# DRAFTING A WRITING CENTER:
## DEFINING OURSELVES THROUGH OUTCOMES AND ASSESSMENT

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Writing centers—and perhaps especially writing centers at two-year colleges—are not interchangeable. While we, as writing center professionals, may share philosophies and goals, our writing centers often differ wildly in structure, practice, available services, institutional relationships, and other factors. Those of us organizing these centers have different titles, qualifications, positions, and levels of security. What we have in common—what we have always had in common—is a commitment to supporting student writers, and the perpetual labor of establishing and articulating our space within our various institutions.

As Outcomes Assessment has become increasingly important to accrediting bodies, and thus to institutions and administrations, the assessment process has become part of the complex negotiations of position for many writing centers. At College of the Sequoias, we felt invested in assessment as a valuable tool. But when, in 2016, we were designated as a separate unit in our Institutional Program Review process, we discovered that reexamining our assessment practices offered an unexpected opportunity to more clearly define our writing center and declare its purpose—not only to the institution, but to ourselves.

## The Problem of Hyperfocused Assessment

Many of us long-time writing center true believers have grown up on Stephen North's old axiom: "Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing" ("Idea" 438). While North has gone on to reconsider and qualify some of what he wrote in "The Idea of a Writing Center," we can set aside the particulars and see ourselves in his purpose: declaring, unequivocally, the process-oriented essence of writing center work ("Revisiting"). Whatever the differences in our institutional contexts, our practices, or even our pedagogies, we are united in our fundamental goal: helping student writers improve their skills.

Because that goal is fundamental, it often comes to define the identity of a writing center. Our own website defines the CoS Writing Center as "a place for writers of all levels . . . to talk to experienced readers about what's happening in their writing, and to learn new strategies and techniques to help them overcome

the obstacles that lie in their path" ("Our Philosophy"). Jackie Grutsch McKinney refers to this as the "writing center grand narrative," and observes that while there is truth in that narrative, it is also restrictive ("Introduction"). Rather than "one of many possible representations" of the broad scope of writing center work, that familiar narrative becomes, in our minds, 'just what we do'" (McKinney, "Introduction"). A focus on tutoring is good, as tutoring is understandably central to the image and self-image of the writing center. But what McKinney describes—and what we at the College of the Sequoias Writing Center found ourselves guilty of—is *hyperfocus*: a focus on tutoring so intense that it obscures our sight of the wide range of other work that we do.

Moreover, McKinney argues, part of the power of that narrative is that tutoring is an eminently quantifiable practice. "It is easy," she notes, "if we are counting tutoring sessions, to compare one year to the next and to have quantitative data that speaks to our efficiencies and progress" (McKinney, "Introduction"). Because tutoring is, in many ways, easy to quantify—numbers of sessions, student contact hours, frequency of issues, and the like—it can easily take pride of place in our assessment work. McKinney notes that "[a] focus on tutoring allows for the development of student learning outcomes that feed into assessment protocols." In that observation, McKinney's summary reveals a fundamental contradiction: what we do in writing centers extends far beyond tutoring, but what we assess is often limited to the tutoring table.

At College of the Sequoias, our hyperfocus on tutoring manifested in a long-standing practice of regular analysis of our clients' success. Working with our college's Office of Research and Planning, we analyzed data about their classroom performance (Do they stay in the courses they're taking? Do they succeed in those courses? Do they earn good grades overall?) in our annual reviews of our work. These reviews have always shown a strongly positive correlation between using the writing center and desired outcomes; our student users tend to complete, succeed in, and earn higher grades in their classes than students who don't use our services. We held up that research as evidence that what we offer is effective and deserves continued

and expanded institutional support. Any questions about our work from the administration were answered by that data.

As Schendel and Macauley argue, however, assessment is not merely about justifying our existence to administration. Rather, "it can help us understand much more tangibly the work that we do, what works best, why it works, and how we can make that work accessible to as many as possible" (Schendel and Macauley xvii). Moreover, it is a way of communicating ourselves to stakeholders beyond our walls; through assessment, "we articulate how our work fits within the institution and within the field of writing studies—within the whole idea of empowering people through writing and education" (Schendel and Macauley xviii). At the heart of assessment is a simple but vast question: Are we doing the work that we set out to do? To answer that question, we must ask it not only of what happens at the tutoring table, but of the full wild, wiggly range of inarticulable labor that occupies the periphery of the writing center.

