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Believing in the Online Writing Center

Abstract

This article explores beliefs writing center stakeholders and practitioners hold about online writing centers (OWCs) in terms of OWC services available at their current institutions and in terms of any prior experience tutoring online. Beliefs about OWCs can influence whether writing centers offer online services, whether tutors find their work in OWCs satisfying or disheartening, and how OWCs are created technologically and theoretically. These beliefs are explored through a convenience-sample survey of writing center stakeholders and practitioners. This survey finds that while practitioners and stakeholders have overall positive beliefs about the purpose of OWCs, experience influences both positive and negative beliefs, with less experienced respondents tending toward beliefs that OWCs must be synchronous to be effective, that it is difficult to communicate or build rapport with students in OWCs, and that OWCs are convenient. While scholarship on OWCs indicates there are many effective methods and means for implementing OWCs, each with its own limitations and opportunities, there is still work to do in addressing how OWC scholarship fits with the beliefs and experiences—or inexperience—of individual writing center stakeholders and practitioners.

Believing in the Online Writing Center

In response to the COVID-19 crisis, many writing centers rapidly shifted their services online to work with students remotely. For some writing centers, this shift was an expansion of already-existing online writing centers (OWCs), but for others it was a new endeavor. As the pandemic stretches on, we must consider how best to maintain these online services, as well as how or even if they will be maintained postpandemic. What does an effective transition from emergency to sustainable OWC work look like? What tutoring configurations will we use? How will we enact our writing center values in these spaces?

Over the past three decades, the work of OWCs has been supported by an emerging body of scholarship that can help guide us through these decisions. However, this scholarship also registers currents of negative *affect*, an umbrella term encompassing feelings, beliefs, attitudes, and similar dimensions often formed over time on the basis of experiences (McLeod, 1991). Among others, we can see examples in David A. Carlson & Eileen Apperson-Williams's (2000) finding that tutors often feared online sessions as emotionless and in Diane Martinez & Leslie Olson's (2015) acknowledgement of OWCs as potentially "daunting endeavors" fraught with perception issues (p. 183). We must contend with these affective currents as we look to long-term OWC work in the pandemic and beyond.

When developing an OWC, we take into account such factors as current scholarship, budget, staffing, the safety of interpersonal contact, and student populations. Affect may be an important consideration to add to this list: What beliefs, ideals, and attitudes circulate in our decision-making processes? When considering the matter of required writing center visits, Jaclyn Wells (2016) notes, "No amount of well-formed studies will help us solve important dilemmas and make important decisions before we figure out for ourselves what ideals might be influencing our practices" (p. 89). Similarly, as we look to develop and maintain our online writing centers, it may also be valuable to examine the extent to which beliefs may influence whether writing centers offer online services, how individual OWCs are designed, and the extent to which tutors find their work in these OWCs satisfying.

Because of the potential influence affect may have on implementation, it is important to know what writing center stakeholders believe about OWCs. A handful of studies address affective dimensions of OWCs, but few examine these feelings or beliefs in depth. In addition, these studies are spread across the last twenty years, a time period that has seen dramatic shifts in technological capabilities and access. Early in OWC scholarship, Mark Shadle (2000) gave an overview of perspectives on online writing labs (a category including both conferencing services and static websites) that included an observation that some resistance to online writing labs existed. Where this resistance existed,

he found it was “passionate” (p. 5), based on reasons such as lack of material support, philosophical disagreement with the mission of online writing labs (e.g., the belief that students face no barriers to coming to the on-site writing center), or a sense that web resources from other universities were adequate for students’ needs.

Approximately a decade later, Stephen Neaderhiser & Joanna Wolfe (2009) also observed negative affective elements in their update on the state of OWCs, namely that OWC services were not worth the effort and that students could be required to come to the on-site writing center instead. Additionally, Joanna Wolfe & Jo Ann Griffin’s (2012) study on satisfaction in synchronous, nonvideo online conferencing sessions found tutors tended to be more satisfied after in-person conferences than after online appointments. In combination, these studies suggest negative affect is a persistent presence in the practices of OWC development and maintenance.

More research must be done to understand beliefs about OWCs, especially in light of the many possibilities for their implementation. Tutoring may be offered through asynchronous means such as email or through synchronous methods including text, chat, screen sharing, and live video. OWC research addresses pedagogical affordances and constraints of these many modalities. For instance, both Joel A. English (2000) and Beth L. Hewett (2015) note cognitive benefits for students in processing and reflecting on information presented in text-based methods of tutoring, and Mark Mabrito (2000) and Rodney H. Jones, Angel Garralda, David C. S. Li, & Graham Lock (2006) found text-based tutoring may also be more encouraging to high-apprehension writers. On the other hand, more visually based modalities, such as synchronous video, may provide embodied cues that help tutors and students understand the motivations and emotions underlying statements within an OWC session, Julie Stella and Michael Corry (2016) have noted.

Some research has been done regarding the ways these modalities may correspond to affective perspectives on OWCs. Among the few to examine specific methods of tutoring in terms of affect, Carlson & Apperson-Williams (2000) noted that in their email-based OWC, tutors who were less practiced working face to face exhibited less anxiety about tutoring online, and they speculated that over time more practice tutoring online might also lead to less anxiety. Thus, prior tutoring experience may also play an important role in beliefs about OWCs. Research on affect in OWCs with attention to both modality of conferencing and experience with OWCs can help identify what writing center stakeholders consider important about OWCs, where their concerns lie, and how writing center studies can support OWCs as a necessary method of online writing support, as has been indicated by the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Committee for Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction (OWI) (2013).

This study examines these affective currents through two primary questions:

- What beliefs do writing center stakeholders (writing center administrators, tutors, writing program administrators, etc.) hold about the purposes, values, benefits, and drawbacks of OWCs?
- How, if at all, do these beliefs relate to whether a respondent has previous online-tutoring experience and to the methods—if any—of online writing conferencing at their current institution?

