they did);
- how satisfied students were with what they had accomplished during the visit; and
- how likely students were to return to the writing center.<sup>2</sup>

Since students in 2014 were required to use the writing center, their survey also asked about their reactions when they found out they would be required to visit.

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- 1 Catherine Kohler Riessman’s book (2008) and Molly Andrews, Corinne Squire, & Maria Tamboukou’s edited collection (2008) are particularly instructive regarding the narrative turn and the various assumptions and strategies of narrative researchers in the social sciences, and Nicole I. Caswell, Jackie Grutsch McKinney, & Rebecca Jackson’s *The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors* (2016) provides a recent and compelling illustration of the power of narrative inquiry (in a case-study format) within writing center studies.
  - 2 See Appendix A for redacted survey questions.

For the interview phase, I identified two students from the 2014 cohort and four from 2015 who agreed to follow-up interviews. These interviews ranged from just under 10 minutes to around half an hour; they took place in meeting rooms on campus and were digitally recorded. I was able to interview students in the 2015 group just as the program was ending; for logistical reasons, interviews for the pair of students from 2014 took place in early 2016. Though both had fairly clear recollections about their experiences, the time gap, of course, represents a limitation. I personally transcribed each interview, maintaining verbal quirks in order to communicate each student's voice as accurately as possible. Following the principles of narrative inquiry, I err on the side of length when quoting in order to acknowledge students' agency as storytellers, that is, how students framed and represented their lived experiences as they chose what to tell and what not to. At the same time, these responses were undoubtedly shaped by many factors: students' families, communities, educational histories, larger social and cultural forces, and so on.

The interview questions broke down into three clusters.<sup>3</sup> The first assessed participants' experiences in the writing center. The second addressed the larger questions of validation and belonging at the university. I felt I could, but should not, ask about belonging directly, as it would be easy to second-guess oneself and think, "Wait, *should* I feel like I don't belong?" This caution stems in no small part from my own identity: I am myself Asian American and biracial and have been asked "Where are you from?" more times than I can count. I know only too well how damaging insinuations of not belonging can be. In lieu of asking directly, then, I asked how participants felt at the start and end of the program and if anything had helped them feel more connected.

Finally, in the third cluster, I asked optional questions related to students' self-identification: how students identified in terms of sex and/or gender and race and/or ethnicity. All chose to respond to one or both questions. I elected to determine pseudonyms in consultation with participants: it struck me as particularly inappropriate to assign names to these students unilaterally, as pseudonyms could either highlight or obscure race, sex, gender, and/or ethnicity in troubling ways. I felt the most appropriate option was to leave this choice in students' hands.

From the 2014 cohort that had been required to visit, I interviewed two students: Talented and Jill. Talented identified as female and African American; Jill identified as female and Hispanic. From the 2015 cohort, I interviewed four students who had chosen to visit: Maddy, Nikki, Vincent, and Esperanza. Maddy identified as female and Native American; Nikki identified as female and African. Vincent identified as male and Latino, specifically Puerto Rican. Esperanza did not want to identify in terms of gender, and she was not com-

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3 See Appendix B for redacted interview questions.

fortable narrowing down her race or ethnicity into specific categories. When I asked later, she responded that female pronouns were acceptable, so I employ those here.

To analyze the interview data, I borrowed Rendón's categories of academic and interpersonal validation and read for instances of each, as well as for moments when writing center staff missed opportunities to validate participants. I also made note of the 2014 participants' reactions to having been required to visit the writing center. During this process, two other categories emerged: articulations of feelings of belonging on campus and moments when participants picked up on "identity-safe cues" in the center. My process was thus influenced by grounded theory—I did my best to remain open to what the data would tell me and what categories might emerge—but does not strictly follow this methodology, as I approached the data with the framework of validation theory in mind.

## Results and Discussion

I present my findings based on my main research questions, drawing from the quantitative and qualitative data as needed.

