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Accommodating Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in the Writing Center

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Accommodating Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in the Writing Center

BY

Rebekah Barton

Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis explores how collegiate writing centers could better serve the needs of students with autism. As there is so little research that involves writing centers and college students with autism, scholarship was pulled from traditional writing center pedagogy, research concerning adults with autism, and the information that was available about teaching students with autism in the college composition classroom. A mixed methods approach was used to conduct my own research: my study involved surveys, interviews, visits, and website analysis. It became clear that not only are writing centers not ready to accommodate students with autism, but some writing center professionals believe they do not need to make changes to their practices to serve the needs of students with autism. Then accessibility is examined from three different angles: websites, physical environment, and tutor training. The last chapter is a list of my recommendations meant to improve accessibility in those three different areas of writing center *praxis*.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this project to my mom, whose respect for and dedication to her own students with autism inspired me to consider how we could better serve the needs of these students at the post-secondary level. You have truly been an invaluable asset to me throughout this process.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Terri Fredrick for serving as my own personal IRB paperwork wizard. And for teaching me to represent data in logical and productive graphic organizers.

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But most of all, I would like to express my sincere thanks to my director, Dr. Tim Taylor. Your ability to quickly turn around my drafts and to be firm with deadlines was indescribably appreciated. Without your expertise, encouragement, and brilliance my ideas could not have expanded into this magical and meaningful project.

And also thanks for teaching me the word *paucity*.

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Chapter 1: Research Review

> Adults with an ASD have spoken about the challenges of…the diagnosis
> of autism, stating that those providing services to adults need to be better
> informed about the characteristics of this population and that services need
> to more directly address the desired outcomes of community integration;
> employment; environmental adaptations; and access to community, social,
> and leisure activities.
>
> Kristie Patten Koenig and Moya Kinnealey in "Adults With An Autism Spectrum Disorder"

Introduction

I often tell people this project started with a student who came into the writing center. He displayed some odd behavior: he spoke so loudly when he was overwhelmed that he frightened other tutors. When the veteran tutors told me he had autism and schizophrenia, his behavior suddenly started to make sense. I didn't have an enormous knowledge base concerning autism; I didn't have a sibling or a close friend on the spectrum. But my mother had been a practicing occupational therapist (OT) for 30 years. She moved from a hospital setting to an educational one, and she worked closely with students on the autism spectrum. My exposure to these students came from volunteering at her school. It was there that I was able to see that these students were often very intelligent but could sometimes be challenging to communicate with.

When I met this student in the writing center, I realized I didn't know nearly enough to effectively tutor him. When I tried asking open-ended questions, he became agitated and loud. When we tried to tutor him at a table instead of the computer station he usually worked at, he almost shut down completely. I looked through my tutoring

textbooks and manuals[1]: there was nothing on specifically working with students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). In fact, there was very little research on disabilities in the writing center at all.

As I continued looking for resources, I began to examine different tutoring guides and writing center pedagogy textbooks. It became clear that there was almost no existing scholarship on how to tutor students with an ASD in the writing center. To find answers to my questions, I would have to examine information on ASD, writing center pedagogy, and the small amount of information I could find on how to teach students with an ASD in the college classroom.

After doing research in these areas and realizing there is little guidance on how to work with these students, I designed this project as an attempt to provide strong guidance on how to work with students with an ASD within the confines of a writing center. I surveyed writing center tutors and directors to ascertain how confident they feel working with students with an ASD and in what ways (if any) the centers are equipped to tutor students with disabilities. In addition, I interviewed a college student with an ASD to find out what he thought would help him in a tutoring session and gathered his suggestions for making the center more inviting for students with an ASD. I visited other institutions' centers to examine accessibility of the physical space, the website, and tutoring services. Finally, all the research is synthesized into recommendations for directors to incorporate into tutor training and to consider when making administrative decisions for website design and the physical environment of the writing center.

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[1] The required practicum taken by writing consultants at my university included assigned readings from these books: *The Longman Guide to Writing Center Theory and Practice* (2008*), The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors 5th ed.* (2010), *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors 2nd ed.* (2009), and *A Tutor's Guide: Helping Writers One to One 2nd ed.* (2005).

Before delving into the primary research of this project, which will be provided in later chapters, it is important to first examine some basic information about autism and how it relates to our work in the writing center.

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is no longer the mystery that it once was. According to most recent Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) statistics, ASD now affects 1 in 68 children in the US, is five times more likely to affect boys than girls, and can occur regardless of socioeconomic status, race, or ethnicity ("Facts about ASD"). Recently the number of children diagnosed with ASD has increased. Some speculate that is due to changing diagnostic criteria, and others assume it is due to an increased awareness of the disorder, but practitioners have not ruled out the possibility that a larger percentage of American children are being born with ASD.

According to the most recent edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders the diagnostic criteria for ASD is as follows:

A. Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts…

B. Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities…

C. Symptoms must be present in the early developmental period (but may not become fully manifest until social demands exceed limited capacities, or may be masked by learned strategies later in life).

D. Symptoms cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of current functioning.

E. These disturbances are not better explained by intellectual disability (intellectual developmental disorder) or global developmental delay. Intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder frequently co-occur; to make comorbid diagnoses of autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disability, social communication should be below that expected for general developmental level. (adapted from American Psychiatric Association 50-51)

There have been some changes from the fourth edition to the fifth edition—the most marked is that Asperger Syndrome, which was typically referred to as *high-functioning autism*, is no longer a separate diagnosis but is now under the ASD umbrella. The core features, however, have remained the same. Lisa R. Audet expands on these characteristics in her article "Core Features of Autism Spectrum Disorders: Impairment in Communication and Socialization, and Restrictive Repetitive Acts." She notes how the features vary based on the severity of the case but says that because the two impairments (communication and socialization) are so intrinsic to our humanity, it can be very challenging to relate to people with autism (89). This is especially relevant in the writing center where one-to-one tutorials are the cornerstone of writing center pedagogy. Audet breaks down communication into language and non-language aspects and brings up a particularly important complication in communication for people with an ASD: echolalia.

Echolalia, the onset of which can be delayed or immediate, is "when someone repeats what is said to him or her" (93). This often occurs when a person with autism feels like he needs to respond to someone else but can't form new words, so his response is to repeat the words back to the speaker. To an unknowing speaker, echolalia can

appear to be mocking, rude, or intentionally offensive. For example, in her narrative

Nobody, Nowhere, Donna Williams describes her thought process when demonstrating

echolalia as a child who was nonverbal and the negative response she received:

> Words were no problem, but other people's expectations for me to respond
> to them were. This required my understanding of what was said, but I was too
> happy losing myself to want to be dragged back by something as two-
> dimensional as understanding.
>
> 'What do you think you're doing?' came the voice.
>
> Knowing I must respond in order to get rid of this annoyance, I would
> compromise, repeating 'What do you think you're doing?' addressed to no-
> one in particular.
>
> 'Don't repeat everything I say,' scolded the voice.
>
> Sensing a need to respond, I'd reply: 'Don't repeat everything I say.'
>
> Slap. I had no idea what was expected of me. (11-12)

As seen in Williams account, her echolalia was perceived to be a mocking reply and was

greatly offensive to the original speaker. While it is highly unlikely a student

demonstrating echolalia would be responded to with aggression in a writing center (i.e.,

slaps, yelling, or scolding), it is likely that a tutor would be insulted by a student with

echolalia. When a person feels disrespected, the client/consultant relationship can fall

apart, and sessions could become unproductive.

While high-functioning people with autism are less likely to demonstrate

problems like echolalia, it wouldn't be unusual for them to still struggle with nonverbal

cues like facial expressions, gestures, and eye contact. Perhaps the most difficult barrier

for students with an ASD is the lack of metalinguistics: "Many children…demonstrate difficulties comprehending abstract or metaphorical vocabulary and language containing humor, sarcasm, or phrases with multiple meanings…Although many children with an ASD have basic comprehension and use of language, they have deficits in the ability to interpret and use nonlanguage cues and figurative language" (95). Humor, idiomatic expressions, and abstract language are all important parts of communication patterns. Without the ability to recognize and interact with people using these patterns of communication, people with an ASD are prone to struggle in an environment that relies heavily on communication like classrooms and writing centers. For example, a statement that could easily be heard in a composition classroom or a writing center, "Writing is a process that has different stages: prewriting, drafting, and revising. It's important not to cut corners when going through this process" can be problematic. Many of us would have no difficulty understanding the meaning of these two basic sentences. But for the student with autism, there is a lot of potential confusion—stages of writing? How can writing have stages? Cut corners? Corners of writing? What?

Audet discusses a framework for better communication between the person with an ASD and the person without an ASD in her article "Enhancing Social Relationships and Communication in Individuals with and Autism Spectrum Disorder." She notes that communication is essential to creating meaningful relationships with other people, and her framework is designed around five pillars that incorporate the fundamentals of communication. She also describes the value of creating a situation in which the student with an ASD has to seek out another person to have his needs met, but she specifies the problem to be solved has to be reasonable and able to be solved (305-06). This

information and her recommendations seem to confirm that not only could these students

come to the writing center for help with the same issues encountered by students who

don't have an ASD, but also that writing center interactions may help improve and

increase communication for students with an ASD. Audet's five communication pillars

are the following:

(1) listening is central,

(2) normalized communication must be modeled and encouraged,

(3) comprehension precedes expression,

(4) genuine engagement fosters socialization, and

(5) respect for diverse needs and styles guides intervention. (306-22)

Audet defines the pillars and offers OT strategies for each one, which can be adapted to

provide guidance for writing center professionals working with students with an ASD.

Listening is Central

Here Audet notes that traditionally a lot of emphasis has been placed on

encouraging students with an ASD to talk, but this pillar is more focused on teaching the

students to be better listeners. Therapists promote students' active listening by not

repeating directives (it would imply that the student is unable to comprehend rather than

unsure of how to respond), using least-to-most prompts (which uses scaffolding to help

the student produce a desired result), using strategic wait time (to allow the student time

to process the communication), and slowing the pace (this allows the therapist to

remember that the student is trying to communicate something meaningful).

Normalized Communication Must Be Modeled and Encouraged

Modeling normalized communication is more difficult than it sounds. Audet points out that in traditional therapeutic communications between therapists and children with autism the adults frequently do not communicate simple things like the child's progress directly with the child; in doing so, the adults unintentionally communicate to the child that she is not competent. Audet advocates for more everyday language and spontaneous communication with individuals with autism. She does, however, specify that these interactions should be slower than usual but encourages the person without an ASD to be a normalized communicative partner rather than just using repetitive communication (i.e., holding up flashcards with pictures and asking the student to verbalize what the visual is). Audet also notes that modeling normalized communication will help the students see nonverbal aspects of communication and understand better how those aspects are important to social interactions (311-14).