This question was put to us in earnest when, in 2016, the College of the Sequoias Institutional Program Review Committee designated our writing center as one of the first "hybrid" units at CoS. In so doing, the college acknowledged that we are part of two different campus areas: academics and student support. We are thus obliged to assess not only what our students are learning (in the form of Student Learning Outcomes at various levels), but also the ways in which we serve the college (in the form of Service Area Outcomes). To begin our first Program Review, we needed to design Outcomes that represented the full range of our work and construct plans for assessing those Outcomes. This bureaucratic necessity became, for us, transformative, as we realized that this new assessment task allowed us to articulate our work more broadly. As we worked toward drafting our Outcomes, we were in fact drafting a new, more complete identity for our writing center.

## Outward-Facing Outcomes

At its core, assessment is about relationships and responsibilities. The first step in our overhaul was asking ourselves two questions. First, what were our responsibilities? And second, to whom were we responsible? Our focus had long been on our relationship with the students who use our writing center; thus, we had looked primarily and extensively at their success as the core of our assessment.

However, the relationship we have with students and the effect we may have on their coursework is only one of our relationships within the college, and only one facet of our complex structure. In fixating on that relationship, we have long neglected to engage with questions about our other constituencies, including our administration and staff, our faculty, and our student tutors. What were our obligations to those constituencies? How could we meaningfully measure our success in meeting those obligations? When we began the process of drafting our Outcomes for Program Review, we didn't know.

One of the foundational tenets of assessment pedagogy is that meaningful assessment is recursive in nature, and so it bears pointing out here that we're thinking of all of our work—our Outcomes, our Assessment Plans, even our Purpose Statement—as perpetually subject to revision. As is the case for so many writers, the hardest part of this first draft was pulling together all of the pieces in the first place. When this project began, we had one hastily-written Outcome for our student users, three slightly less hastily-written Outcomes for each of our four student tutor training courses, and three cobbled-together-by-committee Program Outcomes for our Writing Consultancy Certificate. For the purposes of our Program Review process, we needed to have a Purpose Statement, Service Area Outcomes, and coherent Program and Course Outcomes with preliminary assessment plans that would encourage us to engage in ongoing, robust self-assessment. While the details of these requirements may be specific to College of the Sequoias, they revealed five levels of inquiry that any writing center could—and perhaps should—use to define itself:

- What is our central purpose?
- What are our responsibilities to the college at large?
- What are our responsibilities to our broader academic community?
- What kind of training are we offering to our tutors?
- What kind of service and support are we offering to student writers?

Our specific answers to each of those questions are, we think, less generally useful than the questions themselves. In our discussion below, we will focus on the steps we took in exploring those questions. The appendix to this article, however, includes the artifacts and Outcomes we generated at each level, as well as our plans for assessing them.

## Rewriting the Writing Center
*Defining Ourselves: Purpose Statement*

At the outset of this project, we had a number of disparate paragraphs that purported to describe our

function, housed in various campus receptacles and on sundry hard drives. Many of the writers of those descriptions had long-since moved on to other campus projects. Some paragraphs were too specific, some were too vague, and others were simply clunky. We wanted our purpose statement to be readable, accurate, and reflective of the fact that, at our core, we exist to provide peer support for students and student writing. Thus, we focused our purpose statement on this relationship. Whatever else we are, whomever else we serve, we always come back to our mission to provide high-quality support for student writing projects.

*Supporting Our Institution: Service Area Outcomes*

As a newly-minted hybrid unit, the CoS Writing Center needed to create Service Area Outcomes, which CoS Student Support Service Areas use to define their commitments to their constituents. But one of our first difficulties came from trying to identify what, exactly, a Service Area Outcome was. We scoured campus documents, asked colleagues, and poked around other institutions for guidance; at every turn, we felt we had less certainty, not more. Finally, the Dean of Student Services told us something that was simultaneously frustrating and enlightening: Service Area Outcomes are whatever you need them to be.