### **Question 1: Do Prior Findings About the Effectiveness of Required Writing Center Visits Hold True for Students of Color New to a PWI?**

Because they reflect responses from a broad cross-section of program participants, the survey results provide the clearest answer to this question. I received 32 total survey responses during 2014 and 30 during 2015, giving a return rate of slightly under 50% for each year. All 32 respondents were required to use the writing center in 2014, but although 26 respondents indicated they had intended to visit in 2015, only 6 actually did. Good intentions do not always pan out, of course, and this stark difference underscores, at least in principle, the utility of required visits, which do guarantee contact.

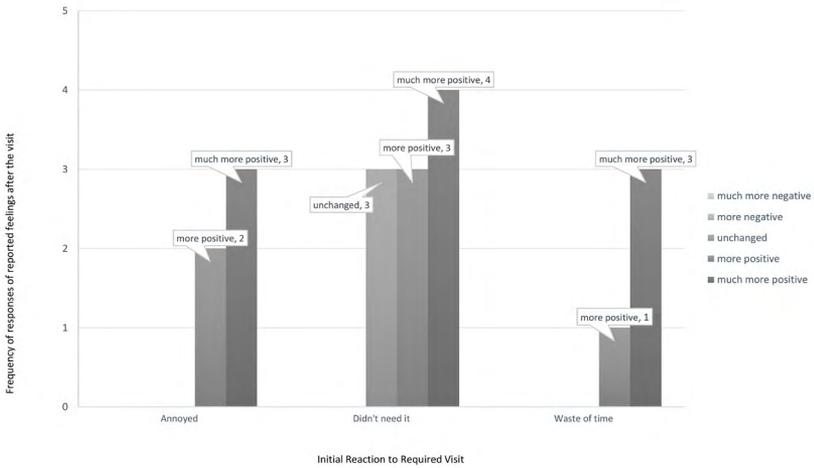
Of course, such visits are useless (or worse) if they do not represent a positive form of contact with the center. But as in the studies cited above, students' perceptions of the writing center in the present study either stayed the same or became more positive after required visits. Of the students who were required to visit in 2014, 81.25% indicated they were "Satisfied" or "Very Satisfied," and 84.4% had "More Positive" or "Much More Positive" feelings after visiting. The remainder had "Unchanged" feelings; none reported feeling more negatively about the writing center after their visit.

The 2014 survey also asked students to report how they felt when they found out they would be required to use the writing center, effectively getting beyond the common (and unhelpful) "good-bad" dichotomy Wells (2016) identifies around required visits. Interestingly, responses were roughly evenly

divided between negative/unenthusiastic and positive ones. Furthermore, of the seven respondents who indicated they felt “annoyed” and/or it would be a “waste of time,” all indicated “More Positive” or “Much More Positive” feelings after their required visit. Of the 10 who chose “Felt I didn’t need it,” three reported “Unchanged” feelings, while the other seven selected “More Positive” or “Much More Positive” (Figure 1). Thus, not only were students not uniformly opposed to required visits, but also even when answers indicated some resistance, the majority of students left with more positive feelings about the center.

**Figure 1**

*Change in Students’ Post-Required-Consultation Responses to the Writing Center, Cross-Referenced With Initial Reactions to the Initial Visit Requirement.*



*Note: two respondents gave an initial neutral response (“Indifferent”), and both reported positive feelings after the required visit; for clarity, these responses are not included in Figure 1.*

While these datasets are not large, the high return rate both years suggests we can take them as reasonably representative, and the results are consistent with the positive outcomes found in previous studies. I wish to stress, however, that framing remains absolutely vital for avoiding stereotype threat. Students in this program were required as a group to use the writing center in 2014, not singled out as individuals, which Barbara Bell & Robert Stutts (1997) identify as a key strategy for avoiding stigmatization. Furthermore, the writing center was presented as just one of many campus resources to

which program students had access rather than as a service they “needed”—at least, not more so than any other student on campus. And, as noted above, the writing center director served as a member of the planning committee for the program, ensuring required visits were part of an ongoing collaborative process in which goals of the program and the writing center could be communicated and mutually understood, a process Rendleman & Livingston (2017) identify as key to successful collaborations.