Comprehension Precedes Expression

Audet explains this fundamental principle that individuals with autism cannot use true spontaneous, generative language until they can comprehend the concepts attached to the language. This idea is not specific to people with autism—people who do not have an ASD are also not able to use spontaneous and generative language until they fully grasp the concrete concepts attached to them. Audet notes that the first two pillars are full of strategies that aid in comprehension but adds that consistent follow-through, integration of multiple modes of representation, and providing several repeated examples of concepts will also help students with an ASD in comprehension.

For example, in the writing center, asking a student with an ASD a question like "Who's your audience?" is not likely to have positive results. Audience awareness is a very abstract concept. A better way to help a student with autism comprehend this idea is to ask, "Who is going to be reading this writing? Who is going to be using it to make a decision about X?" When the student has an easier time understanding the concept he will be able to understand and use language about audience awareness. In accordance with Audet's strategies, a tutor could use verbal and visual cues (multiple modes of representation) to ask this question. Asking the same question out loud will be helpful, but also writing it down for the student to see will also aid in understanding. Repeating this concept to the student with an ASD will eventually lead to comprehension, which will then lead to expression of the concept.

Genuine Engagement Fosters Socialization

Audet continues to make points about communication that we might think are obvious: "of course genuine engagement encourages social behavior!" But faced with someone who departs from "normal" patterns of communication, and for those with an ASD, it may be difficult to be genuinely engaged in communication. So Audet offers guiding principles for the therapist that will lead to genuine engagement. Each of these seven principles uses the word *therapist*; each time the word *therapist* is interchangeable with the word *tutor*: (1) all human beings have a desire to communicate regardless of their ability to speak; (2) the therapist will need to take the perspective of the student with autism—by creating a neutral approach, this technique will help the student correct his own deficits with perspective taking[2]; (3) the therapist needs to have an ongoing commitment to problem solving because communicating with an individual with autism

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[2] This particular challenge is an enormous hurdle in audience awareness for these students with an ASD.

is going to present several issues; (4) therapists have to constantly engage in self-reflection; the reflection leads to an understanding that lays the groundwork for the student to develop confidence and self-advocacy; (5) therapists *must* believe that the student with autism is competent[3]; (6) therapists should talk with (not at) the person with autism: this includes talking directly to the student and engaging in active listening; and (7) therapists must work to empower their students—this is usually done by respecting the students' choices and then helping them assess the outcomes and impacts of those choices.

Respect for Diverse Needs and Styles Guides Intervention

Understanding that different students have different needs is common knowledge in educational spheres. Audet reminds readers that there aren't one-size-fits-all approaches when working with individuals with autism. It's a spectrum disorder. It's the job of the therapist to create a meaningful relationship with the client, which then leads to understanding and development of skills.

What is encouraging about each of these approaches is that that the writing center could potentially accommodate and/or implement all of these principles. They fit nicely with the guiding principles and practices of the writing center community: minimalist tutoring, agenda setting, and respecting the different needs of different writers. As there is not much specific information concerning students with an ASD in the writing center, it is important to examine what information is available on accommodating students with autism in the college composition classroom because the two areas overlap with writing-related research.

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[3] This idea is paramount. Progress cannot be made until the therapist truly believes that the student has the ability to learn and develop social and emotional skills. Therapists who don't believe the student is competent can be more damaging than if the student had no therapy at all.

Students with ASD in the College Classroom

As noted, the high prevalence of the disorder and early intervention provided in elementary and secondary schools is producing a shift in the number of students with ASD at the college level (Mann 45; Zager et al. 4). In their article, "Adults with an Autism Spectrum Disorder," Kristie Patten Koenig and Moya Kinnealey detail the challenges for adults living with an ASD. A section of the article is devoted to lower-functioning persons with ASD, but there is some important information about how people with an ASD can have productive and meaningful lives despite the challenges they encounter. One of these productive and meaningful paths includes a post-secondary education. A college education aligns with the OT intervention best practices that emphasize independence and community participation through self-determination and self-advocacy (241).

Adjusting to a new college environment can be difficult for anyone, but students with ASD struggle more than typical first-year students adjusting to new things like freedom, living on their own, and practicing time management skills. Many students with an ASD were lucky enough (at a time when what we knew about autism exploded into awareness) to have early diagnoses and interventions. They went through elementary and secondary schools with IEPs (Individualized Education Plans) and an array of accommodations and resources (Zager et al. 2). Some came from families in which their parents were highly involved in their academic endeavors. And although best practices encourage self-advocacy for adults with an ASD, this background of supports can exacerbate the difficulty of adjusting to the independent lifestyle that college often requires. In addition, students with ASDs are likely to encounter difficulties with social

interaction, executive functioning, information processing, sensory issues, and "blips" or overwhelming situations that build up and "snowball"[4] (7-15).

As mentioned earlier, persons living with an ASD struggle with social and emotional maturity because of their difficulties comprehending and appreciating the emotional states of themselves and others. They also struggle to predict and/or understand the thoughts, feelings, and reactions of those around them (9). This is one of the prevalent features that hinders their social interactions at college. On the academic side, executive functions—which tell us to manage our activities and achieve our goals— are an issue. Because executive functions are neurologically based, students with autism don't always have the ability to force themselves to "tune in" to a lecture or class discussion. They can be easily distracted by noise and other sensory input issues (11). A lack of attention, a problem which is not exclusive to individuals with autism, is something that disables students from reaching their full potential in college-level coursework. In addition, students with an ASD have trouble decoding, comprehending, and registering abstract concepts; Serena Weider notes that without this comprehension, students are unable to develop academically (83). Information processing requires them to take in new data, fit it into existing knowledge, and store it to be retrieved later (Zager et al. 12). All of these challenges together contribute to blips and snowballs: when faced with what feels like an unsolvable problem, these students become overwhelmed with anxiety, which leads to another problem, which leads to more anxiety and then yet

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[4] Snowballs occur when a student has a bad experience that leads to anxiety, which then leads to further problems. For example, if a student forgot to turn a small assignment and stays awake worrying about how that will affect his grade, he might oversleep and miss class the next day. The anxiety is now increased because each new problem is added to those that already exist.

another problem—thus the snowball effect. Pretty soon the student is left feeling buried underneath problems that make them feel hopeless.

To avoid these terrible blips, Zager, Alpern, McKeon, Maxam and Mulvey offer many practical strategies instructors can use to assist students with an ASD in the classroom, many of which rely on principles of universal design—using multiple methods to engage students, presenting information in multiple formats, preparing students not only before the semester begins, but also before each class session, designing course materials to be user-friendly, etc. (36-39).

More specific to college composition settings, Marcia Ribble describes utilizing a writing tutor who found one-to-one conferences were necessary for her student with an ASD. In her article "Reaching the College Composition Student with Autism through the Cartoon Enhanced Classroom," Val Gerstle describes how effectively the lighthearted nature of cartoons helped to relieve anxiety and writer's block (99). She discusses how students with an ASD think visually rather than linguistically, so using visuals both effectively teaches those visual thinkers and engages the other students in the classroom. Muriel Cunningham also notes how students with an ASD were able to effectively use classroom activities that involved writing about visual images to strengthen their writing. There are numerous examples of instructors effectively teaching students with an ASD how to write despite all of the challenges these particular students face, but the process involves research, accommodations, and adjustments.

Again, as there is currently little research focused on tutoring students with ASD with their writing, this project will consider how we can adapt the information that is available to best meet the needs of students with autism within the friendly confines of a

college writing center. With this disorder becoming more prevalent and earlier systems of intervention, students with ASD will be pursuing post-secondary education. If we cannot help them in the writing center, we fail those writers and our overall mission to help all writers.

Challenges in Current Writing Center Pedagogy

With the diverse student populations that have come and will continue to enroll in post-secondary education, centers have had to make adjustments to their pedagogy to accommodate nontraditional students like adult learners and returning students. In the past, writing center scholarship has addressed the needs of basic writers, international students, and professional writers. Scholars have attempted to answer questions like, how should we tutor students who are in developmental education programs or students with dialect issues? There was a point when the writing center community wanted to know how to tutor nonnative speakers of English and now there are several resources and empirical evidence to help answer that question.

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, when I began looking for information on how to tutor a student with autism in the writing center, I couldn't find any scholarship to help me and my fellow consultants. Through further research I have been able to gather a range of tutor training manuals and writing center pedagogy textbooks to examine what patterns exist in them. Two patterns emerged very quickly. First, there was not a lot of specific information on tutoring students with disabilities and none on tutoring students with autism, but there was usually a section focused on "diverse learners." In *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*, there is a chapter devoted to "The Writers You Tutor." Ryan and Zimmerelli remind tutors that students will have different

learning styles, and many students come in with concerns. The diverse types of students are broken down into writers with anxiety, with basic writing skills, writers for whom English is a second language, writers with disabilities, and adult learners. Putting aside the fact that the five writers described aren't really parallel (they don't really all comfortably fit under the umbrella of "student concerns"), there is a huge discrepancy in information. There are four pages devoted to ELL writers complete with useful strategies for tutoring these students. There is one page devoted to writers with disabilities, and it's specific to writers with learning disabilities.

That's it: "Learning disabilities." Some might be surprised to learn that autism actually doesn't fall under the umbrella of learning disabilities. It's classified as a psychological disability. There is no mention in the book of a specific learning disability, just one term that encompasses multiple disabilities. The authors offer some general principles for tutoring students with an LD. The principles are helpful, but they are not enough. The second pattern that is that in tutor training manuals there is always a section of articles that "affirm diversity." These sections typically reference Julie Neff's article "Learning Disabilities and the Writing Center." That is the extent to which the materials offer information on disabilities in the writing center. Neff's article has useful strategies for tutoring students with learning disabilities like using directed conversation as an alternative to freewriting as a prewriting technique because students with learning disabilities struggle with language retrieval and concept relationships. She also effectively points out that tutors are often unprepared to tutor students with disabilities and the process should start with correcting misperceptions and changing the way we think about disabilities. But the fact that each manual seems to point to this article and

imply "Look we've got this disability area covered!" ignores the fact that the term
disability is so much more broad than they've made it.