In this study, I focus on beliefs as one dimension of affect. In Susan McLeod's (1991) work on affective terms for writing center research, she identified beliefs as a cognitive aspect formed from attitudes, both less intense and more stable than attitudes on their own. Expanding on McLeod's work, Kristie Fleckenstein (1991) clarified that beliefs have more cognitive input than attitudes, though beliefs remain near the middle of the continuum between affect and cognition. Thus, beliefs are both cognitive and affective, and an emphasis on beliefs allows for an understanding of the interplay between affect and cognition. This focus on beliefs treats both affect and lived experience as valuable and worth attention.

Methods

To explore the research questions, I distributed a survey to the WCenter and WPA listservs.¹ Surveys are a useful methodology to collect affective information such as beliefs, opinions, and feelings (MacNealy, 1999), and the WCenter listserv offers a wide cross-section of people interested in and invested in writing centers, from current directors and tutors to administrators and emeritus directors. I also included the WPA listserv for two reasons: writing program administrators often have stakes in the writing center, and it is a more active listserv.

The survey, included in the Appendix, consisted of two main parts. During the initial phase of the study, information was collected about demographics and experience with OWCs using close-ended questions. Experience with OWCs was operationalized in two ways: first, whether a participant had previously tutored online, and second, whether a participant was exposed to OWCs at their current institution and, if so, to what sorts of OWC modalities.

The other part of the study included questions designed to invite participants to describe what they felt were the purposes, benefits, and drawbacks of OWCs, as well as how the participants felt writing center values aligned with

¹ This survey was conducted with the approval of the Florida State University Human Subjects Committee, reference number HSC Number 2015.15408. Design was refined through input from writing center tutors and writing program faculty.

OWC services.² These questions were open-ended to avoid prompting or prejudicing responses toward any beliefs, although the time commitment necessary may have discouraged some participation. Asking about the purposes of online tutoring provided participants an opportunity to explain what they believed to be the motivations and reasons for the existence of OWCs generally. Inquiring about the ways OWC and face-to-face conferencing values aligned invited participants to explain their beliefs about how OWCs fare in comparison to their face-to-face counterparts. Separate questions regarding benefits and drawbacks offered an opportunity to assess positive and negative beliefs about OWCs. These questions in the second section of the survey invited statements of belief through introductory phrases like “what do you consider” and “in your opinion.” While Likert-scale questions could have explicitly addressed affective dimensions, this approach enabled the discernment of latent beliefs in the evaluations participants volunteered.

Participants

The survey was taken by 59 participants between November and December 2015, with 51 participants providing at least some answers to the open-ended questions. Almost half of those who responded were writing center administrators, 10 were tutors, and 7 identified as “staff members.” Additionally, 21 participants chose the category “other” to describe their role in relation to the writing center, identifying themselves as former directors, former tutors, and coordinators of related programs.³ Participants who responded were disproportionately from institutions with OWCs: 85% (47 participants) had an OWC at their institution, including 5% (3 participants) from institutions that *only* offered writing center support online. The online services at respondents’ institutions included a wide variety of methods, but all descriptions aligned with the definition of OWC put forth by Neaderhiser & Wolfe (2009), that OWCs involve one-to-one conferencing between a tutor and student.⁴ Of all participants who offered OWC services, 48 described the method of online

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- 2 Additional questions inquired whether online services at the respondent’s institution should be continued (or added, if not already present), and participants without writing centers were asked to choose from a list of possible reasons their institutions did not offer online services. These questions do not receive major attention in this article for several reasons. First, the focus on respondents’ specific institutions meant these questions did not solicit beliefs about OWCs in general in the ways the other four questions did. Where beliefs about OWCS (as defined in the Data Analysis section) did appear, they aligned with the findings reflected in the analysis of answers to the four major open-ended questions.
 - 3 These numbers add up to more than 59 since participants were invited to choose more than one role if applicable.
 - 4 In addition to one-to-one conferences, many participants’ institutions offered static web services, such as pre-recorded videos or learning management system archives. However, these were always offered in connection with a method of online conferencing.

tutoring at their institution, while 2 declined to specify. Of the institutions whose participants described their existing OWC services, about 20% (10 of 48) provided only asynchronous tutoring, and close to half (22 of 48) offered at least some video conferencing. About a third (16 of 48) offered synchronous conferencing without a video component. In addition, the majority of survey takers—72%—had previous online-tutoring experience. In contrast to my study, only 59% of respondents to the 2014–2015 Writing Center Research Project (Purdue Writing Lab, n.d.) survey were from institutions with OWCs (n=193). More recent versions of the WCRP note OWC rates that are higher but still not comparable to rates in my own study: 65% of institutions (n=203) offered online services in the 2016–2017 WCRP survey (Purdue Writing Lab, n.d.). In similar questions, the 2017 National Census of Writing found that 49% of writing centers at four-year institutions (n=477) offered scheduled online appointments, 10% offered drop-in online appointments, and 35% offered email feedback.

Data Analysis

In analysis of survey responses, I used a grounded-theory method (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). For the responses to open-ended questions, the grounded-theory approach involved multiple passes through the data, taking notes of concepts and constantly comparing data throughout. This method allowed codes and conceptual categories to emerge from the data instead of such categories being imposed from an external heuristic (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Merriam, 2001). Based on these multiple passes, I identified the most frequent categories of beliefs (Table 1). Some of these beliefs explicitly concerned OWCs themselves, but others were adjacent beliefs that impinged on OWCs, such as beliefs about students or technology. Beliefs could be positive, negative, or both simultaneously, and answers could display more than one belief.

Table 1
Coded Beliefs With Descriptions and Examples

Category of belief	Description	Affective dimension	Example
Access	Participants used the word “access” and/or described extending service to more and/or particular groups of students.	Positive	“Makes tutoring available to those who cannot come to campus during business hours.”