## **Question 2: Do the Benefits Outweigh the Potential Drawbacks? If So, How Might Programs Deploy Required Visits for Students of Color Without Making Them Feel Targeted?**

I turn now to the interview data to tease out more nuances of participants’ experiences with the writing center. Although the four interview participants from 2015 were not required to attend, their responses still illuminate where consultants and other staff members succeeded in providing forms of validation and identity-safe cues, and—crucially—where opportunities were missed. My focus here is on answering the first of the above questions; while I have already touched somewhat on answers to the second, I will return to it in more detail in the final section.

### ***Potential Benefits of Required Visits for Students of Color***

Within participant responses, I identified three main potential benefits: academic validation, interpersonal validation, and the sending of identity-safe cues.

**Academic Validation.** For the participants who had been required to visit, results were mixed when it came to academic validation. Jill appeared to feel validated as a student writer, describing her consultant as “uplifting” and “respectful,” while Talented, who was more lukewarm about the experience overall, reported that the consultant “seemed very . . . unbiased, I guess. So they didn’t like say it was *bad*, but they didn’t say it was great, um, just kind of threw facts out there [laughing].” Talented’s response echoes the findings of the quantitative data in that her required visit did not seem to cause harm, but none of her comments suggested she felt particularly validated as a writer. Required visits thus provided opportunities for academic validation, but no guarantee.

The 2015 students who had chosen to visit, however, all reported instances of academic validation. Maddy received “a lot of positive feedback” from her consultant, and several participants came in with negative ideas about their own writing that were countered by the consultant’s positivity. Vincent’s description was the most colorful:

Well, I was a bit nervous, I was like, “Oh my God, they’re going to see my paper, they’re going to see all my horrors, because they’re not even

errors, they're horrors," yeah . . . but no, they were so nice, they—they had a good approach to the errors, they did not make me feel like I was wrong, they were just like, "Oh, you can do this to make it even better." Similarly, Esperanza described going in feeling like her draft was "worthless" but was reassured: "After going through it, she was like, 'Yeah, it's pretty good, and the idea, where you're going with it is pretty good.' She—she reinforced me." Particularly notable is how Esperanza shifts from talking about her draft as "worthless" to her self as "reinforced," thus implying that praise on her writing led her to feel validated as a thinker and writer.

As writing center practice tends to incorporate praise for successes alongside constructive criticism, such responses are unsurprising. But given that these students of color were visiting during a program expressly designed to help them persist, such examples of academic validation arguably have particular value. While most participants' comments did not explicitly connect writing to students' identities, Nikki's were an exception, as she discussed being validated specifically as an English-language learner. She recalled times she had felt insecure about her language skills, as well as how the consultant helped change Nikki's self-perceptions:

Well, even though I know I'm a bad writer, they weren't like, "Oh, that's bad," you know, they were like, "Oh, this is pretty good, you have a pretty good, like, solid information, da da da . . ." So, it was like, yeah, they made me feel pretty good about my writing, like, "Oh, I guess I'm better than I thought I was."

Like Esperanza, Nikki moved from talking about the draft to talking about herself as "better than [she] thought [she] was," again indicating she herself felt validated. Though she still placed herself in the perceived category of "bad writer," the incremental progress in her writerly self-image underscores the benefits of requiring visits within programs like this one, which serves as students' introduction to the university: building a relationship early can allow writing centers to get a head start on helping students reframe their notions of themselves as writers. Perhaps with additional writerly validation, even Vincent might be convinced his mistakes are not, in fact, "horrors." Providing this type of validation can be particularly meaningful within sessions with students of color and other historically marginalized students: if, as Rendón (1994) argues, validating students academically indeed helps them find success in college, then writing centers have a vital role to play in cementing students' overall sense of academic belonging at their institutions.

**Interpersonal Validation.** Though examples were far more sparse, participants did describe a few instances of interpersonal validation—that is, affirmation of individual students "as persons" and as full members of the university community. Jill, who had been required to visit, provided the strongest example of this type of validation among all responses. For her, the most useful

part of her required visit was conversation about the topic of her essay rather than the essay itself, which concerned her goals for her time at the university:

It was more her [the consultant's] advice, I guess, on certain things. So I said I wanted to join clubs and she's like, "Well, you know a really good club to join would be this for journalism, I know a lot of people have really enjoyed that," or "You know, I have friends who've done this, and they found that this is super helpful," or "I think that's a really good idea," or, you know, stuff like that, just tips and tricks from, I guess, upperclassmen, I would call it.