Given the lack of specific information tutoring students with disabilities, we
must go back to the seemingly universal principles that drive writing center theory and
practice. Muriel Harris notes six shared approaches:

1. Tutorials are offered in a one-to-one setting.

2. Tutors are coaches and collaborators, not teachers.

3. Each student's individual needs are the focus of the tutorial.

4. Experimentation and practice are encouraged.

5. Writers work on writing from a variety of courses.

6. Writing Centers are available for students at all levels of writing proficiency. (qtd.
   in McKinney 59)

Other commonalities of our community of practice are the notions of producing better
writers rather than better texts; having student-led sessions; asking facilitative, open-
ended questions rather than directive or evaluative comments, agenda setting; offering
other services like workshops; and providing a place for students to access resources
related to writing (Fishman, Harris, North, Macauley, Lunsford). These principles seem
less universal when we complicate the tutoring situation with an exceptional writer—the
student with autism. Typically, as principle two states, tutors should not take a directive,
teacherly role but instead should use a collaborative, peer-centered approach. But
sometimes a student with autism would be overwhelmed by facilitative questions and
responds better to blunt directives. In this situation, a tutor might be required to take on a
more authoritative role.

Harris also notes that experimentation is encouraged and it should be—tutors will likely need to try different strategies to help individuals with autism, but when they find something that works well, the experimentation should be over. Students with autism thrive on routine, so constantly changing the tutoring techniques would be overwhelming, not useful.

Fortunately, there are traditional aspects of writing center pedagogy that fit nicely when tutoring students with autism such as: tutoring in one-to-one settings and emphasizing individualized needs. April Mann, the only person I could find that focused specifically on tutoring students with ASD in the writing center, discusses some of these individualized needs.[5] Her article "Structure and Accommodation: Autism & the Writing Center" was hiding in Gerstle's and Walsh' 2011 collection *Autism Spectrum Disorders in the College Composition Classroom*. Mann notes that students with Asperger Syndrome (AS) tend to have focused interests that often generate paper topics that the writers are excited about, but that giving students choices, which is a traditional practice in composition studies, gives students with AS more anxiety than enthusiasm. Mann acknowledges that too many choices gives tutors a chance to help students focus on something they will enjoy, which aligns nicely with current writing center pedagogy: "Thus student autonomy and existing writing center and composition pedagogy mesh surprisingly well with advice given by autism professionals. One area that might be more challenging, however, is the interpersonal sphere" (56). She goes on to note that in an effort to make the writing center an inviting place, tutors like to create a friendly environment by making jokes, using humor, chit-chatting, or sometimes appropriately

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[5] It is worth noting, however, that Mann's article specifically focuses on students with what was previously known as Asperger Syndrome, which is now only one small place on the autism spectrum.

friendly touching. These practices are problematic because we know that students on the spectrum often don't understand humor and idiomatic expressions, and their sensory issues do not invite any kind of touching. It's possible that this type of social interaction could be so intimidating to students with an ASD that they would not want to come to the writing center. It could become another place they fear because of their previous experiences interacting with strangers, and life has probably taught them they aren't particularly skilled at everyday conversations. So this anxiety offers an additional challenge: how can we invite students with autism into the center without frightening them? Mann, by way of Liane Willey, offers the following set of practices:

- Remembering to use concrete language and examples because students have trouble with abstract concepts

- Being prepared to expect unusual discussion and questions

- Realizing that the clients aren't intentionally trying to act out with unusual or rude behavior, [that] they just have difficulty with social interactions

- Avoiding idiomatic language, sarcasm, and words with double meanings; and

- Remembering that nonverbal language is not going to be the most effective way to communicate (qtd. in Mann 60).

Implications

There are no easy answers to the question of how to tutor a student with an ASD in the writing center. The questions feel more complicated because there is little scholarship that explores the answers. But there are some general principles we can use as we continue to look for answers:

- The core features of autism are impairments in communication, social interactions, and restrictive repetitive acts.

- These students have trouble with abstract thought and expressing their thoughts and feelings verbally.

- ASD is completely unrelated to students' levels of intelligence. These students are capable of learning and have the potential to be well-educated, productive members of society.

- Autism is a spectrum disorder; therefore students on the spectrum should be seen individuals with different needs.

- The number of students with an ASD attending college will continue to rise.

- They need to be accommodated in the college classroom and in the writing center.

- Specific practices within the writing center will have to be reexamined or adapted to fully serve these individuals.

After careful inspection of the scholarship concerning college students with autism, the writing center community should want to find answers to the following questions: (1) what are current pervasive attitudes regarding tutoring students with autism, (2) is the writing center accessible for students with autism, (3) how does a session differ when students disclose their ASD, and (4) what can we do when they do not self-identify as writers with autism?

In this chapters that follow, I will relate the results my study of what other writing centers have already done to address these needs of students with ASD and what we can do to expand on those accommodations. Finally, I will provide specific guidelines for addressing the needs of these students when they visit writing centers based on

information pulled from occupational therapy approaches, writing center pedagogy, and guidelines for accommodating students with autism in the college classroom.

Chapter 2: Research Methods & Results

Research Questions

When I began my research process, I was specifically looking for information on ways we could improve accessibility in three specific areas for students with autism: physical environment, website design, and tutor training. My research review yielded a lot of information, but nothing specific to my research questions. So I sought information from other writing center practitioners. I had my own experience working as a tutor in two different writing centers, but I needed more information from other tutors and directors before I could see trends, draw conclusions, and make recommendations. This chapter details my research methods and the information I collected. In chapter 3, I will discuss the trends and implications of these research results and then provide recommendations for progress in making the writing center more user-friendly for students with autism.

Methods

For a project like this one, which is venturing into newer territory, I decided that it was appropriate to use multiple research methods. Using different methods allowed me to examine accessibility from numerous angles of the writing center experience. I wanted to know how directors and tutors viewed their own spaces and abilities. I was curious to see how websites may help writing centers include, or unintentionally exclude, students with autism. I also visited other writing centers to examine the physical layouts of the spaces

to determine how the physical environments might help or hinder this specific student population. Finally, I sought out college students with an ASD at my own institution to ascertain how they viewed writing, their own writing processes, and how they felt the writing center could be more accessible.

Surveys

I designed two surveys. One was for writing center directors, and the other was for writing center tutors. After carefully crafting my survey questions, I sent them out to the wcenter listserv[6] on January 15, 2015 and then waited for replies. When I was writing my questions, I wanted them to be open-ended and leave room for respondents to describe their experiences. The questions I used for the director surveys are as follows:

1. Do you direct a center at a two- or four-year institution?

2. What role does inclusivity play in your writing center?

3. What role does inclusivity play in your tutor training?

4. Is your center equipped to tutor students with learning disabilities? If so, how?

5. Is your center equipped to tutor students with physical disabilities? If so, how?

6. Is your center equipped to tutor students with psychological disabilities? If so, how?

7. Is the center accessible and equipped to tutor students with autism? If so, how?

Questions 4-6 were included because I was curious to see how many thoughtfully considered different aspects of disability. The term *disability* is very broad and therefore difficult to cover thoroughly. Even in my own tutor training, tutoring students with disabilities was not an issue that was covered at breadth.

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[6] Currently, the listserv has 2,787 active members.

As with the director surveys, I wanted my survey questions for tutors to be open-ended to allow each respondent the room to expand on his or her answer. The following questions comprised the survey for the tutors.

1. Do you tutor in a center at a two- or four-year institution?

2. Are you a faculty tutor, graduate student tutor, or undergraduate tutor?

3. Do you feel like you have a knowledge base concerning autism? If so, would you give a brief summary of this knowledge?

4. Do you feel confident in your abilities to tutor a student who has autism?

5. Have you had any experience tutoring a student who has autism? Please provide a short summary of those experiences (was it positive? negative? stressful?).
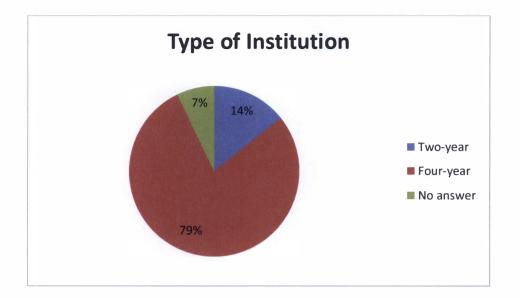
Thirteen directors responded to my survey, and 29 tutors participated in my research. The results were intriguing.

Director Surveys

I included these surveys in my research because I was looking for answers about whether or not directors (1) thought these issues were important; (2) carefully considered the implications of inclusivity issues; (3) had taken any steps to include this particular population of students; and if so (4) how these issues had been addressed.

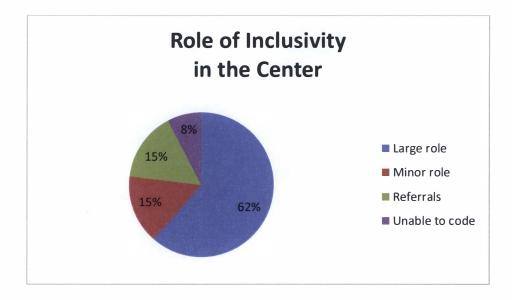*1. Do you direct a center at a two- or four-year institution?*

I included this question to make it possible for me to see if the type of institution had any effect on the resources for students with autism.

Type of Institution

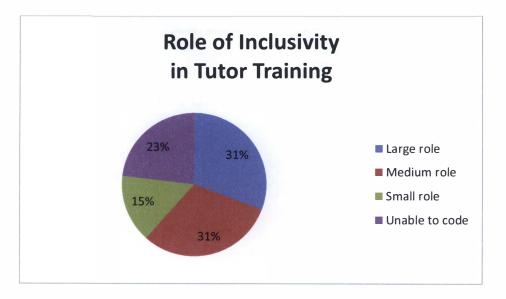Most of the respondents (n=11) direct centers at four-year institutions.

2. *What role does inclusivity play in your writing center?*

I wanted this question to be fairly general—I wanted to know how they would answer the question without any prompting. Eight of the directors (65%) said that their center strives to be inclusive of "all students/writers" or "any student" that comes to the center. Two participants said that inclusivity only played a minor role in their spaces, while another two respondents specified that they take referrals from disability services on campus. One respondent just said that "It's a large part of tutor training and ongoing professional development." The answer made sense, but I was unable to code it with the other responses I received because it did not respond directly to the question.

Role of Inclusivity in the Center

- Large role
- Minor role
- Referrals
- Unable to code

8%
15%
15%
62%

3. What role does inclusivity play in your tutor training?

Thirty-one percent (n=4) of the 13 directors indicated that inclusivity plays a "large" or "major" role in tutor training. Another 31% (n=4) noted that they provide "a couple of readings" or have specific training hours for working with "students with special needs." I coded those four responses as having a medium role in their tutor training.