For our writing center, then, Service Area Outcomes are a way to define the commitments we have that are not academic in nature. Student awareness of our services, for example, is not something we can measure as part of a class or program. It isn't contained to a classroom, or even to a single department. However, it has long been a question in our minds (and at our staff meetings): Do students know we exist? How do they find out about the services we provide? We have partnered with our college's Office of Research and Planning to add questions about writing center awareness to a large biennial survey of our student population; we will use students' responses to that survey to shape our future student outreach efforts.

We have long known that the bulk of our student users come to the writing center to work on writing assignments for English courses, primarily those in our composition sequence. We have long identified the need for better relationships with potential referring bodies—the History department or the Student Success Program, for example—but our previous assessment structures did not have a space for us to articulate goals not directly connected to student learning. Thus, our outcome regarding Faculty & Staff Relations was born. Numbering this among our outcomes keeps us mindful of and accountable to it as

a goal. It is our hope that we will see an increased diversity of referrals.

Our Tutor Professionalization Outcome is, on one level, part of a larger institutional effort to increase the number of certificates and degrees awarded. But on a more immediate level, it is also an effort to improve the quality of our tutoring and to increase professional opportunities for our tutors. We hope that our commitment to tutor professionalization will help us argue for increased tutor compensation in the future.

Finally, we wanted to institutionalize the idea that our services would be offered in ways that maximize efficiency and economy. Like all writing centers, we are limited by our budget and the size of our staff. Perhaps this seems obvious from the outside; after all, isn't budget efficiency a concern at every institution of higher learning? The reality, though, is that we are often asked to offer tutoring in places and at times that our own research indicates is not an effective use of our funds. Our Student Demand Outcome provides us with a formal, institutionally supported reason to base staffing decisions on data, even when facing pressure from individual administrators with their own needs and agenda.

*Supporting Our Community: Program Level Outcomes*

Our Certificate in Writing Consultancy has been among our college's program offerings for the last five years. Here, our work brushes against other, larger bodies: our Certificate includes courses from a variety of other campus departments; bears the approval of our campus curriculum committee, our academic senate, and our board of trustees; and is registered with the California Community College Chancellor's Office. Therefore, our revision process had to consider existing relationships, responsibilities, and practices of outside disciplines and governing bodies. In revising the Program Outcomes, we asked ourselves: What do we want students who complete this certificate to have learned? And do the courses required for certification give them the opportunity to learn those things?

We found that many of the courses included in the certificate encourage students to experience composition in diverse ways, including introductory creative writing, journalism, linguistics, and literature classes. This broad experience will prepare our tutors to support writers working on an equally broad range of writing tasks. Our first Program Outcome describes this experience.

The remaining Outcomes are more focused on what students learn in up to 8 units of writing center training courses. We recognize that many of our tutors are aspiring educators, and we hope to number them among our colleagues in the future. In that spirit, it's in

our best interest to give them fertile soil in which to grow their own pedagogies. We have therefore focused on two discrete questions: Can tutors work with students on higher- and lower-order concerns in their writing? And can tutors express how pedagogy undergirds their practices in the writing center? These questions speak to students' learning across the full range of their experience at College of the Sequoias. In order to assess tutors at this level, we plan to collect culminating portfolios from all students earning the Certificate in Writing Consultancy. These portfolios will allow students to choose the work that best represents their experiences in the Writing Consultancy program.

*Supporting Our Tutors: Course Outcomes for Tutor Training*

While our Certificate Program is, of course, concerned with what our tutors are learning, its focus is on the skills our tutors carry with them into the community after they graduate. But our tutors are not simply products to be shipped off to other roles and institutions. So, in addition to using tutor learning as a way of looking at our obligation to our community, we should also look at our obligation to those tutors. How are we training, teaching, and supporting our tutors while they are with us?