This conversation represents a crucial form of non-writing-related writing center talk, with one peer helping another navigate the institution; specifically, the consultant validates Jill interpersonally by helping her envision herself inhabiting a variety of active roles on campus. Such informal mentoring is significant given that students of color often find themselves on the margins within PWIs, in need of validation before they fully engage with campus life.

In fact, Jill highlighted the role of this experience in her decision to become a consultant: "What I liked most was, I actually got to know the writing center, and about it, and I really became interested in it, I actually work there now. . . . I just remember thinking, 'Oh, this is such a cool place, like, I really like the people here, and I kind of want to be part of that environment.'" The importance of the full range of talk within consultations thus cannot be overstated: by straying from explicitly writing-related topics, the consultant was able to help Jill discover how she might carve out a place for herself within the university community more generally and the writing center community specifically. These moments of off-topic conversation can be particularly fertile for interpersonal validation, as consultants have opportunities to draw students out about their experiences and provide personal affirmation.

The only other participant who reported an experience that rose to the level of interpersonal validation was Vincent, who commented on the "kindness" of the consultants at the writing center, as well as "the fact that they're students too—like, you can relate to them, and they can relate to you, because they were probably in your—your footsteps." While this example is somewhat oblique, I argue it does function as interpersonal validation, as this type can encompass the formation of bonds among students (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011). Vincent viewed himself and the consultant as being on equal footing, able to connect over shared experiences; he was thus able to see himself as part of the continuity of the university community. Making such a connection is ideal for the peer-to-peer format of most writing center consultations, and working to do so consciously is undoubtedly an attainable goal.

**Identity-Safe Cues.** While most participants did not report interactions that rose to the level of interpersonal validation, some participants did discuss moments when they perceived cues that affirmed identities. In discussing her

experiences as an English-language learner, Nikki offered the most obvious example:

They were super friendly, and I kinda don't actually step out of my box and be like, "Okay, I need help with my English language," just because I feel like [people say], "Oh my God, you don't notice? We learned this in, like, middle school!" and I'm like, "Uhhh, I wasn't, I was just learning the English language, so I don't know about all that!" . . . They [the people working at the writing center] were really friendly, comforting, they weren't judgmental or anything, so I kinda, like, enjoyed my time there, I was comfortable.

She explicitly sets up the contrast between how people in general have made her insecure about her language skills and how the consultant made her feel safe and valued as a multilingual writer. Though she did not refer as explicitly to her own identity, Maddy's responses evoked a similar feeling of being able to relax within the writing center: "It was awkward at first because I came in thinking 'professional' and 'gotta uphold this reputation,' and they're all like, 'Sure, come on in, here we go!'" Maddy's responses demonstrate how writing centers can indeed send positive cues about identity by making reputation and self-presentation less of an issue for students who come in. As Maddy did not reference her background specifically, apart from pointing out at the end that she came from an extremely small town, it is difficult to know whether she was thinking about her reputation as a student from an underrepresented group or as a student in general. Yet her consciousness about how she might be perceived suggests stereotype threat might indeed be a factor in this situation. Regardless of the source of Maddy's concerns, however, becoming more conscious about sending identity-safe cues can only help, as writing center staff can work to create environments where minoritized students need not remain preoccupied by their self-presentation.

### ***Potential Drawbacks of Required Visits***

While both required and voluntary visits created opportunities for validation at minimum, we cannot ignore the potential harm that might occur: most seriously, the possibility of engaging stereotype threat, as well as negative feelings about being required to visit.

