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Bridging Institutions to Cross the Quantitative/Qualitative Divide

[Fall 2010 / Focus](#)

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Considering qualitative and quantitative student response data and comparing those data cross-institutionally improves writing center policies locally and helps define broader objectives of the writing center as a campus institution.

As writing center practitioners, it can be difficult to determine whether we should focus our research and assessment energies on gathering quantitative or qualitative data. Few of us are trained as “numbers people,” yet most of us regularly collect masses of quantitative data in the form of user statistics, exit surveys measuring student satisfaction, and demographic information about the writers who use our centers. Still, qualitative data often *feels* like the best illustration of our pedagogy to us, our tutors, and our faculty and administrators. When we do collect qualitative data, it frequently reflects recurrent themes in our scholarship. Even if our qualitative data manifests cross-institutional similarities, it is difficult to compare across different schools. **[1]** Convinced that both quantitative and qualitative feedback is essential to effective assessment of writing center work, we - three very different writing center practitioners from three very different institutions - set out to create a collaborative research project that would allow us to harness the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Much of the writing center field hesitates to embrace cross-institutional approaches such as ours because of concerns about making large-scale statements about the work that we collectively do; much current research has favored conclusions based on “local” situations (see for example, Carino and Enders 101, Donnelly and Garrison 17, and Gillam xx). We share this belief in the importance and impact of local context. However, we still see our centers as part of a larger writing center community with trends, directions, values, and expectations. We therefore designed our joint research project to enable us to gather and compare both quantitative and qualitative data by using the same student exit survey at all three of our institutions: a large, public land-grant university; a medium, private doctoral university; and a small, selective liberal arts college. Because our institutions are so different, we hoped that both the similarities and differences we found would illustrate some of the broader trends in the writing center field. Identifying common outcomes among our writing centers allows us to speak more persuasively to those outside the writing center about what we do as a field and why it matters, as well as to understand better the unique features of our local institutions. **[2]** (Any similarities we found would also be relevant for our tutors, who often move from undergraduate tutoring at one institution to graduate tutoring at another.)

We thus created a primarily quantitative study (with a simple four-point rating scale) that, by design, engaged with the values of our pedagogy usually shown through qualitative studies. We were most interested in what made a session “work” from the student’s perspective. Thus, we included the usual questions about why students decided to come to the writing center, whether they felt welcomed, their overall satisfaction with their visit, and demographic questions about their class year, gender, race, and home language. But we also asked questions that we hoped would get to the heart of what students learned in a session: did they feel able to transfer what they learned in that session to future assignments, and did they feel that, afterwards, the project better reflected their own writerly identity? We chose to include one open-ended question designed to probe for qualitative data because we believed that students’ own words would best illustrate the dialogic, affective, and cognitive sides of our work.[3]

The applications of our common findings can still be local, tailored differently to our specific audiences of consultants or administrators, depending on our interests as directors and the concerns of our particular staffs and institutions.

From our survey responses, we learned that a strong majority of students felt welcomed at the writing center, that their consultant addressed and focused on their concerns, and that their consultation was productive. Interestingly, we also learned that there are strong connections between students’ assessment of the success of their writing center consultations and their expression of writerly identity and that a large percentage of students feel able to transfer skills learned in their writing center sessions to future work.

The applications of our common findings can still be local, tailored differently to our specific audiences of consultants or administrators, depending on our interests as directors and the concerns of our particular staffs and institutions. One of us, training tutors who are exclusively undergraduates, uses students’ satisfaction to reassure anxious new tutors that their first sessions will almost always go well. Another of us, faced with often-reluctant graduate student tutors, uses this same data to talk about the importance of consistently practicing certain writing center fundamentals, such as beginning each session with a few moments of conversation to welcome and set the tone. We can therefore use these results as a jumping-off point for tutor-training workshops, devoting a staff meeting to an issue highlighted by the survey data. There have been other applications in tutor-development as well: two of us asked students to identify their tutor when completing the survey and then used this data to talk with tutors about their performance. To administrators, all of us can trumpet our finding that nearly 100% of students who visit the writing center plan to return and would recommend it to a friend.

As we analyze the results of our survey, we are increasingly aware that many of the remaining questions we have about student assessments of the effectiveness of a writing center visit can be better understood through additional qualitative research. We are therefore planning to convene student focus groups at each of our institutions. These will give us an opportunity to talk with students and to hear, in their own words, why they decide — or don’t decide — to visit the writing center and why, exactly, a session sometimes works and sometimes doesn’t for them. Student voices are all too often lost in quantitative studies. These voices, what Muriel Harris calls “the language of students,” demonstrate the real-life impact that our tutors have on writers that

they meet (30). Student feedback therefore serves both as a motivator for tutors and as an important way to highlight the impact of our work to faculty, administrators, and trustees. Gathering more qualitative data will help us learn what steps we should take to improve our student outreach and what issues we can address in tutor training to make sure that more sessions work for more students. We also hope to use what we learn from our focus groups to refine our quantitative questions.