Our Course Outcomes for our four tutor training classes offered us a way to answer this question. Those four classes are intended to help students build a library of tutoring techniques, to prepare them for the varied challenges of writing center tutoring, and to lead them through a sequential process of deeper study and inquiry into writing center—and ultimately composition studies—theory and practice. As we revised these Outcomes, we found an opportunity to express precisely what we want our tutors to be learning. As we rethought our approach to assessing those Outcomes, we found an opportunity to ensure that our tutors were, in fact, learning those things.

Tutor training takes many different shapes at different institutions, with varying degrees of formality. But we should hold ourselves accountable to articulate our expectations for what tutors should learn, and to evaluate how well we are teaching and supporting them, especially in those cases where tutor training is not formally linked to a course assessment process.

*Supporting Our Students: Course Outcomes for Student Writers*

Somewhat fittingly, we finished our drafting work almost exactly where we began: discussing what happens between student writers and their tutors inside the writing center. Our first pass at this was almost crass in its simplicity: "Students will improve their writing." However, we decided to flesh out what this would look like and how those improvements should come about. After all, the quickest way to improve student writing would be, in many cases, to write it for them; this, however, does not serve our purpose, nor does it align with our college's code of student conduct. After discussion, we landed on the following: "Students will improve their writing ability by drafting, revising, and polishing with a tutor." Isn't this what we do, week in and week out?

Here we returned to our long-standing, foundational question of assessment: are our clients succeeding? This question—the object of our hyperfocus—is and always ought to be central to our work in the writing center, and we should never let it go.

## Working Forward

As Outcomes Assessment becomes an increasingly pressing reality, and as it is deeply ingrained into institutional practices of resource allocation, it is easy to look at assessment as a bargaining tool. It is easy to let assessment create a sense of division between the writing center and the institution. We feel we must offer up our assessment results to the institution, or use them to defend ourselves against our institution, or wheedle resources from our institution. But in truth, as we work to articulate ourselves across the many levels of our work, we make ourselves more deeply and meaningfully a part of our institutions. As Schendel and Macauley say, "it is through this reciprocal relationship of articulating our values in a way others value, and reshaping our values to reflect others' values, that we can change the assessment dynamic from 'us' versus 'them' or 'us' and 'them' to a coherent, collegial, inclusive 'us'" (85).

Rewriting ourselves has been an arduous process, but as in so many cases, its ending is, in truth, a beginning. What we do from day to day has changed very little, but the way we look at that work has expanded vastly. We continue to engage in that wild, wiggly range of inarticulable labor that is the work of a writing center—only now, we have articulated it. Having mapped out our commitments, we can see them clearly and begin the work of exploring how and how *well* we meet those commitments.

Works Cited

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# Appendix

Assessment Overview – College of the Sequoias Writing Center

| Purpose Statement | The purpose of the Writing Center at College of the Sequoias is to provide high-quality peer writing support to all students. The goal of this support is to create empowered, confident writers who feel confident navigating diverse writing tasks. | | |
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| Outcome Area | Individual Outcomes | Current Assessment Plan | Cycle |
| Writing Center Service Area Outcomes (SAOs) | Student Awareness: Students will be aware of the services available at the Writing Center. | The Research Department included awareness of the Writing Center services to the Student Support Survey 2017. This will create a baseline for future assessment. | Odd Years, Fall |
| | Tutor Professionalization: Writing Center tutors will earn a Certificate of Writing Consultancy. | We will compare the proportion of tutors who apply for a certificate in 2016 to those who applied in 2015. We hope to see a 10% increase in the proportion of tutors who apply for a certificate. | |
| | Faculty & Staff Relations: The Writing Center will receive student referrals from faculty and staff both inside and outside of the Language Arts Division. | We will compare the number of referring faculty in 2016 to the number of referring faculty in 2015. We hope to increase the number of referring faculty from the English unit by 10% and outside the English unit by 25%. | |
| | Student Demand: The Writing Center will provide services during times and at places where we can meet the demands of the most students. | We will monitor usage data at all three campuses and online and student survey data to adjust schedules and hours. | |
| Writing Consultancy Certificate Program Outcomes (POs) | Writing Experience: Students will demonstrate proficiency in a variety of modalities of composition. | We will collect a portfolio from students who complete the certificate and assess the outcomes based on the portfolio. | Even Years, Fall |
| | Concern Prioritization: Students will identify, prioritize, and address higher- and lower-order writing concerns. | | |
| | Pedagogy: Students will guide writers toward next steps in drafting and revising in accordance with best practices in Writing Center and Composition pedagogy. | | |
| User Student Learning Outcomes (English 400 SLOs) | Students will improve their writing ability by drafting, revising, or polishing writing with a tutor. | We will use student course completion, success, and grade data to measure this outcome. We will use additional qualitative data from our post-session client report forms and student satisfaction surveys to round out this assessment. | All Years, Fall |