Role of Inclusivity in Tutor Training

- Large role
- Medium role
- Small role
- Unable to code

23%
31%
15%
31%

Two respondents (15%) acknowledged the challenges of training tutors to have specific knowledge of every type of student they might encounter, so I coded them as having a

center in which inclusivity played a small role in tutor training. Their responses are as follows:

- "We discuss suiting tutoring methods to the individual. However, our tutor training does not currently include a section specifically on working with students with disabilities."

- "We are a small center, and our tutors often move on to pursue four year degrees at other campuses. For this reason, our tutor training tends to focus on the immediate needs we've been seeing rather than offering an overview of accomodating [sic] various disabilities. We emphasize focusing on individual clients and adapting our practices to their individual needs, drawing upon their own knowledge of what works for them whenever possible."

The last three directors provided answers that I was unable to code because they didn't provide information that made it clear how the tutors were trained with inclusivity issues in mind. This lack of clarity is most likely due to the question that was intentionally left rather vague. Their responses are listed below.
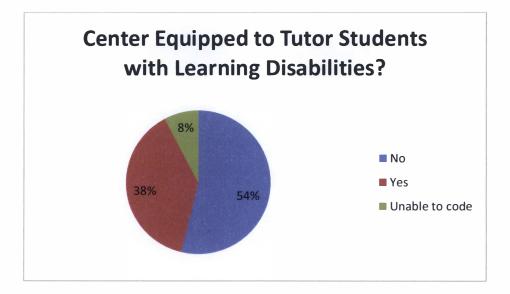
- "We routinely, directly and indirectly, address inclusivity issues."

- "we train tutors on handling students with learning differences in CRLA [College Reading and Learning Association] III sessions"

- "We attend to issues of race, gender, language difference, and disability."

These responses were all a bit challenging to code. In a survey approach where the data is self-reported, it is easy to see that some directors view their own centers as inclusive but then later cannot present evidence of specific accommodations that would make them inclusive to students with disabilities. Some directors insisted inclusivity played a large

role in tutor training but then were defensive when asked if their centers could accommodate students with autism. It is clear that there might be a disconnect between directors' perceptions of their own centers and the realities they operate in.

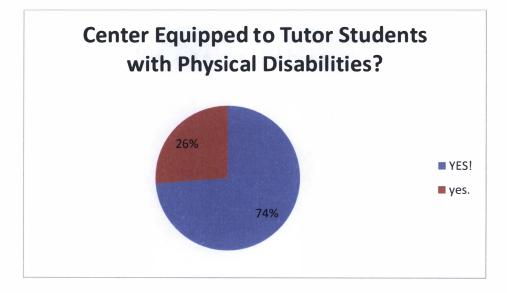4.   *Is your center equipped to tutor students with learning disabilities? If so, how?*

I was expecting learning-related disabilities to be the type of disability that centers were most equipped to handle because they are more common in university settings than physical or psychological disabilities, but less than half, only 38% (n=5), felt their centers were appropriately able to accommodate students with learning disabilities. More than half, 54% (n=7), responded with conditional statements: "to some degree," "depending on the student," "minimally," or "not terribly well." One director (8%) responded with "Training, just training only."

Center Equipped to Tutor Students with Learning Disabilities?

Nearly all of the directors who indicated they felt confident their center was equipped (three of the five) noted that their centers were linked with other resources on campus. Those responses are listed below.

- "Yes, incidentally, we have a student who works for both our center and the center that handles tutoring for students registered with office of disability services"

- "Yes, e.g., [sic] by working closely with/seeking advice from our campus' Asscessibility [sic] Resource Ctr, welcoming discussion amongst tutors/admins, and offering relevant readings/materials"

- "Tutors are trained some strategies and we have ACESS services do a workshop on disabilities--the politics, procedures for undiagnosed, and what their tutors do"

5. *Is your center equipped to tutor students with physical disabilities? If so, how?*

Initially I wasn't sure what to expect from this batch of responses, but I found that this was the one type of disability that directors felt their center was most equipped to handle. Seventy-four percent (n=9) of the directors responded with a rather enthusiastic YES! (the answers were firm, with a yes at the beginning of the response and then an explanation afterward), and only 26% (n=4) of the respondents answered with qualifiers like "I hope so," "Barely," "but I'm not sure," and "To some extent."

Center Equipped to Tutor Students with Physical Disabilities?
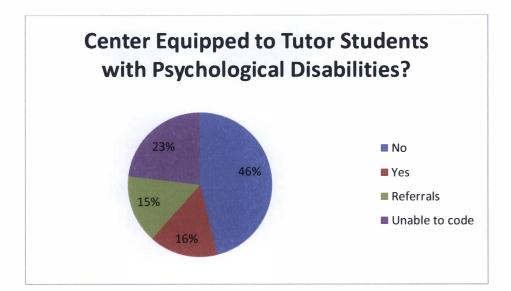
26%

74%

- YES!
- yes.

But many of the more emphatic responses specified merely that the building complies with ADA standards (doorways wide enough for wheelchairs and at least one elevator). They didn't typically include any extra resources for these students, though a few specified which populations they were prepared to cater to. Those responses are listed below.

- "yes, seperate [sic] rooms for hearing impaired students"

- "Yes. We have tables easy to use for those with physical disabilities, and we have an ASL professional on campus (and students) who can assist us in accommodating the deaf if necessary. One of our most experienced tutors has severe physical disabilities and is very helpful in advising tutors and clients as to how to make use of their software, etc."

- "Yes. Tables are set high enough for wheelchairs, ZOOM on all the computers, noise reduction headphones available, headphones for increased volume, tables spaced wide for easy passage, deaf interpreters on site"

I found these specifications rather encouraging. It showed a lot of thoughtful preparedness on the part of the writing center.

6. *Is your center equipped to tutor students with psychological disabilities? If so, how?*

I wondered how many of the respondents would know that autism is actually classified as a psychological disability, but I suspected that many were not aware of that fact.

Center Equipped to Tutor Students with Psychological Disabilities?

Nearly half, 46% (n=6), of the 13 directors said they were not equipped to tutor those students. Only two (16%) noted that they were equipped; one of those directors noted that his or her tutors have regular training sessions with counselors that allow the tutors to handle these clients. Another two participants (15%) noted that their tutors were trained to refer these students to other campus resources, but the most notable response was from the director who asked "What do you mean by equipped? Straight [sic] jackets? Haladone stocked on the shelves? Panic button? Stun guns?" I was unable to code this response because it was so sarcastic and insensitive to a serious issue that challenges many college students. I think many people associate the term *psychological* with terms like *crazy* or *unbalanced*, but psychological disabilities can include bipolar disorder, anxiety disorders, and depression. None of these are uncommon in college students.

7. *Is the center accessible and equipped to tutor students with autism? If so, how?*

I wasn't sure what to expect from these directors, but this question produced answers that ranged widely. Directors' responses are listed below.
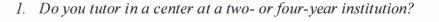
- "Tutors receive a small amount of training on autism in particular. We also try to be flexible-- students can work on the computer or on paper, in the main tutoring area or in a quieter back area, etc."

- "Partially, 3 available tutors, including myself are trained to tutor ASD students. We have florescent light and busy decorations, which is generally a negative."

- "Yes, we are accessible. We don't have any special training to work with folks with autism."

- "Perhaps I am underinformed about autism; I do not know of any impediments that would make our center inaccessible to students with autism. I imagine that we work with students with autism frequently without knowing their diagnosis. We certainly do not ask students whether they have any particular disabilities or conditions. In short, all students are welcome and treated as individual writers who have assignments they want to be successful in completing."

- "I believe so--we have worked with students who have autism spectrum disorders. Again, though, I'm not sure what would qualify us as "equipped" to work with students with autism, other than specific training."

- "Not sure how to reply to this except to say, yes, we are accessible in that we are open to all student writers--and I am quite sure we have worked with students with autism out of the thousands with whom we work each year although we are usually not privy to medical diagnoses."

- "We're certainly accessible but I don't think we have any particular equipment for students with autism. I have worked with one student over the last 2 years and for the most part his only requirement is extra time."
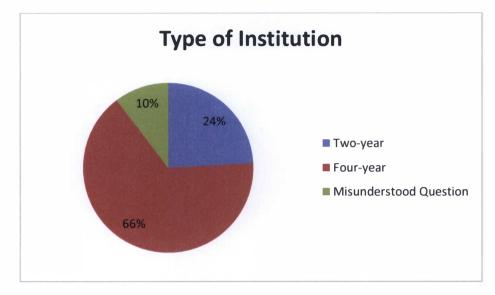
- "I am not sure that the tutors would know enough to pick out an autistic tutee unless the tutee disclosed it."

- "We do our best by consulting with our disabilities coordinator and working closely with professors. We do seem to see the students on campus with autism pretty regularly, but as I said above, I tend to take the lead in tutoring them, as our tutors are not usually confident, at least initially, in their ability to work with students on the spectrum."

- "Not specifically, but we do have a range of supplemental resources that we offer to students of all walks of life. Again, most often, we do not know that a student has autism."

- "this [sic] is a strange question since the spectrum for autism is so wide and variable. We do not turn any student away who is looking for help with their writing. If we are not able to help, we walk them to ACCESS services or a counselor to help them get the help they need."

- "I have no idea what would be necessary to make it specifically "accessible" to this student population or how to "equip" it beyond what is provided for non-autistic students."

Many of these responses indicate that the several of the directors are adamant that students don't typically self-identify (respondents pointed that out more than once in their particular surveys), and seemed to imply that this lack of self-identification is the real reason they can't possibly be fully prepared to accommodate students with disabilities—autism in particular. In Chapter 3 I will address individual responses to these survey questions in more detail.

Tutor Surveys

I was not sure what to expect from other tutors filling out the survey, but I had a relatively high number of responses—29.

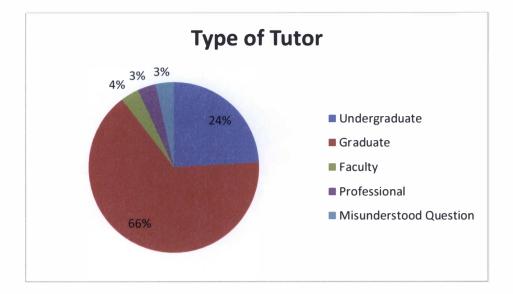1. *Do you tutor in a center at a two- or four-year institution?*

Most of the respondents (n=19) tutor in four-year institutions, 24% tutor at the two-year college level, and there were three participants who misunderstood the intent of the question and just responded with "yes."