**Stereotype Threat.** Engaging stereotype threat is by far the greatest potential drawback of requiring writing center visits for students of color. While none of the participants identified moments of stereotype threat in their responses, students may not have felt entirely comfortable doing so in interviews; furthermore, this study involves far too small a sample size to sustain any claims that stereotype threat is not at play in the writing center. Most participants did not make reference to their racial or ethnic identities as they responded to my questions, making it challenging to determine what role these identities played

in their feelings of belonging. Vincent, however, was a notable exception, as he made multiple direct references to his identity as Puerto Rican throughout. He talked at length about how difficult it was to come to campus alone from Puerto Rico, saying he felt “nervous” but also “confident.” Conversely, he also told me how someone he was showing around campus later on was amazed at how he seemed to know everyone, suggesting how fully integrated he had become by the end of the program. He also described having met Puerto Rican upperclassmen on campus, which he found “exciting.” Vincent’s confidence and community-mindedness bring to the fore why I was hesitant to ask direct questions about belonging: he had worked to establish himself as part of the campus community, and I did not want to shake his confidence in any way.

Vincent not only talked freely about his own identity as a Puerto Rican student, but some of his comments highlighted how participants’ identities as students of color on a PWI campus do inevitably inflect their experiences, even if most did not state this explicitly or articulate incidents of stereotype threat. His observations about the relationship between program students and others on campus uncovered some of these unspoken tensions:

[Other students are] not as . . . like . . . for example, in psych—in psychology, there were a few of us that are in [the summer program] . . . you can see the bonding in between us, and we’re so open to different people, different students, we’re not, like, just [the program], like everyone can come and talk to us, we just have the bonus that we already know each other and basically sleep next to each other, but—yeah, and you can see the difference, ’cause we’re more open, more nice. Um, open-minded—not everyone is very open-minded.

He does not call out differences of race or ethnicity in so many words, but that aspect of difference is impossible to ignore as a subtext. Given that Vincent is discussing interactions within classes on a majority White campus that, like many others, had been experiencing major racism-related incidents in the preceding years, and given that he draws an explicit contrast between the students of color in his program and others at the university, it is difficult not to see racial or ethnic difference as fundamental to what he observes, particularly considering the emphasis he places on open-mindedness.

Vincent’s responses thus highlight our need to be cautious: it would be unwise to assume all students of color struggle to feel as if they belong. But as is true for everyone, the experiences of participants were inevitably shaped by their racial and ethnic identities. I therefore emphasize that we should not feel overly reassured by the apparent absence of stereotype threat in these data, as more pointed questions may have elicited different responses.

Because we cannot ignore the risk of stereotype threat, then, it is crucial to exercise caution around validation. Consultants must not be in such a rush

to validate that they fail to read enough cues about the degree of constructive criticism the writer is looking for, as this example from Esperanza illuminates:

I felt . . . that I should have chosen somebody else, because I don't think—she was fine, she was helpful, but I would've—I wish she would've had more communication with me, like her own ideas. She only wanted to do what I wanted to do, and, like, that's fine, but if you see something, I would've wanted her to tell me, 'cause—'cause she did see some things, and only after I mentioned it to her, was she like, "Yeah, I saw this," and I'm like "Okay, well why didn't you tell me?," and so I just wish she would've been more thorough with me.

When I asked if she would have liked to have gone more in depth, she responded with a resounding "Yeah, I wish she would have torn it apart!" Even though Esperanza made no specific reference to stereotype threat, an incautious approach to validation may well trigger that phenomenon if a student of color perceives their consultant assumes a deficit of confidence or skill and is therefore going easy on the student. Since Esperanza intended to return, the session was by no means unsuccessful; nevertheless, while Esperanza did not tie this experience to stereotype threat specifically, her example does reveal the potential risks. Overeager or overtargeted academic validation might easily be perceived as condescension, and assuming insecurity is a hazardous way to go: we cannot assume students of color need academic validation in particular, just as we cannot assume White students do not—especially given all the invisible identities that might affect a given student's academic confidence, including socioeconomic status (Denny, Nordlof, & Salem, 2018). Further, although no interview participants discussed feeling stereotype threat during their sessions, that does not mean it did not happen or is unlikely to happen within the writing center. Writing center practitioners must read students' cues carefully and consistently and engage in self-reflective practices.