Category of belief	Description	Affective dimension	Example
Convenience	Participants used the word “convenient” and/or described OWCs as faster or more flexible.	Positive	“For when the student just needs a quick answer.”
Communication	Participants described conversation, rapport, and communication.	Both positive and negative, established through use of words such as “offers” (positive) or “lacks” (negative)	Positive: “It’s not as intimidating for the writer than is a face-to-face meeting.” Negative: “Lacks relationship development between student and tutor.”
Writing help	Participants described writing centers as improving student writing or helping writers.	Positive	“Both institutions seek to help students become better writers.”
Differing best practices	Participants described different strategies between spaces while affirming OWCs as beneficial.	Positive	“The values are the same. The methods are different and complementary.”
Mediation matters	Participants described OWCs in positive terms only under certain circumstances.	Simultaneously positive and negative	“The values line up as long as the online conferences are synchronous.”
Quality of tutoring	Participants described quality of instruction.	Negative	“Potential to become a glorified reference tool.”
Student perceptions	Participants described mismatch between student perceptions and OWC practices.	Negative	“I find that students still want to drop off their work and come back later.”

Category of belief	Description	Affective dimension	Example
Resources	Participants described staffing, training, and financial investment as difficult to provide.	Negative	“Staffing is quite challenging.”
Technology	Participants described challenges or failures of technology.	Negative	“Using the online system (the technology) may be a barrier for some students.”

I then examined these themes in the context of participant experience with OWC tutoring, as well as the context of modalities of OWC services (if any) offered at their institutions. To compare the types of OWC services, I noted whether services included at least some video conferencing, at least some synchronous conferencing but no video options, only asynchronous conferencing, or no online tutoring. This breakdown aligns with the WCRP division of tutoring systems into synchronous or asynchronous but with a further division between video and nonvideo methods of synchronous tutoring. Although almost half of the OWCs offered multiple methods of online tutoring, I opted not to break down these distinctions further due to the already small sample size. This approach does prioritize the interactivity of OWC services over other elements, but given the emphasis participants placed on interaction and synchronicity in responses, it seemed important to explore.

Results and Discussion

Though this data reflects a convenience sample with a limited response rate, the results do show both positive and negative beliefs about OWCs and point to potential trends regarding the experiences of participants. Overall, the responses suggest that affective dispositions about OWCs have a complex relationship to both prior online tutoring experience and current exposure to OWCs. In the following section, I examine four main trends observed in the data regarding beliefs about the existence of OWCs in general, about implementation of OWCs across the variety of possible modalities, about the benefits and drawbacks of OWCs, and about barriers to implementation. While I provide numbers and percentages from the results of the survey to show more clearly the breakdown of responses, the limited sample size means the overall trends and proportions are more important than the individual numbers and percentages themselves.

Broad Support for OWCS

First, survey responses demonstrated strong positive beliefs about the existence of OWCS, especially in terms of access and educational equity. This was most strongly apparent in the responses to the question *What do you consider to be the purpose of online writing center tutoring?* Responses to this question often invoked the word “access” explicitly, such as “access for students” and “access and equity.” Of all responses to this question, 72% (36 of 50) included positive beliefs about OWCS providing student access to writing support (see Figures 1 & 2). A similar pattern appeared in response to the question *What do you see as the benefits to online writing centers?* When the focus shifted from why OWCS exist to what good things they offer students, the emphasis on access remained strong, at 61% (30 of 49) overall (see Figures 5 & 6).

Although distance students were seen as the main beneficiaries of the access provided by OWCS, they were not the sole populations believed to benefit from increased access through online services. Respondents also stated that OWCS address challenges to writing access due to student employment, commuting, disabilities, and social anxiety. This belief in access as the purpose of OWCS services remained strong across all categories of respondents, though it was proportionately highest among respondents whose institutions offered only asynchronous services, followed by those whose institutions offered video conferences. Among all groups, however, positive beliefs about access appeared in well over half of answers. No other belief appeared as frequently throughout survey.

Figure 1
Beliefs About Purpose of OWCS by Type of Service

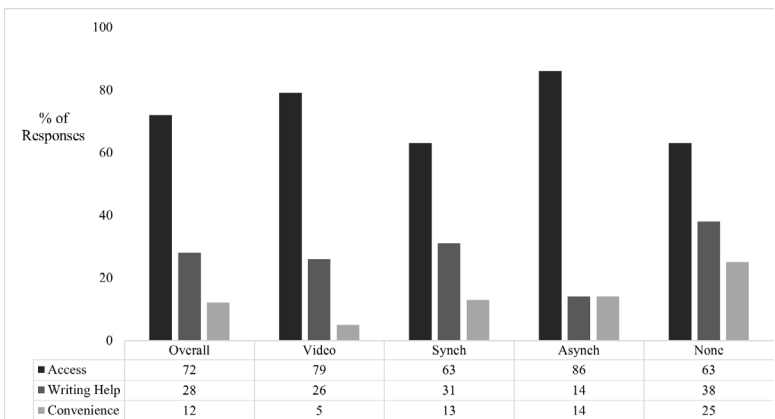
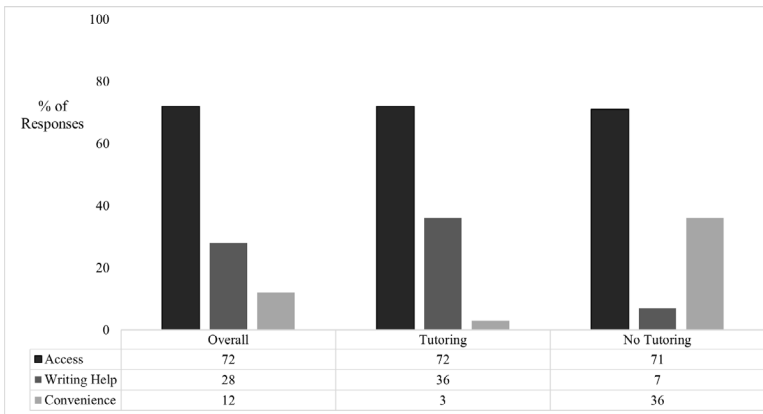