2. *Are you a faculty tutor, graduate student tutor, or undergraduate tutor?*

At the institution where I was trained (a four-year university), the center is staffed by English department graduate students. At another institution (two-year college) I had a very different writing center experience: the writing lab is staffed by composition instructors. I wondered if the tutor make-up would impact a center's ability to accommodate students with an ASD.
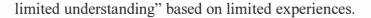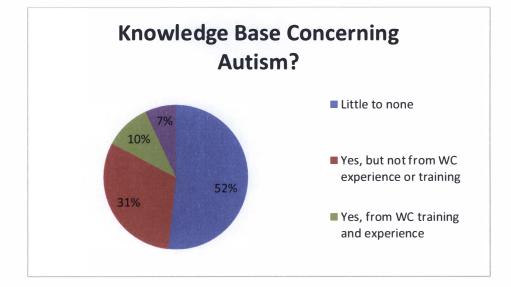
The respondents in this case were comprised of one faculty tutor, one professional tutor, seven undergraduate tutors, and 19 graduate student tutors. One participant misunderstood the question—he or she thought I was asking what types of students the center tutors: "Our center is set up so we tutor anyone who comes in. I have yet to have a faculty member as a client, but I've worked with [sic] graduates and undergraduates."

The results made me wonder if more centers were staffed with a high number of graduate students, but that large population of respondents could be due to the fact that a smaller proportion of undergraduate student tutors belong to and are active on wcenter. It's also worth noting that 29 respondents is a small sample of nearly 3,000 listserv subscribers. And even that number of subscribers is small compared to the global number of people involved in writing center work. But even this small amount of data provides a starting point for the writing center community to reflect on how it might be able to better serve this student population.

3. *Do you feel like you have a knowledge base concerning autism? If so, would you give a brief summary of this knowledge?*

Fifteen of the 29 tutors (52%) responded that they had no knowledge base or only "a limited understanding" based on limited experiences.

A fairly large number (31%, n=9) of the tutors did mention they had a knowledge base concerning autism, but each of them specified that they didn't receive this knowledge from anything WC related but rather from their own individual experiences. See the following responses.

- "My nephew has autism. That's all the knowledge I have."
- "Worked in a residential facility that supported mild autistic adults with other disabilities and also at a facility that supported children with moderate to severe autism, though this experience was 30 years ago and I know how much the field has changed."
- "yes [sic]. I have worked in child care with autistic children and in Indonesian [sic] class rooms with grade school kids."
- "yes [sic], I have worked with students in the classroom who have been diagnosed with autism."

- "I have basic knowledge of the autism spectrum, which I have learned from my sister who works with children with autism at [____] I know that autism is a spectrum disorder and that that each person with autism has unique challenges as well as areas of special skill. Autism is characterized by difficulty with various aspects of communication and social interactions as well as higher sensitivity to stimuli."

- "Yes. I have a son with autism. I am aware of his needs, styles, and limitations. As the post-secondary world opens to accommodate autism, I am cautiously optimistic. A local community college has just implemented 2 programs for students with autism. My son can and does look forward to college. There will be challenges due to stemming and repetitive speech, but they can be managed."

- "Yes, I have several friends with autism and some knowledge about how it affects people."

- "I have some experience working with high school age students with autism--so I am aware that autism is characterized as a neurodevelopmental disorder, there is spectrum on which individuals are diagnosed with autism and the behaviors can vary greatly from person to person. Common characteristics of persons with ASD include impaired social interactions, repetitive behaviors, impaired metaphorical thinking skills, and difficulty with communication (both verbal and nonverbal). Persons with ASD are often highly intelligent and have talents and abilities in many academic areas. The causes of ASD are largely unknown, but it has been linked to heredity (genetics) and possibly environmental factors."

- "yes, but what I know was learned while nannying autistic children, not through writing center trainings"

Two of the three participants mentioned that their knowledge comes from WC training:

- "Brief knowledge base from psychology course and writing center course"

- "Yes. As tutors we were required to attend a training course, during which we covered tutoring students with learning disabilities. The main thing I remember about tutoring students with autism is that leading questions may not necessarily be an effective approach; it is better to give more specific direction to an autistic student."

The third tutor specifically mentions his or her knowledge was sparked by a tutoring session.

- "Basic, but yes. We have a student who comes in rather regularly and he was my first tutoring appointment ever last semester. I felt the session went well, given my lack of experience with people with autism. I looked up some information online about how best to tutor and found that being direct, giving them explicit instruction, and encouragement when they get something right are the basic "rules" for getting them to focus."

This particular response echoed my own personal experience related in Chapter 1.

The last two respondents just mentioned some of the core features of autism, but didn't specify how they knew that information. See their responses below.

- "people with autism are must [sic] often intelligent but lack social skills. They have difficulty making eye contact and appear to be uncomfortable in social situations. Recognizing others [sic] facial expressions is often difficult."

- "Yes. Autism is a disorder that affects abilities to communicate. Effects range from moderate to severe."

4. *Do you feel confident in your abilities to tutor a student who has autism?*

I included this question because I have heard a lot of statements from other teaching professionals like "But if those students need extra help that's what resources like the writing center are there for." And there is some degree of truth to that, but if tutors don't feel confident tutoring students with autism, that undermines their effectiveness, which affects the writing center as a whole. Each tutor is part of that whole, so when they don't feel confident and are therefore less effective, the center is less able to serve this student population. This resistance to accommodating students can be seen on an institutional level as well, considering that the professionals looking to send students with an ASD to the center do not feel they are able to provide appropriate accommodations.

Confidence Tutoring a Student with Autism?

- No
- Depends
- Yes, without follow-up
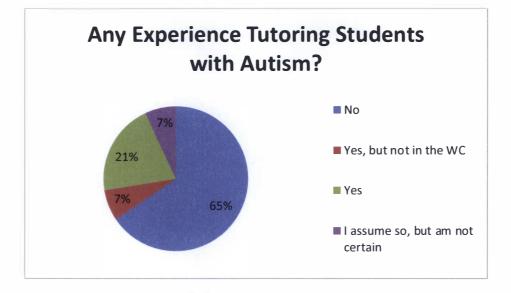- Yes, with follow-up

Fifteen (52%) tutors responded with a firm "no." Eight more (28%) responded with what I would call conditional statements: "it would depend on the student," "only those with mild autism," "somewhat confident depending." Five tutors (17%) said they

did feel confident, but provided little follow-up information. And only one tutor
mentioned his or her small confidence due to his or her own research:

- "I feel better now that I have interacted with autistic students and have done
  the research on how to tutor toward their disability."

5. *Have you had any experience tutoring a student who has autism? Please provide a*
   short summary of those experiences (was it positive? negative? stressful?).

Nineteen of the 29 participants (65%) responded that they had no experience
tutoring students with an ASD, and some specified that they weren't aware that they
tutored any students with autism. Two more tutors (7%) responded that they had worked
students with autism but not in the writing center: one worked with his or her own son,
and the other helped students that he or she nannied with their homework. Six (21%)
shared their experiences, many of which seemed to fall in line with my own research
and/or experiences.

- "I had one experience tutoring an autistic student. What made it so difficult
  was that I couldn't tell if what I was doing was really helping him with what

what [sic] he wanted to work on. He just took my advice as telling him what to do at some points."

- "Yes, actually my supervisor places me with students with autism because of my experience working with them. My experience has been positive because I have I know [sic] how to handle the issues that arise and how to interact with an autistic student. For example, I know that students with autism struggle with change. In one instance, a student sat down at an unoccupied table and I approached him to see if he was seeking tutoring. He said yes and I told him to move over to the table where I was working from. He refused and I knew immediately that he probably had Asberger's [sic] and it would be best for me to move to him. This allowed us to get off to a good start and not have our session break-down right away."

- "Yes, he had Asperger's Syndrome. He was open about it. He was slightly awkward, but we had a successful session."

- "It was very positive. My student was very high functioning, but still got off on tangents and wanted to talk about subjects only of interest to him. I used his interest in these subjects to guide his writing and help him choose a topic. Just because he wasn't studying physics specifically did not mean he couldn't research it and write about it."

- "I have built several tutoring relationships with autistic writers. For me at least, the experience was positive, but stressful at times."

- "With Asperger Syndrome (which isn't listed under Autism in the DSM anymore, I believe). The experience was challenging, but positive overall. The

student was the most honest I had ever worked with and would even call me out on my own demeanor during a session (if my mood seemed different that day). I worked with this student each week, as it was required for his English class."

Two more insisted that they weren't sure they could identify the students as having autism (because the students don't self-identify), but they seemed certain they tutored some students with an ASD.

In Chapter 3 I will address the trends and implications of these survey responses.

Visits

In my visits to other institutions' writing centers, I was able to interview their directors and see the physical space of the centers. These visits gave me a detailed look into how they saw students with ASD navigating those spaces. As previously mentioned, my own experience tutoring as a graduate student at a four-year institution and as a composition instructor at a two-year college already gave me a range of experiences, but I was curious to see how other centers were structured.

The schools I visited were located in four different counties in central or northern Illinois. Three were located in heavily populated, more suburban settings (20,000-148,000). One was located in an isolated smaller city with a lower population (22,000).

The first center I visited was in a four-year institution—University A. This school was in a state of transition because it had previously enrolled only upper-level undergraduates (juniors and seniors) and graduate students. The fall semester of 2014 brought the university its first freshman class. The writing center is located in an Academic Resource Center and is staffed by a mixture of undergraduate and graduate

student tutors. Their tutor training is somewhat informal: new tutors observe sessions, begin tutoring under the eye of the director, and then move toward independent tutoring. There was no required reading or tutor training textbook, but there was a tutor manual that was specific to their center.

The physical layout of the center felt a bit sparse. When I entered the room there was a desk where clients would check in, one large round table (that seated 8-10 students), and then two small rooms that each contained a desk, computer, and printer. It was in these rooms that most of the tutoring took place.

When I set up the visit, the director indicated that the center did have some experience tutoring students with autism. When I asked her to expand on those experiences in our interview, she described one particular student who prompted the tutor to seek research on tutoring students with an ASD. She showed me Elise Geither's and Lisa Meeks' book *Helping Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder Express their Thoughts and Knowledge in Writing: Tips and Exercises for Developing Writing Skills*. She explained that her tutors passed around the book and each read what he or she wanted; she and the staff had a series of informal discussions about what they had read and experienced. While this center did not have a formal practicum about writing center practice, it seems that they were able to effectively serve students, and by their own claim they were also able to accommodate students with autism.