**Dissatisfaction With Being Required to Visit.** Bell & Stutts (1997) identify a number of potential drawbacks of required visits, particularly negative attitudes on the part of both writers and consultants. While neither participant in the present study who had been required to visit expressed significant negative feelings about the experience, neither was thrilled about the requirement either. Talented was not a fan of receiving peer feedback in general though she was unfazed overall: "I just felt like it was something I had to do. It wasn't a downer." Jill, however, had many thoughts about the requirement, particularly as a writer-turned-consultant. More than once, Jill expressed her irritation at being required to visit for the particular goal-setting assignment: "I felt like I didn't need the help," she said, adding that she was "just a little annoyed, but nothing too terrible." From her vantage point as a current consultant, she proposed having students be required to visit but for *any* assignment during the program, to "give students a little more freedom."

Jill's suggestion is certainly reasonable, although from a programmatic standpoint, it might involve a more extensive commitment from the unit partnering with the writing center in order to ensure students ultimately do visit. And yet, her own responses point to the utility of required visits, even—perhaps especially—for assignments students find easy to write. As noted above, Jill felt that free-ranging conversation on the topic of her goal-setting essay, rather than discussion of words on the page, was the most useful part of the session. Therefore, we may well want to take students' expressions of annoyance about required visits with a grain of salt: Jill's own example makes apparent that even a seemingly unnecessary required writing center visit can have unexpectedly generative consequences. Additional training can prime consultants to make the most of such consultations and turn toward whatever kinds of talk seem most useful, especially mentoring-oriented conversations for incoming students. If writers gain something of value from consultations, even if not directly about writing, annoyance about having been required to visit need not be a deal breaker.

## Lessons Learned

Ultimately, while truly dissatisfied students may have neither filled out the survey nor volunteered for an interview, and participants may not have disclosed their negative experiences, if any, the survey and interview data overall do suggest the benefits of requiring visits. The potential for academic or interpersonal validation, as well as the opportunity to send identity-safe cues, are significant enough to justify risking the possible drawbacks of annoying students or, more gravely, engaging stereotype threat. Avoiding the latter involves thinking holistically about the relationship of students of color to PWIs, and listening to these students reveals the value of both what is built into core writing center practice and what writing center practitioners can do better. Keeping the following lessons in mind can help writing center consultants and leaders maximize the potential benefits while minimizing the inevitable risks.

### **Framing Is Particularly Important When Considering Requiring Visits for Students of Color at a PWI**

As writing centers develop partnerships with other programs, who engages in the collaboration, and how, makes a difference. When I asked in a follow-up question whether the initial outreach presentation had influenced Jill's decision to apply to be a consultant, she affirmed it had:

I remember during the outreach presentation, too, I think [the director] had mentioned that, like, "Oh, we hire from all majors," or "We'll train you," or "You don't have to be, like, super into—" like, I don't know, I just remember thinking, "Oh, that sounds like a really cool opportunity,

I should look into that,” and after going, and talking to [the consultant] kind of about what I wanted to get involved in, she was very, like, “Yeah, I love working here; it’s so much fun.”

Here, Jill highlights the vital importance of framing, particularly when talking to a group of minoritized students. The director at the time, a person of color, delivered the presentation and portrayed the writing center as a place where program participants could work, not just receive feedback on their writing. This framing functioned as an identity-safe cue signaling that program students would be valued in that space, a move that laid groundwork for the individual interaction between consultant and writer that solidified Jill’s interest. As Holly Ryan & Danielle Kane demonstrated in their 2015 study of writing center classroom visits, the importance of face-to-face contact between writing center folk and their communities cannot be overstated. I would take this even further: such personal contact matters not only for motivating students to visit the writing center but also for students who do not fit the profile of the typical consultant in many PWI centers—that is, the White female English major—to envision themselves working there. When leaders of color are present who can make this connection, so much the better. Finding opportunities to engage directly with students in ways that affirm their identities plays an essential part in recruiting for diversity of all kinds.