Figure 2

Beliefs About Purpose of OWCs by Tutoring Experience



These responses demonstrate that OWCs may be widely considered a matter of educational inclusivity, not only for students enrolled in OWI but also for many students whose writing instruction could be better supported. As observed in these findings, the widespread belief in OWCs as a component of educational access and support indicates that this remains a strong affective dimension surrounding OWCs and suggests writing center stakeholders may see OWCs as part of wider writing center efforts toward educational justice, such as those noted by Andrew J. Rihn & Jay D. Sloan (2013) and Beth Godbee, Moira Ozias & Jasmine Kar Tang (2015). Concerns about access have been connected to OWC work from the early days of online writing labs: Shadle (2000) found that half of the participants in his 1997 survey mentioned distance students as at least part of the purpose of online writing resources and conferences, and most of his respondents mentioned a desire for increased student access to resource materials. Educational inclusivity may be a strong motivating force for the creation and maintenance of OWCs. In the current moment, concerns with access and inclusivity may also manifest as concerns for the health and safety of students and staff as administrators seek to comply with COVID-19 safety guidelines.

Concerns Regarding Modality of Implementation

Although responses to the survey generally tended to support the existence of OWCs, not all OWC conferencing methods were believed to be equally effective. In response to the question *In your opinion, how do writing center values align with online writing center services?*, there were rarely indications of an overall mismatch in values (fewer than 10% of responses from 50 total).

Instead, a majority (52%, or 26 of 50) of responses made reference to shared values (see Figures 3 & 4). Because the question was open ended, leaving the definition of “writing center values” up to the respondent, many participants clarified what these aligning values were, indicating an emphasis on helping clients improve as writers while improving their written work, such as “to help students become better writers and improve their grades in English and writing courses.”

A smaller set of comments showed conditionally positive beliefs in the alignment between OWC support and writing center values; 16% (8 of 50) of responses included a belief that the mode of tutoring makes a difference in whether writing center values are enacted online. These comments usually specified that synchronous tutoring was necessary for this alignment. For instance, one respondent stated, “The values line up so long as the online conferences are synchronous.” This belief may speak to a sense that online sessions should mirror in-person sessions as closely as possible. Such beliefs in the alignment of values were twice as frequently displayed by respondents without any OWC services at their current institution and also appeared more frequently among those who had never tutored online before. On the other hand, this belief that writing center sessions must be synchronous to maintain values appeared only half as frequently as average among those respondents whose institutions offered OWC services synchronously but without video conferencing.

These positive responses suggest online services are seen as a valuable resource for students, capable of upholding the practices and values enacted in writing center spaces. Because responses indicating a need for synchronous tutoring were largely from participants with less experience in OWCs—those who did not have OWC services at their current institution or those who had never tutored online before, or both—these results suggest a possibility that resistance to asynchronous tutoring may come more from a place of speculation rather than previous poor experiences with this modality of tutoring. Thus, it may be that some perceptions of OWCs do not fully align with the experiences of OWC professionals.

Figure 3

Beliefs About OWC Value Alignment With On-site Writing Centers by Type of Service

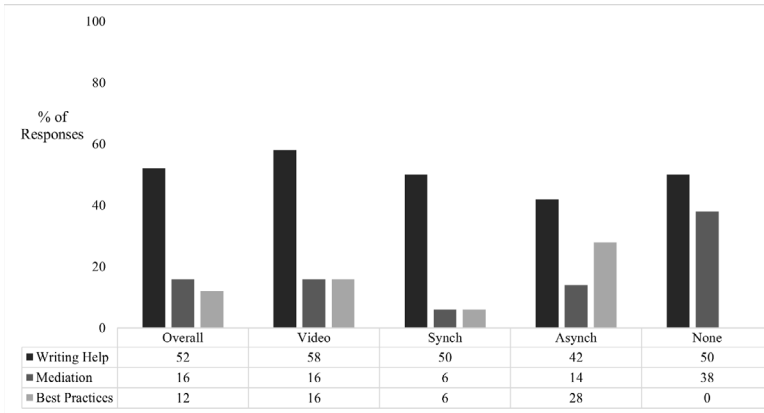
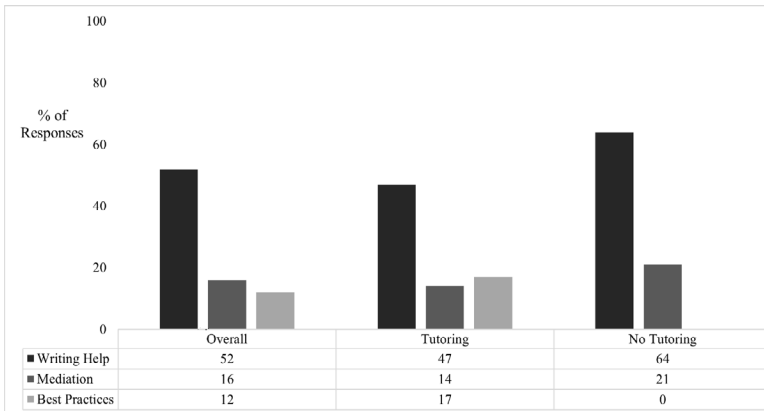


Figure 4

Beliefs About OWC Value Alignment With On-site Writing Centers by Tutoring Experience



In contrast to those who believed only some tutoring modalities maintain writing center values online, other respondents believed that best practices to enact those values differ between online and face-to-face tutoring. This belief appeared in 12% (6 of 50) of responses, most frequently from respondents with asynchronous tutoring at their institution. Only one response indicated what these shifting practices might be, stating, “The values are the same. The

methods are different and complementary. F2f [face-to-face] consultation is based in the Socratic method, while asynchronous response is based in reader-correspondence.” All responses directing attention to differing best practices came from participants who had both OWC services at their current institution and previous online tutoring experience.