The next institution I visited was a two-year college in a suburban area of Northern Illinois—College B. Similar to University A, the writing center wasn't a separate entity but contained in a tutoring center or learning commons (10 different rooms). Most of the rooms were interconnected. There were rooms for different subject

areas and for specialized tasks. For instance, math, writing, and science all had separate rooms in the commons, and there was also a room for students to practice giving a speech. There was equipment in that space, like a video camera so the students could practice their speeches and see what they were doing well and what they could improve. There was lots of specialized equipment and spaces for different populations. It was an impressive facility.

The room for writing tutoring had five round tables and two walls of computers. There were also two bookshelves with lots of resources for writers. The walls were mostly bare, but the lighting wasn't too intense and colors on the wall were neutral and calming.

This college has a mix of undergraduate peer tutors, faculty tutors and professional tutors. Tutors are provided with tutor training textbooks but don't have a formal practicum or course as there is a high turnover rate for tutors. When I asked the director of the learning commons about tutoring students with autism (particularly in the writing room), she told me that students with disabilities can use the learning commons as they wished, but the office of student accommodations also has a lab with computers and tables. Students with disabilities may also come to this lab, which is in a different location on campus, for tutoring. What really struck me about this other lab was that it was in the front of the office where there are large windows so anyone outside can see into the lab. And the office is clearly marked as a place for students with disabilities. This did not seem to deter students from coming to the lab: the day I visited I saw at least seven different students coming in to work. I wasn't sure if this campus has really managed to remove some of the stigma from being identified as having a disability, but it

appeared to be a very comfortable and collaborative atmosphere based on the brief time that I was observing.

In my time as a graduate assistant and classroom instructor, I was also able to work and observe in the writing lab of College C—another two-year college located in central Illinois. The school is located in a town that has a very suburban feeling and is home to a large research university. Similar to the previous institutions, the writing lab was located in a Center for Academic Success. The lab was staffed by full-time composition instructors at the college. With the exception of myself (the graduate student intern), each of the tutors had a Master's Degree, and many of them had a Ph.D. Because the tutors already have advanced degrees, there really isn't much training. I received a 20-minute talk about how the center was different than the other one I was trained in. This lack of training is concerning because it is indicative of a perception that people with advanced academic degrees wouldn't need any specialized training to tutor diverse students. This is also a center with no appointments; it's a drop-in service. Students can enter the lab and just sit on a computer and compose their papers without talking to a tutor. When students come in, it's the job of the tutor to ask if they need help and if the student wants a session, they're usually only allowed around 10-15 minutes for a tutorial.

The physical space is a little small, but it seems to meet the needs of the student body. There are six computers and three tables, all equipped with rolling chairs. There are some cabinets with student records for each session, three bookshelves with free magazines, and a rotating stand full of helpful handouts for students. There are two doors for students to come through, one of which is a double door and therefore wheelchair

accessible. The doors can be closed to reduce noise in the center, but typically remain open.

The last center is my home institution: University D, which is found in a small town in central Illinois. The writing center staff is comprised of graduate students who have assistantships in the English graduate program. The tutors are assigned to the writing center as part of their assistantship without any input from the director of the center. Tutors are given a two-day orientation before the semester begins, and they begin tutoring when the center opens during the first week of the semester. However, they are required to complete a semester-long practicum as a formal training experience. In the practicum, students learn about diverse types of learners, different genres of writing, writing center pedagogy, tutoring non-native speakers, and general tutoring strategies. The writing center here is a completely separate entity—it isn't part of another type of success center, but is located in very close proximity to the English Department. This makes it convenient for those who run it and staff it, but I think that proximity makes it difficult for the center to assert its independence from the English Department. This wasn't a main focus of my study, but for students who are wary of or dislike the English Department or particular professors, the writing center doesn't always feel like a safe space separate from the entities they dislike or mistrust.

The center is one room with a desk area by the door where students check in. There are two desktop computers and some laptops (but those don't appear to be utilized much). The computers have rolling chairs. There are four round tables that comfortably seat three people each—those chairs are more stationary. There is also a lounge-like area with a couch, armchair, and coffee table. The center has three bookshelves with lots of

tutor training materials and resources for writers, and a large file cabinet full of more handouts and other things. The center is limited in some ways—tutors aren't able to adjust the lights in the room or find ways to reduce noise without actually leaving the space. The room (and the building) comply with ADA guidelines, but are not extraordinarily flexible for people who have physical disabilities. For example, the building has only one elevator (a rather rickety one) located in an area that isn't in close proximity to handicapped parking spaces. Similarly, the writing center has a doorway wide enough to accommodate a wheelchair entrant but only a few of the furnishings are on wheels and easy to move. If a client came in to the center in a wheelchair, the staff could certainly move the chairs that aren't on wheels, but the center is crowded with people and their things, so it might be difficult to move a chair out of the way completely. Moving a chair for one student likely means placing it in another person's way.

The opportunity to visit and observe the practices of other centers was very useful, especially when coupled with my own experiences. This next section specifically focuses on a student who has autism and previously visited University D's writing center where I tutored him, without knowing that he had autism.

Student Interview

The student who volunteered to be interviewed for my study was a junior Communications Studies major. He wasn't diagnosed with autism until he was already in college. Student X originally decided to be an English major, but grew frustrated with the professors in the English department and the assignments they were asking him to complete. Much of his anger stemmed from feeling as though "English people" talked over his head and made him feel stupid. He and I scheduled an interview through email,

and when we met I remembered tutoring him in the center and finding the session extremely challenging. I later discovered that session was his last in the writing center.

1. *What challenges do you have with writing?*

Here the student talked a lot about his struggle with academic writing. He did express some interest in creative writing but generally saw the writing process as overwhelmingly challenging. He discussed how he was unable to start any paper until he came right up to the deadline. I asked if he had used the writing center for brainstorming purposes, and it sounded like he had tried it once, but did not find that conference particularly helpful. He told me his biggest challenge came with, "essay writing. I just stare at the screen for hours. I have trouble starting, I have to start at the beginning—I cannot start in the middle. I have the same struggle with creative writing. I can only start when the due date is looming."

2. *What do you like about writing?*

Here he talked about enjoying creative writing but still made it clear that he struggled with it. He told me that he stumbled onto creative writing because he was looking for artistic talent and he did not find it with drawing. He also spoke at length about his desire to write scripts for TV or for video games. I asked if he liked anything about any type of academic writing, and he told me that he didn't enjoy academic writing at all but did have an easier job writing reflective pieces and narrative essays.

3. *What do you fear about writing?*

He talked about not having fear but rather anxiety that comes from worrying about grammar issues, "It just becomes a lost cause, and I give up on life because of my frustration." I asked him if any anxiety was due to the prospect of getting a bad grade and

he told me that he didn't really care that much about the grade. It seemed like he used to care, but the frustration of constantly doing poorly on writing assignments because of his grammar issues just turned his anxiety into apathy.

4. *In what way(s) do you think the writing center might be able to help you?*

He started to talk about what he would like from tutors based on his previous experience in the writing center, so I asked him to refocus his answer on how he thought the center could help him improve his writing. He specifically answered that he is "not sure what they could do to help my writing, probably how to get a good attention-grabber. That would be a good start." So I repeated "maybe helping you start your papers?" and he told me, "yes so I have content to show them later to help me with, It could help me start my paper. Brainstorming."

5. *What do you expect from a writing center?*

Here the student talked a lot about what he wanted from the tutors. A lot of his hostility came from a short stint as an English major. During this time he grew very frustrated with people in that field, particularly with the jargon-heavy language professionals tend to use. Specifically, he mentioned that he wanted tutors "to speak slowly, not use large words—and if you can't help it, define them with patience, give examples, use internet speak."

6. *What fears do you have about visiting the writing center?*

Similar to the previous question, he spoke at length about his irritation with English majors. He was someone who did not fit into the mold of a "perfect English major" and was often made to feel unintelligent and lacking in basic skills: "I'm afraid of being misunderstood, that people will make assumptions about me, think I am stupid." As I

listened I realized a lot of students feel this way about the writing center, not just students with an ASD. I remember feeling that way as a student and in my time teaching FYC courses my students have also shared the same concerns about visiting campus academic resource centers that offered tutoring services.

7. *How could a tutor help you?*

He again echoed his preferences about the language the tutors used, but he also described some of his own personal challenges with taking notes in classes and how that might also translate to the writing center. We talked about the way sessions are typically run in the writing center and how the tutors might better accommodate his specific needs. He noted that the tutors could, "Read the paper out loud for me; help me take notes for the session and brainstorming."

8. *How could a tutor frustrate you?*

This student had lots of strong feelings about the language tutors use—he emphatically stated that he did not like so many "big words." It was actually rather depressing for me when he remarked that tutors could annoy him, "When they don't use common language, correct my speech, judge when I come in with a very rough draft, when you don't listen to what I'm asking." I wondered if these things had actually occurred in the writing center or if he just felt judged because he had a very rough draft. It also seemed to speak to the communication impairments I detailed in Chapter 1—if a tutor used sarcasm, idiomatic or abstract language, or relied too heavily on non-language communication, it would be very possible for him to misunderstand the intent and feel insulted.
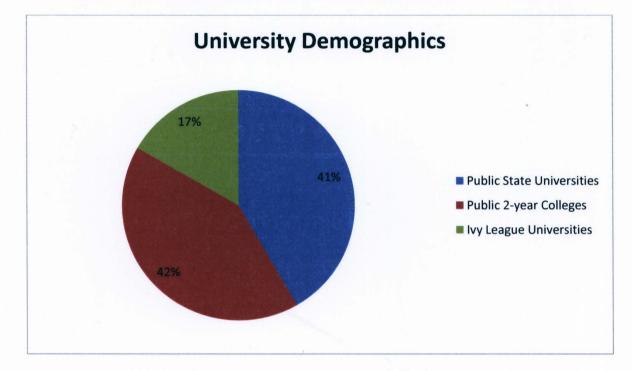
9. *How could the physical environment of the center be improved?*

I asked this question to hear his thoughts about how our physical space might be more inviting for students with autism. He was able to tell me his own preferences but also told me about how he thought other people with autism might be more comfortable: "I'm more comfortable with female tutors, but I don't need to work with the same tutor unless it's the same paper. No dead silence. Having two tutors wouldn't help some people. Maybe a stress ball would be good for some people." I offered some suggestions like having two tutors at once, extra lamps or music, some of which he responded to enthusiastically, and others less unenthusiastically. He did not think having two tutors would help him, but thought it might help other students with autism. He loved the idea of having music play—he felt like that would release some of the pressure he felt from the quiet in the room. He did not like the idea of outsiders, tutors or other students, hearing his writing read aloud or the discussion between him and his tutor.