### **Training Not Just Tutors/Consultants, but Entire Writing Center Staffs, to Be Alert to Moments When Interpersonal Validation Is Appropriate Would Help Avoid Missed Opportunities for Connection**

Writing center staff cannot assume all students of color feel they do not belong, though many will likely experience complicated relationships to PWI campuses. Regardless, an example from Esperanza calls attention to how easy it is to engender feelings of not belonging for students who walk through the writing center’s doors. When I asked how it felt to visit the writing center, she discussed having arrived early and being asked to wait:

And there was another person, and they were just chatting, and it was—it was pretty friendly, like they didn’t really ask us personal questions, and I mean, I didn’t expect them to befriend me, but it—it wasn’t like they were mean to me. We—we just didn’t really talk, aside from me going in and awkwardly sitting on the couch and reading a magazine.

What Esperanza describes here represents a significant missed opportunity for connection. Her story makes visible the crucial role of small talk: these casual exchanges may be the times one can most connect with a newcomer and make that person feel comfortable in the space. At minimum, such conversation can offer identity-safe cues within the writing center; at best, this can extend to the kind of interpersonal validation Jill experienced. If we hope for our writing centers to be spaces geared toward interpersonal as well as academic validation,

we cannot overlook any aspect of our interactions with the students who come through our doors. What if staff development included conversations with undergraduate front-desk workers on being aware of the in-group/out-group culture that can develop at the front desk, for instance? Writing centers already do considerable work toward increasing students' institutional literacy, but discussing the potential for writing center sessions, particularly required ones, as occasions to mentor incoming students (carefully) and draw them into conversation about their experiences represents a worthy topic for staff-meeting discussion.

### **Writing Centers Should Work to Send Identity-Safe Cues, Again with Caution**

Like it or not, a writing center does serve as one face of its institution, and students from marginalized groups tend to be hyperaware of any cues staff members give out, consciously or unconsciously. The most powerful cue writing centers can offer is the presence of a diverse, inclusive, and equitable staff, including administrators of color. Every choice writing center professionals make about whom to partner with, how to frame the writing center, whom to recruit, and whom to mentor into leadership positions can move us closer to or farther away from this goal. And of course, diversity by itself does not ensure inclusion and equity, and the latter two go far beyond simple recruitment.

### **Looking Beyond the Context of Developmental Writing for Required Writing Center Visits Can Be Valuable**

While lore around required visits has been stubborn, research in the field has repeatedly demonstrated the utility of these requirements, and my results indicate these findings hold true for students of color in a nondevelopmental context as well. Set up carefully, these visits can help build constructive relationships with students. Rendón & Muñoz (2011) highlight how critical it is to make contact early: "Because nontraditional students can benefit from early validating experiences and positive interactions in college, validation is most critical when administered early in the college experience, especially during the first few weeks of class and the first year of college" (p. 18). Given how much more comfortable the students I interviewed were at the end of their program, we can reasonably extend Rendón and Muñoz's claim to encompass students of color, as well as nontraditional students (some, of course, are both). Partnering with programs that introduce students to the university can ensure early contact; if these programs are not remedial in nature, the risk of stereotype threat is also lower. Partnerships like the one in question here can not only acquaint students of color with the writing center but also encourage these students to see themselves as potential consultants.

## **Partnerships Benefit From Ample Listening and Checking In With the Populations Writing Center Staffs Are Looking to Support**

If we are administrators of color ourselves, we should do a gut check about how messages around the writing center could be received. If we are not a member of the group with which we are trying to connect, we should solicit advice from campus partners and others who can more easily inhabit the perspective of the student population with whom we are trying to connect. And ultimately, writing center professionals can and should always ask for and listen to the stories of students of color, as Faison and Treviño (2017) urge us to do.

Given the potential benefits, then, I argue that partnerships like this one can, when approached thoughtfully, lead to stronger relationships between the center and students of color on campus. And as Rendón and Muñoz (2011) make clear in terms that should resonate with writing center professionals, validation is not something to accomplish once and for all: “Validation should not be viewed as an end, but rather as a developmental process which begins early and can continue over time. Numerous instances of validation over the time the student spends in college can result in a richer college experience” (p. 18). As long as students of color come in contact with our centers, we have the opportunity to validate them both academically and interpersonally. There are absolutely risks to this process: well-intentioned but ill-conceived attempts to validate students of color may well backfire and lead students to feel targeted in a negative way. But studying our practices, maintaining key partnerships, and listening carefully will help us learn how best to provide validation and affirm that students of color do, indeed, belong at PWI institutions and in their centers, as both consultants and leaders.