These beliefs in shifts in best practices align with current OWC scholarship. OWC scholarship indicates that tutoring practices must be adapted; for instance, Hewett (2015) has suggested the desired formality of a tutoring session and strategies for verifying student comprehension may vary based on modality. A belief that conferences must be synchronous to align with writing center values suggests some methods of online conferencing are inherently better suited to writing center work, while a belief in differing best practices suggests these goals are simply accomplished in different ways.

Together, the responses regarding alignment of writing center values in OWCs suggest one of two things. First, experience with OWCs may offer perspective on how to work more effectively across a variety of methods, tempering beliefs that writing conferences must be conducted in particular ways to align with broader writing center goals. This possibility aligns with conjecture by Carlson & Apperson-Williams (2000) that experience can build comfort and confidence with online tutoring, soothing anxieties about social distance and communicative breakdown. Alternatively, these responses may suggest people who already believe writing center work can be accomplished in a variety of ways could more often be those who go on to tutor online and to support online services at their institutions. The CCCC Committee for Effective Practices for OWI (Conference 2013) has suggested OWI should be conducted by those who demonstrate willingness to work online, and these findings reinforce that recommendation. In either case, the affective weight of experience—or lack thereof—may have repercussions for the future of OWCs, as stakeholders decide whether OWC services are necessary, whether those services should be offered synchronously or asynchronously, and how to select and train tutors to work in these spaces. In circumstances where tutors and administrators have been forced by COVID-19 to hold appointments online, it may be worth reexamining this relationship to see whether familiarity has indeed led to more positive beliefs about the modality of OWCs and/or whether pandemic-related online tutoring underscores the CCCC Committee for Effective Practices for OWI’s perspective that, ideally, online instructors would be chosen from those who are interested in online work.

Disagreements in Drawbacks and Benefits

In the responses to the survey, this trend of diverging values between participants with prior online tutoring experience and/or exposure to OWCs and participants without prior online tutoring experience and/or exposure to

OWCs continued when it came to beliefs about the benefits and drawbacks of online writing centers. Participants demonstrated beliefs that OWCs could benefit and frustrate interactions between tutors and students, and they demonstrated vastly differing levels of belief in the convenience of OWCs. Thus, while there is widespread agreement that OWCs serve positive purposes, there are major differences in both beliefs about how those purposes should be implemented and views about what drawbacks or additional benefits such an implementation may have.

Effects of OWCs on Communication

Whether or not OWCs benefit the communication and rapport between tutor and student was a point of contention among participants. Beliefs about the positive effects of OWCs on communication were the third most frequent belief (14%, or 7 of 49 responses) displayed in answers regarding the benefits of OWCs (see Figures 5 & 6). These statements frequently focused on the benefits of distance, such as increased time to understand and respond and the potential for diminished anxiety about meeting face to face. However, negative beliefs about the effects of OWCs on communication were much stronger, at 44% (22 of 50) of responses regarding OWC drawbacks (see Figures 7 & 8). These negative beliefs included beliefs in increased misunderstandings between tutors and students and beliefs in difficulty establishing rapport. The presence of both positive and negative beliefs about communication may speak to the ways the work of tutoring changes online, for better and for worse, as noted above in terms of different best practices online and offline.

However, these beliefs are inflected by participants' own tutoring experiences and their institutional contexts. Positive beliefs about communication in OWCs appeared in similar proportions for those who had tutored before and those who had not. Negative beliefs about communication, on the other hand, appeared about twice as frequently among participants who had not tutored online before. This discrepancy may arise from the same potential causes as the discrepancy among those who believed OWCs should be conducted synchronously to align with writing center values: that personal experience tutoring may diminish negative beliefs, or that participants with fewer negative beliefs about communication online may be more likely to opt into online tutoring. In either case, as above, at least some beliefs about the drawbacks of OWCs may be driven by inexperience and speculation.

Figure 5
Beliefs About Benefits of OWCs by Types of Service

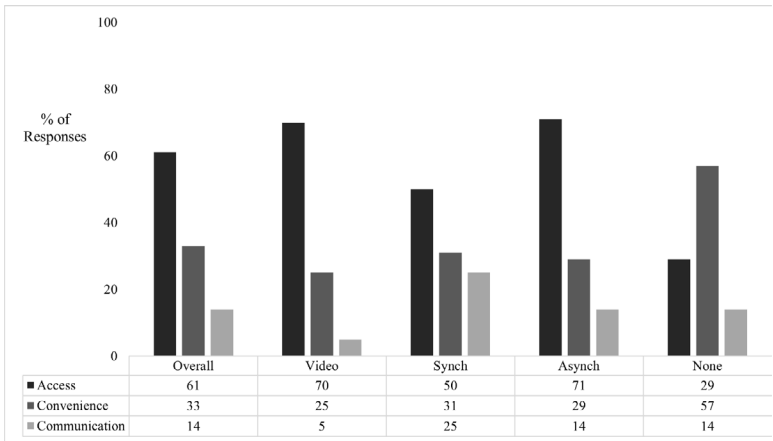
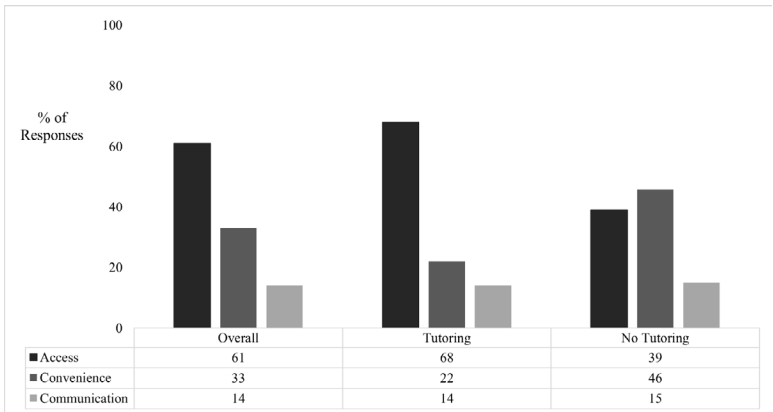