I wasn't quite sure what to expect from this interview, I did note some moments where it felt very difficult to communicate with the student—I had to clarify my questions a lot—but I thought he would be angry about answering so many questions, and he was really rather pleasant throughout the interview. It reminded me that in interviews, as in writing center sessions, that we cannot anticipate every aspect of the interaction and that personal dynamics will always have some type of impact on the session.

Website Analysis

I wondered how accessible writing center websites were for all students, but particularly for students with autism. I examined 12 writing center websites. Five (41%) were public state universities located in three different US regions. Another five (42%) of

the twelve schools were public two-year colleges pulled from three different US regions.

The final two (17%) were prestigious Ivy League universities on the east coast.

University Demographics

- Public State Universities 41%
- Public 2-year Colleges 42%
- Ivy League Universities 17%

When I examined each of the websites, I wanted to evaluate ease of access, placement of basic information (location, hours, etc.), use of visual elements, and use of abstract language. When I began at each home screen for the institution, I counted how many steps it took me to find the actual writing center page. I wanted to see how easy it would be for a student to access it. Would s/he have to search for it? Find it accidentally while looking for support services? Was there a specific writing center website or just a list of tutoring services? My results are as follows:

- Three of the 12 sites would be impossible for a user to locate by clicking on links like "ACADEMIC RESOURCES" or "STUDENT SERVICES." I had to type "writing center" into the search engine to arrive at a writing center website.

- Four of the 12 sites were easy to access; a user would need only two link clicks to find the writing center page. This would be ideal for students with autism if they were looking to find information about the writing center. It would also be easier for them to just find accidentally while looking for support services and resources.

- Two of the 12 sites were moderately easy to access; a user would need only three clicks to find the writing center page.

- Another two of the 12 sites were mildly difficult to access; a user would need four link clicks to find the writing center page.

- And the last one was moderately difficult to access with the user needing five clicks to find the writing center page.

Some other important findings to consider:

- Only one of the five two-year colleges had a dedicated writing center website. The other four had lists or blurbs about what types of tutoring were offered, or lists of the services a writing center could offer, but no writing center webpage.

- Six of the 12 schools required students to use an "ACADEMICS" tab to locate the site, three put it under a "STUDENTS" tab, and seven used a tab with words like "TUTORING," "RESOURCES," and "ASSISTANCE."

- There was no consistency with the two Ivy League schools. One of the two sites I was unable to locate without typing "writing center" into the search engine, but when I was able to find it the webpage was extremely helpful and well designed. The other site required the user to go through five link clicks to find the page, and

the page didn't offer specific information about what a student could expect from the writing center.

I examined the types of information provided by the 66% (n=8) of writing centers that did have websites in four categories: logistics (location, hours, how to make an appointment, etc.), services offered, services NOT offered, and visuals (photos, videos). As previously mentioned four of the five two-year colleges didn't have a website; eight schools did have writing center websites.

Many (75%, n=6) of the schools had good logistical information, but some were missing some basic information like the location of the physical center. A student would have to call the center to find out where it was located. There were two sites that were excellent: they had a list of tutors with basic information like major, year, strengths, and photos. Another site had a video tutorial of how to sign up for an appointment using WCOnline.

Nearly all of the sites (n=7) provided some information on what services were offered. Some were more specific than others—actually listing workshop schedules or specific tips on stages of the writing process like brainstorming, prewriting, drafting, and revising.

Typically most writing centers have some information about what students cannot expect from a tutoring session (i.e., editing, writing the paper for the student, offering a grade). Only one of the eight sites was completely free of this information. Each of the other seven had some mention of services the writing center does not provide like grade evaluations or editing services. Each one varied with how specifically they detailed this information—some did in in list form, others in a Q & A format.

The reason I wanted to see how well the sites used visuals is because research shows students with autism actually respond better to visual stimuli than traditional written text. Two of the eight had no photos, but one of those two had a video tutorial on how to make an appointment, which would be helpful for a student with autism. Four of the eight had photos, but they were stiff, made-to-look-candid shots without much personality. The other two sites provided lots of photos that seemed natural and candid in addition to the pictures of the individual tutors.

Lastly, I looked carefully through the written text of the sites to assess the type of language the sites were using. Students with autism tend to struggle with abstract language, but thrive on clear, concise, concrete language. Some sites used more abstract language than others, but on all eight sites there was at least one example of abstract language that could potentially be confusing for students with as ASD. These examples are listed below.

- "stages of writing," "brainstorming ideas"
- "improving the quantity, caliber, and engagement of student learning"
- "improve organization, audience, arguments, and support," "drawing upon that knowledge"
- "build a stronger foundation for your paper"
- "revise for stronger content"
- "provides students with individual, tailored instruction"
- "tutors are trained to read academic papers critically and with an eye towards strengthening an argument"
- "they use their sources only to illustrate ideas"

Some of these examples may so common it might be difficult to see the abstract language, but I will refer back to them in Chapter 3 when I discuss principles of universal design and problematic language.

Conclusion

Considering the findings of this research, I see many implications about these reported and observed levels of accessibility for students with autism. In the next chapter I will discuss what my research results indicate about the current culture regarding students with autism in the writing center. I wanted to know how other writing center professionals viewed students with an ASD and how they fit into the writing center space. The results were helpful in this regard because they illustrate the pervasive attitude of writing center administrators that students with autism don't often need special accommodations, and they wouldn't be able to receive those accommodations without disclosing their different-abledness. This same attitude came through in the survey responses reported in this chapter and administrative choices in website and physical space design. The survey responses also made it clear that many tutors don't know very much about autism and are not confident in their abilities to effectively tutor students with autism.

In the next chapter, I will discuss these implications in more depth and examine specifically how accessible centers are now in terms of their physical environments and websites, and to what extent this concern for inclusiveness and accessibility is reflected in tutor training. I also discuss universal design principles and how we can utilize them to make the space more inviting not only for students with an ASD, but all students.

Chapter 3: Implications and Recommendations

Accessibility is a broad concept that is central to a conversation about tutoring students with autism in the writing center. The Oxford English Dictionary defines *accessible* as "Able to be received, acquired, or made use of; open or available (to a particular class of person)." By this standard, most centers are not accessible for students with autism, as is clear when we focus on accessibility from three different angles— website, physical environment, and tutor training. As related in Chapter 1, the questions this research study was looking to answer were as follows:

- What are current pervasive attitudes regarding tutoring students with autism?

- Do students with autism know how to access the writing center?

- How does a session differ when a student discloses?

- What can we do when they do not disclose?

In this chapter I discuss current attitudes toward this student population, the ways writing centers are and are not accessible for students with autism, and how professionals can better equip writing centers to meet the needs of this particular group of students.

Research Implications

Before conducting my research I had a general idea of writing centers' abilities to tutor clients with autism. A lack of scholarship concerning the issue coupled with the responses to few wcenter listerv inquiries on how to tutor students with an ASD indicated that it was an issue that should be addressed but that more research was needed. Using a mixed methods research approach allowed me to obtain information from several angles and to examine the current trends in website and physical space accessibility in addition to the trends in director attitudes and tutorial experiences.

One of the most interesting trends I noticed when evaluating writing center websites was that many two-year colleges lacked a formal writing center website. Even the school I visited with the most impressive facilities did not have a dedicated site with information about writing center services. It was clear that any students with autism would have to rely on the referrals of teachers and perhaps the office of disability services to access the writing center: they are not likely to be drawn into the center by a blurb vaguely telling students they can "get help with writing."

The other trend that was very apparent in regard to websites was that each of the sites made liberal use of abstract language, which will be discussed in detail in the upcoming section on websites. The abstract language is so common in everyday academic speech that a website administrator or author would probably have to specifically edit the content to remove or clarify abstract language with this particular audience in mind.

The fact that the examples of abstract language are so commonplace shows that writing center personnel need to carefully examine their language, both in writing and in speech. Abstract language on the site could confuse students with autism, non-native speakers, and possibly underclassmen. They could also feel the same discomfort when tutors speak to them in person. When I interviewed a student with autism, his most notable frustration with writing center tutors was that they used "big words"—vocabulary that he just could not understand. Both of these areas in my research draw attention to the idea that writing center professionals need to think carefully about the accessibility of the language that is being spoken and written in writing center spaces.

The trends that I noticed when visiting other centers were indicative of the fact that accommodating these students requires purposeful and well-thought-out adjustments. All of the centers were located in buildings that were handicap accessible and many were equipped with movable furnishings, but all of these things felt really standard—a lot of centers have rolling chairs and tables that can be moved around. There were not a lot of notable exceptions. It is also obvious that these centers suffer are "afterthoughts" with small budgets: nearly all of them are in a space that was clearly not originally intended to house a writing center. Many of them are converted classroom spaces: two of them are located in a type of academic resource center but lack resources like style guides, a sufficient number of computers, or basic decor (more than one poster with Stephen North's maxim "We are here to talk to writers"). It is worth noting that the two-year institution with the impressive facility was not originally intended to be used as a writing center space but had been thoroughly redesigned with student needs in mind (detailed in Chapter 2's section on visits). It was an exception. I've never seen a center so purposefully arranged to accommodate different learners or so full of specialized equipment and resources.

The most enlightening part of the research came from surveying other writing center professionals. The surveys really clarified how many people currently view the issue of accommodating students with autism. When I surveyed both groups—directors and tutors—I asked if they worked in a two- or four-year institution because I wanted to see if there was any correlation between the type of institution and attitudes towards students with autism as well as the levels of accessibility. I did not find any such link, but I was able to identify some other important trends.

When I surveyed the directors, many (62%) of them indicated that inclusivity played a major role in their centers, but only 31% said that inclusivity played a significant role in their tutor training. I had assumed that identifying inclusivity as playing a large role in the center would mean that it would also play a similarly large role in tutor training, but that was not the case. What was of great interest was the fact that many of the directors who insisted that inclusivity played a large role in the center responded with some defensiveness or with hedged answers such as the following:

- "We're certainly accessible but I do not think we have any particular equipment for students with autism."

- "I believe so--we have worked with students who have autism spectrum disorders."

- "Not sure how to reply to this except to say, yes, we are accessible in that we are open to all student writers--and I am quite sure we have worked with students with autism out of the thousands with whom we work each year although we are usually not privy to medical diagnoses.".

But respondents who noted they could improve inclusivity in their centers responded with detailed and specific responses when describing how their centers were equipped to work with students with autism. These comments reveal that sometimes only minor adjustments are needed to accommodate students with autism:

- "Tutors receive a small amount of training on autism in particular. We also try to be flexible-- students can work on the computer or on paper, in the main tutoring area or in a quieter back area, etc…"

- ▪ "Partially, 3 available tutors, including myself are trained to tutor ASD students. We have florescent light and busy decorations, which is generally a negative."