Through our survey and our practice, we've found that quantitative and qualitative data complement one another. The quantitative information — such as the number of students we serve each year and their overall satisfaction with writing center appointments — enables our centers to know whose needs we are or aren't meeting and reflect on how we should adjust our services. Presenting these numbers with appropriate and well-analyzed quantitative data—counting well-chosen beans, as Neal Lerner puts it — enables us to justify our use of funds to those administrators in charge of budget allocations (“Counting Beans” 1; “Choosing Beans” 1). Qualitative information — such as comments from individual students about their appointments or student focus groups convened to ask how we can serve them better — is equally valuable. This feedback deeply influences how we see our writing centers operating within our institutions; the stories we relate when we talk with faculty, administrators, and tutors; and the issues we raise in tutor training. Quantitative information helps us know better *whom* we are serving, and roughly what they have gained from the experience; qualitative data helps us better understand *how* we might serve them better. Through analyzing qualitative data, we may subsequently produce further questions that can best be addressed quantitatively. When taken together and used to inform each other, qualitative and quantitative data provide a more complete picture of writing center work.

While our qualitative data is both fascinating and illuminating to us, our tutors, and our campus communities, the striking similarities across multiple questions in our numerical survey results have allowed us to draw broader conclusions about trends in writing center practice. For example, we found that a large percentage of students felt that they had a breakthrough about their text, felt intellectually engaged in their session, or felt that they were better prepared to handle a similar assignment in the future. Such quantitative data, gathered across institutions, can help the field articulate the ways in which writing center pedagogy may differ from the learning students experience in the classroom. In addition, though demographic data was not the focus of our initial survey, the disproportionately high percentage of both non-native speakers and minority students we each see compared to our institutions' enrollments suggests that our three different writing centers are all places that welcome and encourage diversity on campus. With the increasing focus in the field on making writing centers more welcoming to diverse campus populations (see, for example, Baron and Grimm; Condon; Dees, Godbee, and Ozias; Denny; Gellar et. al.; Leit et.al.), it was reassuring to see that we are already succeeding in these endeavors, both as individual practitioners and as members of the greater writing center community.

[O]ur research has taught us the importance of mixing quantitative and qualitative research methods and the value in considering as broad a perspective as possible, even while maintaining a necessary focus on local context.

Conclusions such as these lead us to encourage other writing center practitioners to engage in cross-institutional studies. Studies such as ours are essential because we, as a field, have not yet collected much data that demonstrates writing centers do what they say they do. Cross-institutional studies allow us to move away from writing center lore [4] — the ideas and practices that shape and inform our work, whether or not supported by research — to substantive data about writing center practice across institutions. Our survey findings suggest that many writing center values that have become part of our lore substantively shape writing center practice across institutions and lead to more sessions that work, at least from the student perspective. For example, we find that tutor-student rapport and empathy strongly correlate with students feeling that their consultation was productive and that they can take what they learned in one session and apply this knowledge to future papers. Such quantitative findings are echoed in our qualitative responses: my consultant “was really willing to sit down with me and help me figure out what I was thinking. She even went through part of the text (no easy task!) to see if she could help me find areas to look at to further my argument.” These common findings suggest that much of writing center lore has become embedded in the practice of writing centers more broadly and shapes our daily work, and we can point to both qualitative and quantitative data to support these claims.

The calls for more robust writing center research, both quantitative and qualitative, have reached a critical volume, and our voices are not needed to amplify them further. Rather, our research has taught us the importance of mixing quantitative and qualitative research methods and the value in considering as broad a perspective as possible, even while maintaining a necessary focus on local context. Perhaps the writing center field needs to think differently about the way that it approaches research. We do not mean to recommend any sort of norming of writing-center practices, but as we enter into a more thorough analysis of our data in preparation for sharing it with the greater writing-center community, we look forward to entering into conversation with additional cross-institutional studies

Notes

[1] Indeed, in order to truly compare qualitative data across institutions, we would need to create an appropriate scoring rubric, code each comment, and do it in a reliable way — that is, turn the qualitative data into quantitative data.

[2] We thus see our project as adding to the cross-institutional perspective of work such as the Writing Centers Research Project.

[3] We will be presenting more detailed results in future work once we have completed our analysis.

[4] For a recent examination of the role of writing center lore, see Thompson et. al.

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From left to right: Pam Bromley, Kara Northway, and Eliana Schonberg at the **IWCA-NCPTW 2010 Conference**

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