Figure 6
Beliefs About Benefits of OWCs by Tutoring Experience



The distribution of these positive and negative beliefs about communication also suggests exposure to particular modalities of online tutoring may play a role. Negative beliefs about the communicative effects of online tutoring were highest among respondents with no OWC services (63%, or 5 of 8 responses) and second highest among respondents with asynchronous-only services (57%, or 4 of 7 responses). Asynchronous tutoring diminishes the ability of tutor and student to engage in real-time conversation and eliminates

facial expressions and vocal cues, while modalities such as video tutoring maintain real-time interaction with facial and vocal cues, as noted by Melanie Yergeau, Kathryn Wozniak, & Peter Vanderberg (2008). Accordingly, among respondents whose institutions offered synchronous video conferencing, negative beliefs about communication in OWCs appeared least frequently, in 7 of 20 responses total (35%), perhaps reflective of the similarity between face-to-face and video conversations.

However, the similarities between video and face-to-face conversations may also limit potential benefits of OWCs. Although they were least likely to share negative beliefs about online tutoring's effect on communication, participants with synchronous video conferencing were also least likely to display positive beliefs about communication in OWCs. Instead, positive beliefs about the effects of OWCs on communication were highest among those whose institutions offered synchronous conferencing without a video component. These respondents believed that tutors and students may have more time to reflect and respond to one another and that such conferences can diminish anxiety for students who are intimidated by meeting in person. Such beliefs reflect current scholarship on OWCs: each configuration of conferencing comes with opportunities and limitations, making different methods of tutoring better suited for individual writing center priorities and circumstances rather than a single method being superior across the board (Mick & Middlebrook, 2015).

In general, the efficacy of communication in OWCs remains contested, with some observing communicative benefits for students and/or tutors while others have concerns. It appears that both positive and negative beliefs about the effects of OWC services on communication may be shaped by practitioner experience.

Effects of OWCs on Convenience

As with positive beliefs about communication, positive beliefs about the convenience of OWCs were tempered by experience. That OWCs offer convenience for students and tutors was the second most frequent belief regarding benefits of OWCs, appearing in 33% (16 of 49) of responses to that question (see Figures 5 & 6).⁵ This belief was also the third most frequent belief about the purpose of OWCs, appearing in 12% (6 of 50) of the total responses to that question (see Figures 1 & 2). However, these positive beliefs were disproportionately distributed. Almost half of participants who had never tutored online

5 It is important to note that responses not showing beliefs in OWC convenience do not necessarily indicate beliefs in OWC inconvenience; instead, these respondents did not feel strongly enough about the convenience of OWC services to volunteer their beliefs in response to an open-ended question.

before believed convenience was a benefit of OWCs. In contrast, fewer than a quarter of participants who had tutored online before did.

Convenience in this study was associated with speed and flexibility. Online tutoring may increase convenience by increasing the potential for a student to be in a time and place that works both for their lives and for the writing center. Connie Snyder Mick & Geoffrey Middlebrook (2015) have observed that asynchronous tutoring in particular offers greater flexibility in scheduling than face-to-face or synchronous tutoring. Indeed, some experienced tutors did believe convenience was a benefit. However, the uneven distribution of this belief across those who have and have not tutored before suggests that, in practice, perhaps this hype does not bear out as strongly. Stakeholders who expect OWC services to increase convenience may find themselves frustrated.

Beliefs about the convenience of OWCs also appear related to the implementation of online writing support. More than half of participants without OWC services at their institution believed convenience was a benefit of online tutoring (57%, or 4 of 7 responses). However, only a quarter to a third of respondents at institutions with various methods of OWC services did (see Figure 5). One possible explanation is that if convenience is seen as a primary benefit or purpose for online services, it may be outweighed by concerns about the difficulty of implementing online services. Previously, Neaderhiser & Wolfe (2009) found a recurring attitude that it was reasonable to require students to come to the on-site writing center if they sought writing support. Thus, convenience may be seen as a benefit but not as a compelling argument for instituting OWC services. Ultimately, the beliefs about convenience in these responses suggest this is one more avenue in which articulating the purposes, values, and differences among writing center modalities can be useful for identifying and interrogating the reasons behind choices regarding the implementation of OWC support for students. For writing centers evaluating how and/or whether to maintain OWC services in the face of COVID-19 and related health dangers, access may be a more compelling consideration than convenience.

Challenges to Implementation

Beyond the challenges noted above, there were few intensely negative beliefs about OWCs, pointing to little ideological resistance to OWCs. Negative beliefs were prompted by the question *What drawbacks do you see to online tutoring?* and tended to focus on practical concerns or individual experiences with specific writing centers (see Figures 7 & 8). No single negative belief appeared in even a simple majority of responses. Five beliefs appeared in at least 10% of the 50 answers to this question: negative beliefs about communication (23 responses), about technology (10 responses), about student perceptions (8 responses), about resources (7 responses), and about the overall quality of

online writing support (6 responses). The belief that OWCs present communicative barriers to the relationships between tutors and students is discussed above, and the relatively low frequency of each of the next four most frequent beliefs makes conclusions difficult to definitively draw.