Assessment Overview – College of the Sequoias Writing Center

| Outcome Area | Individual Outcomes | Current Assessment Plan | Cycle |
|---|---|---|---|
| Tutor Training Course Student Learning Outcomes (English 123 SLOs) | Prioritizing Feedback: Students will identify higher-order concerns in a piece of writing; rank those concerns in order of priority, accounting for the writer's progress through the writing process; and propose multiple options for possible "next steps" in revising. | End-of-semester Portfolios will be collected from all students each semester. Each assessment cycle will thus include four semesters' worth of portfolios for each course. | Odd Years, Spring |
| | Providing Strategies: Students will define higher-order writing concerns in accessible language and explain effective strategies and techniques for addressing those concerns. | | |
| | Identifying Pedagogy: Students will describe a consultant's priorities and approach, and identify the theoretical and pedagogical influences on the consultant, in a recorded or observed writing consultation. | | |
| Tutor Training Course Student Learning Outcomes (English 124 SLOs) | Identifying Lower-Order Concerns: students will identify lower-order concerns in a piece of writing, including patterns of grammatical error, distinguishing between errors and mistakes. | End-of-semester Portfolios will be collected from all students each semester. Each assessment cycle will thus include four semesters' worth of portfolios for each course. | Even Years, Spring |
| | Providing Strategies: Students will define lower-order writing concerns in accessible language, and explain strategies and techniques effective in helping the writer address the patterns underlying those concerns. | | |
| | Critiquing: Students will critique a consultant's priorities and methods, identifying and evaluating key theoretical, pedagogical, and rhetorical features in the consultant's approach, in a recorded or observed writing consultation. | | |

Assessment Overview – College of the Sequoias Writing Center

| Outcome Area | Individual Outcomes | Current Assessment Plan | Cycle |
|---|---|---|---|
| Tutor Training Course Student Learning Outcomes (English 125 SLOs) | Rhetorical Awareness: Students will identify the rhetorical features of a piece of writing, including the writer's purpose, situation, and audience, locating key points of decision and analyzing how those decisions contribute to the essay's effectiveness. | End-of-semester Portfolios will be collected from all students each semester. Each assessment cycle will thus include four semesters' worth of portfolios for each course. | Odd Years, Spring |
| | Rhetorical Models: Students will explain the key features of a rhetorical model in accessible language and guide the writer in using the model to make writerly decisions. | | |
| | Theory in Practice: Students will place a consultant's approach within the context of Composition theory, identifying the theoretical models and thinkers associated with the consultant's approach and assumption, in a recorded or observed writing consultation. | | |
| Tutor Training Course Student Learning Outcomes (English 126 SLOs) | Research Expertise: Students will research an issue in Writing Center pedagogy, explaining the significance of the issue in a piece of client writing, identifying key areas for discussion, and ranking the priority of the issue in working with the writer. | End-of-semester Portfolios will be collected from all students each semester. Each assessment cycle will thus include four semesters' worth of portfolios for each course. | Even Years, Spring |
| | Research Explication: Students will describe their researched issue in accessible language, introducing and employing specialized strategies tailored to that issue. | | |
| | Theory in Practice: Students will describe the significance of their researched issue to a recorded or observed writing consultation, identifying features of that session relevant to the issue, and using their research to offer alternative approaches to the consultation. | | |