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## Appendix A: Redacted Survey Questions

### Survey Questions

1. After hearing the presentation by [writing center] staff about the center's services, how would you rate your feelings about the [writing center]? (Very Negative, Negative, Neutral, Positive, Very Positive)
2. Did you think you would choose to use [writing center] services? (Yes, No, Maybe)
3. When you heard that you would be required to use the [writing center], how did you feel? Please check all that apply.
  - a. Indifferent
  - b. Annoyed
  - c. Eager
  - d. Interested
  - e. Felt I didn't need it
  - f. Felt it would be a waste of time
  - g. Felt it would be useful
  - h. other (please describe):
4. After visiting the center, did your feelings about the [writing center] change? (Yes, No)
5. After visiting the center, were your feelings about the [writing center]: (Much More Negative, More Negative, Unchanged, More Positive, Much More Positive)
6. How satisfied were you with what you and the consultant accomplished during the session? (Very Dissatisfied, Dissatisfied, Neutral, Satisfied, Very Satisfied)
7. How likely are you to come back to the [writing center]? (Very Unlikely, Unlikely, Undecided, Likely, Very Likely)

8. Any other comments you'd like to share?

### **2015 Survey Questions**

1. After hearing the presentation by [writing center] staff about the center's services, how would you rate your feelings about the [writing center]? (Very Negative, Negative, Neutral, Positive, Very Positive)
2. Did you think you would choose to use [writing center] services? (Yes, No, Maybe)
3. Have you visited the [writing center] this summer for a one-on-one consultation? (Yes, No) \*if No, survey will skip to question 9
4. If you visited the center, did your feelings about the [writing center] change after visiting? (Yes, No)
5. After visiting the center, were your feelings about the [writing center]: (Much More Negative, More Negative, Unchanged, More Positive, Much More Positive)
6. How satisfied were you with what you and the consultant accomplished during the session? (Very Dissatisfied, Dissatisfied, Neutral, Satisfied, Very Satisfied)
7. How likely are you to come back to the [writing center]? (Very Unlikely, Unlikely, Undecided, Likely, Very Likely)
8. Any other comments you'd like to share about your experience? (text box)
9. Did you participate in the [writing center]'s writing contest? (Yes, No)
10. Do you plan to use the [writing center] in the future? (Yes, No, Maybe)

### **Appendix B: Redacted Interview Questions**

#### **2014 Cohort Interview Questions**

1. When you first heard about the [writing center] during the [ . . . ] program, did you plan to visit? Why or why not?
2. How did you react when you found out you'd be required to visit?

3. Do you remember that visit to the [writing center]? Can you describe it?
4. What did you like most about the experience? What did you like least?
5. Do you remember how it felt to be in the [writing center]?
6. How did the consultant make you feel about your writing?
7. Have you been back to the [writing center] since then?
  - a. If so, what did you bring in?
  - b. How have these visits compared to your first one?
8. What was it like to arrive on campus at the start of the [ . . . ] program?
9. How do you feel about being at [this university] now?
10. What, if anything, has helped you feel more connected to the university?
11. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experiences?
12. (optional): How do you identify in terms of sex and/or gender?
13. (optional): How do you identify in terms of race and/or ethnicity?

### **2015 Cohort Interview Questions**

1. When you first heard about the [writing center], did you plan to visit? Why or why not?
2. Please describe your session at the [writing center].
3. What did you like most about the experience? What did you like least?
4. How did you feel in the [writing center]?
5. How did the consultant make you feel about your writing?
6. Did you participate in the [writing center]'s writing contest? What did you like or dislike about it?
7. Do you plan to come back to the [writing center] in the fall? Why or why not?
8. What was it like to arrive on campus at the start of the [ . . . ] program?

9. How do you feel about being at [this university] now?
10. What, if anything, has helped you feel more connected to the university?
11. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experiences?
12. (optional): How do you identify in terms of sex and/or gender?
13. (optional): How do you identify in terms of race and/or ethnicity?

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