Despite these small numbers, however, most of these negative beliefs were more frequently expressed by different subsets of participants. Those with exposure to video tutoring at their current institution showed the most frequent negative beliefs about technology failures and frustrations, while those whose institutions offered synchronous, nonvideo tutoring were the most likely to demonstrate negative beliefs about student misperceptions of the OWC. Those with asynchronous tutoring were most likely to mention negative beliefs about the resources required by OWCs, such as the challenge of adequately investing in staffing and training. Finally, as seen above, those without OWCs at their institutions were most likely to demonstrate negative beliefs regarding communication in OWCs. In addition, participants who had tutored before were more likely to have negative beliefs about the technological dimensions of OWCs and the need for adequate resources, while those who had not tutored online had the most frequent concerns about student perceptions of OWCs. Again, due to small numbers of responses, definitive conclusions are difficult to draw, but this variety suggests that exposure to OWCs and experience tutoring may attune writing center stakeholders to different challenges for OWC work.

Figure 7
Beliefs About Drawbacks of OWCs by Type of Service

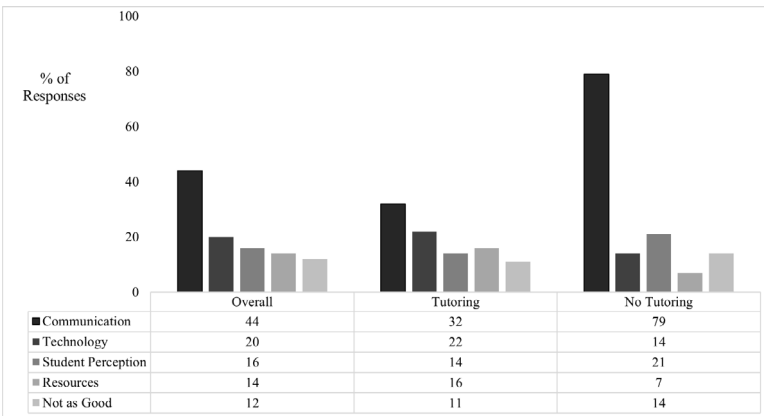
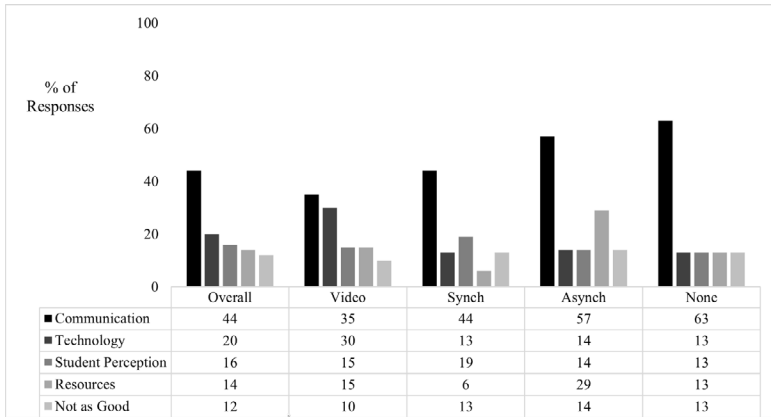


Figure 8

Beliefs About Drawbacks of OWCs by Tutoring Experience



It is worthwhile to note that although the survey question framed these beliefs as OWC drawbacks, many of the challenges noted are not exclusive to OWCs. Face-to-face writing centers may also be plagued by troublesome technologies, limited resources for training and staffing, student misperceptions, and competing understandings of what constitutes quality tutoring. How to incorporate technology appropriately and usefully into writing centers and writing center sessions has been a concern through the last few decades (see, e.g., Blythe, 1997; Buck, 2008; Weeks, 2000). Beliefs that writing centers often struggle with inadequate resources are also common: Lynn Shelly (2014) and Jackie Grutsch McKinney (2013) both observed widespread narratives of marginality and concerns about funding and staffing among writing center practitioners. Student perceptions and expectations of the writing center are likewise fraught: Laurel Raymond & Zarah Quinn (2012) found that tutors prioritized arguments, theses, evidence, and analysis in their sessions but that the top concern of students entering the writing center was grammar. Writing centers in general might seem to be a daunting endeavor, with OWC services a more specific manifestation of this challenge, albeit one within a different set of modalities.

Reading across all sections of results, we can see beliefs that OWCs provide benefits for students—particularly in the area of access to writing support—but beliefs about the implementation of OWCs remain fraught. Exposure to OWCs and experience tutoring online appear to affect both positive and negative beliefs about OWCs. These factors seem to shape beliefs about

best practices for OWC implementation (Are asynchronous writing centers as acceptable as synchronous writing centers? Do effective tutoring practices transfer from space to space without change?) and about the affordances and constraints of tutoring online (Does communicative interaction between tutors and students improve or become more challenging? Are OWCs more convenient than face-to-face conferences?). The beliefs of writing center stakeholders with exposure to OWCs and/or with experience tutoring online tend to line up more closely with OWC scholarship than do the beliefs of those without OWCs at their institutions and/or without online tutoring experience. These correlations suggest a strong potential for affective dimensions to shape the implementation of OWCs and certainly suggest the need for further research.

Implications

Despite the strong motivation for OWCs reflected in positive beliefs about how they may expand access to writing support, these findings suggest lore and a lack of exposure and/or experience may exert a potentially limiting force on the beliefs of writing center stakeholders. In several cases, the beliefs of participants with no prior online tutoring experience and of participants with less OWC exposure at their current institutions were out of alignment with the beliefs of more experienced tutors and with the positions expressed by current OWC scholarship. This suggests three sets of implications for different stakeholder groups: writing center professionals tasked with initiating OWC services and making choices about their methods of implementation, writing center professionals preparing OWC tutors, and OWC researchers.

First, writing center stakeholders who have never tutored online before and who are considering OWC implementation should carefully examine the sources of their beliefs about OWCs and in particular the variety of modalities of OWC conferencing. To what extent are beliefs about the (in)efficacy of particular methods, the benefits, and the drawbacks of online tutoring rooted in experience and exposure to OWCs? To what extent are these beliefs rooted in speculation, even well-reasoned speculation? As writing center stakeholders articulate and examine these beliefs, they can compare them to existing scholarship on OWCs, such as the CCCC Committee for Effective Practices for OWI's (Conference 2013) statement of principles, Hewett's (2015) *The Online Writing Conference*, and OWC-focused issues of *Research in Online Literacy Education*.

Second, writing center stakeholders can build from this research to prepare writing tutors for the unique strategies and experiences of OWC work, a need identified by the CCCC Committee for Effective Practices for OWI (Conference 2013). If unprepared for the nuanced differences among

on-site writing centers, OWCs, and perceptions of OWCs, tutors may face many challenges. Tutors who believe OWCs diminish the quality of student/tutor communication and rapport may be discouraged before they begin, while tutors who believe OWC services are more convenient than face-to-face tutoring may find themselves frustrated. In addition, preparation can emphasize that OWC tutoring may offer beneficial experience in working with multiple methods of tutoring appropriate for multiple contexts. As Elise Dixon (2017) observes, there remains a pervasive sense among tutors that nondirective tutoring is preferable, with tutors feeling guilty when they employ other methods of tutoring, despite a preponderance of scholarship emphasizing attention to student needs (see, e.g., Clark, 2001; Sentell, 2013; Shamoon & Burns, 1995). It is possible that attention to the differences in best practices for online tutors as compared to face-to-face tutors may help tutors become more comfortable with multiple methods of engaging student needs.

Finally, this study raises several possibilities for OWC researchers. It examines a limited sample size, and its recruitment required participants to opt in from the WCenter and WPA listservs. A more representative sample might test whether these findings are reflective of the field. In addition, further research might test and tease out the trends identified in this research regarding exposure to OWCs and experience with tutoring online. How might institutional role affect a writing center stakeholder's beliefs about OWCs? How might beliefs be affected by the length of time a practitioner has spent working on site or online? How might a stakeholder be influenced by the amount of exposure to OWCs in a variety of contexts, before and beyond their current institution? Such research may illuminate relationships between beliefs and the implementation of OWC services, clarifying the practical and scholarly needs that may help writing center stakeholders serve their students effectively.

Conclusions

In the several years since this study was initially conducted, it appears scholarly support for OWCs has grown, including efforts to connect practitioners with scholarly resources. However, there remain concerns that many writing center stakeholders' beliefs about writing centers and OWC services run counter to the prevailing beliefs of those practitioners and researchers who work closely with OWCs, as Rebecca Hallman Martini & Beth L. Hewett (2018) have noted, making continued exploration of these affective currents valuable. This is particularly true as writing centers have been forced to move appointments online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. To what extent may beliefs and experiences with online tutoring be inherent to OWCs, and to what extent are they inflected with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on our universities and lives?

Although this study is limited in quantitative statistical significance and cannot distinguish between cause and correlation, it provides insight into beliefs about OWCs. Critical examination can help stakeholders consider the extent to which, if at all, their beliefs about OWCs—both positive and negative—may arise from (in)experience with OWCs. Stakeholders can also explore the ways these beliefs may align with researched recommendations for OWCs. Such reflection is especially important in light of the recommendation by the CCCC Committee for Effective Practices for OWI (Conference 2013) that online writing support should be offered in the same modality as OWI courses. As OWC presence grows, directors or tutors who find themselves concerned about implementing OWC services may find reassurance that more experienced participants were less likely to have concerns about communication issues and about the continuity of writing center values across platforms.

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Appendix

Survey: Attitudes Toward Online Writing Centers

Gender (check all that apply)

- female
- male
- nonbinary/genderqueer
- other
- choose not to respond

Age

- 18–30
- 31–50
- 51–64
- 65+
- choose not to respond

Current Position in Institution (check all that apply)

- Undergraduate student
- Graduate student
- Teaching Faculty/Staff
- Nonteaching Faculty/Staff
- Other (fill in)

Position Relative to Writing Center (check all that apply)

- Tutor
- Administrator
- Staff
- Graduate Assistant
- Other (fill in)

Does your institution offer online writing center services?

- Yes, both online and on-site services
- Yes, online services only
- No, never
- No, but we have previously

(If yes) Describe your online writing center services (Check all that apply)

- Email
- Prerecorded video tutorials
- Wiki
- Blackboard archive
- Chat messenger
- Google docs
- Phone
- Skype/Video chat
- Screen mirroring/Screen sharing
- Text messaging
- Google Hangouts
- Other (fill in)

Do the different services listed above describe multiple systems for online tutoring (e.g., an email service and a separate video service) or a single combined method (e.g., a text-based service used in tandem with an audio/video component)?

- Multiple systems of online tutoring
- One combined method of online tutoring

What reasons would you identify for not offering online writing center services? (Check all that apply)

- Lack of financial resources
- Lack of technological resources
- Lack of personnel
- Online writing center services do not fit with the values/mission of our writing center
- Online writing center services do not fit with the needs of our student body
- Unsure
- Other (fill in)

Have you tutored in an online writing center space before?

- Yes
- No

Which of the statements below do you most identify with?

- Online consultations can be satisfying for both tutors and students
- Online consultations are more satisfying for tutors than for students
- Online consultations are more satisfying for students than for tutors
- Online consultations are not satisfying for anyone
- Other (fill in)

What do you consider to be the purpose of online writing center tutoring?

In your opinion, how do writing center values align with online writing center services?

What benefits do you see to online tutoring?

What drawbacks do you see to online tutoring?

Do you believe that online writing center services at your institution should be continued?

- Yes
- No

Why or why not?

If given the resources to do so, do you believe your institution should add online writing center services?

- Yes
- No

Why or why not?

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