- ▪ "We do our best by consulting with our disabilities coordinator and working closely with professors. We do seem to see the students on campus with autism pretty regularly, but as I said above, I tend to take the lead in tutoring them, as our tutors are not usually confident, at least initially, in their ability to work with students on the spectrum."

I noticed a similar pattern when I analyzed Q5 in the director survey—many of those who responded emphatically that they were equipped to accommodate those with physical disabilities listed basic ADA guidelines but seemed defensive when asked to describe if the centers were accessible for students with autism.

The question (Q7) asking directors if their centers were accessible and equipped to tutor students with autism brought a wide range of answers. I realized when I was analyzing the results that perhaps using the word "equipped" was a bad idea. I was using the word in a very general sense, but I think many respondents interpreted it as though I was asking if they had special equipment for students with autism, but some of the frustration I detected is more indicative of a lack of knowledge and experience. I suspect some directors viewed the question as an accusation that they should have special equipment for students with an ASD.

Director responses are listed below:

1. "Tutors receive a small amount of training on autism in particular. We also try to be flexible-- students can work on the computer or on paper, in the main tutoring area or in a quieter back area, etc."

2. "Partially, 3 available tutors, including myself are trained to tutor ASD students. We have florescent light and busy decorations, which is generally a negative."

3. "We do our best by consulting with our disabilities coordinator and working closely with professors. We do seem to see the students on campus with autism pretty regularly, but as I said above, I tend to take the lead in tutoring them, as our tutors are not usually confident, at least initially, in their ability to work with students on the spectrum."

4. "I am not sure that the tutors would know enough to pick out an autistic tutee unless the tutee disclosed it."

5. "Yes, we are accessible. We do not have any special training to work with folks with autism."

6. "Perhaps I am underinformed about autism; I do not know of any impediments that would make our center inaccessible to students with autism. I imagine that we work with students with autism frequently without knowing their diagnosis. We certainly do not ask students whether they have any particular disabilities or conditions. In short, all students are welcome and treated as individual writers who have assignments they want to be successful in completing."

7. "I believe so--we have worked with students who have autism spectrum disorders. Again, though, I am not sure what would qualify us as "equipped" to work with students with autism, other than specific training."

8. "Not sure how to reply to this except to say, yes, we are accessible in that we are open to all student writers--and I am quite sure we have worked with students

with autism out of the thousands with whom we work each year although we are usually not privy to medical diagnoses."

9. "We're certainly accessible but I do not think we have any particular equipment for students with autism. I have worked with one student over the last 2 years and for the most part his only requirement is extra time."

10. "Not specifically, but we do have a range of supplemental resources that we offer to students of all walks of life. Again, most often, we do not know that a student has autism."

11. "this is a strange question since the spectrum for autism is so wide and variable. We do not turn any student away who is looking for help with their writing. If we are not able to help, we walk them to ACCESS services or a counselor to help them get the help they need."

12. "I have no idea what would be necessary to make it specifically "accessible" to this student population or how to "equip" it beyond what is provided for non-autistic students."

Responses 1-3 are very encouraging—each one acknowledges that there are students with autism using the writing centers and the staff is responding with special accommodations for those students. The respondents show a basic, if not advanced, understanding of ASD and how it poses particular challenges for the students who are diagnosed with it. Responses 5 and 9 are interesting because they insist their centers are accessible, but then are not able to provide specific details of features that contribute to their accessibility; rather they note they do not have or do not need any particularly special training.

Response 4 especially highlights that most tutors would not be able to recognize students have autism unless the students disclosed their diagnosis, which poses an extra challenge. How can tutors be expected to help students with autism if they cannot see the student has autism because a majority of these students are unlikely to self-identify? Responses 4, 6, 8, and 10 all mention something about not knowing if students have autism if the students do not disclose. This response makes me particularly uncomfortable because it highlights a pervasive attitude that students are not entitled to accommodations if they do not want to disclose that they have an ASD. It places the responsibility on the students to tell the center what accommodations they need, which does not indicate the centers truly welcome this group of students. These responses also show that if students did come in and self-identify many tutors would not be able to accommodate them because their directors do not think they need any special accommodations.

This trend of being unable to accommodate students with an ASD seems to align with the responses I received in my tutor surveys. More than half (n=15, 52%) of the 29 tutors who responded to the survey said they have only a limited understanding of autism or no knowledge base. Most of the respondents who did have a knowledge base also specified that their knowledge did not come from writing center training or tutoring but came from personal experiences. Given these results it is not surprising that most (52%) are not confident in their own abilities to successfully tutor a student with autism. When asked if they had any experience tutoring students with autism, only six (21%) of the

participants had knowingly tutored students with an ASD in the writing center.[7] Their

responses are listed below.

1. "I had one experience tutoring an autistic student. What made it so difficult

   was that I couldn't tell if what I was doing was really helping him with what

   what [sic] he wanted to work on. He just took my advice as telling him what

   to do at some points."

2. "Yes, he had Asperger's Syndrome. He was open about it. He was slightly

   awkward, but we had a successful session."

3. "It was very positive. My student was very high functioning, but still got off

   on tangents and wanted to talk about subjects only of interest to him. I used

   his interest in these subjects to guide his writing and help him choose a topic.

   Just because he wasn't studying physics specifically did not mean he couldn't

   research it and write about it."

4. "I have built several tutoring relationships with autistic writers. For me at

   least, the experience was positive, but stressful at times."

5. "Yes, actually my supervisor places me with students with autism because of

   my experience working with them. My experience has been positive because I

   have I know [sic] how to handle the issues that arise and how to interact with

   an autistic student. For example, I know that students with autism struggle

   with change. In one instance, a student sat down at an unoccupied table and I

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[7] I am concerned that readers could possibly see that 19 of the 29 respondents noted they had not tutored students with autism and conclude that there just are not a large number of students with autism seeking help from the writing center or that there is not a notable population of students with autism at the college level. I do not think that this number is indicative of the number of students with autism coming to the writing center to be tutored, but is more indicative of the fact that tutors are not trained to identify the core features of autism in students without students disclosing that information to the tutors.

approached him to see if he was seeking tutoring. He said yes and I told him

to move over to the table where I was working from. He refused and I knew

immediately that he probably had Asberger's [sic] and it would be best for me

to move to him. This allowed us to get off to a good start and not have our

session break-down right away."

6. "With Asperger Syndrome (which is not listed under Autism in the DSM

anymore, I believe). The experience was challenging, but positive overall. The

student was the most honest I had ever worked with and would even call me

out on my own demeanor during a session (if my mood seemed different that

day). I worked with this student each week, as it was required for his English

class."

The first three responses are from tutors who describe singular experiences with tutoring

students with autism while the latter three responses are from tutors who routinely tutor

students with autism. Responses 1-3 are similar to the sessions I have had with writers

with autism: "I couldn't tell if what I was doing was really helping him," "He was slightly

awkward,[8]" "My student was very high functioning, but still got off on tangents and

wanted to talk about subjects only of interest to him." Responses 4-6 align well with

scholarship describing people with autism: negatively responsive to change, can be

stressful to work with, and responds well to routines. Several of these responses highlight

a trend that although students with autism come with a new set of challenges, engaging

with them can bring enlightening and positive experiences to the tutors who work with

them. Four of them use the word "positive" and another uses the word "successful" to

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[8] I would not refer to my students with an ASD as "awkward" but I can confirm that my students had impairments in socialization and communication.

describe the experiences. Even when they note that the experiences were stressful or challenging, they all note that the sessions were more positive than negative. My research was useful in bringing attention to current trends involving students with autism. Now I will discuss how those trends intersect with current writing center *praxis*.

Current Practices

While writing centers I studied greatly differ in staffing, training, layout, budget, logistics and services, their goals appear to be very traditional: writing centers are here to produce better writers by assisting clients through one-to-one tutoring sessions, workshops, and print and online resources. The centers strive to be inclusive for all writers and train the tutors to be facilitative, minimalist, and informed in the types of writing they will encounter.

But when writing center professionals start to complicate this purpose with a group of students with atypical needs, our customary practices call for additions, and sometimes changes, to current best practices. Not so long ago, universities and writing centers saw an enormous increase in non-native English speaking students. People started doing research and making recommendations for how to work with these students whose language differences posed a new challenge to writing center *praxis*. Now it is very common for tutors to be trained in how to tutor international and/or non-native speakers of English. There are large sections in tutor training manuals and separate books that address the specific needs of this one group of students. My research now challenges the writing center community to do the same for another growing population—students who have an ASD.

It is not unusual for people hearing about this research to ask "Are there a lot of students with autism at the college level?" or "How could we *equip* a center for these students?" As seen in the results of my director surveys, it is clear that the pervasive attitude is that there is not a large population of students with autism coming into the writing center. As a corollary to this perception that students with autism are a minority, people do not always accept that the lack of information about ways to accommodate these students is a problem that needs to be addressed. At least half (50%) of participants responded with an answer indicating they couldn't make special accommodations without knowing a student has autism: "Perhaps I am underinformed [sic] about autism; I do not know of any impediments that would make our center inaccessible to students with autism. I imagine that we work with students with autism frequently without knowing their diagnosis. We certainly do not ask students whether they have any particular disabilities or conditions." But we know that ASD is a spectrum disorder that is increasing in prevalence. It has also been established that autism is characterized by impairments in socialization and communication—two key elements of writing center *praxis*. It stands to reason that the increase in prevalence leads to an increase in early diagnoses and interventions. These interventions with special services and accommodations for these students are intended to prepare them for life after they leave their secondary institutions. Often this life includes a college education, and that is why we are currently seeing a rise in this student population. My research indicates that this population will continue to grow. It is this growth that demands immediate attention to accommodations in colleges, and more specifically, in writing centers.

Recommendations

I have analyzed three different spheres looking for ways the writing center can be more accessible for students with autism: website, physical environment, and tutor training.

Website

The questions that drove my research about writing center websites were the following:

- How easy is the site to access?

- Is the content clear?

- Are there visuals? Video or audio content?

- What language can confuse or exclude students with autism?

My analysis indicates that some centers rely heavily on websites to publicize information about the centers, but other institutions rely less on websites[9]. One interesting and problematic trend is that nearly all of the two-year schools I analyzed did not have a dedicated website. There was often a webpage for tutoring as a general service that mentioned help with writing, but those blurbs did not provide much information about the center and what services were provided for students. Often students with an ASD begin at the two-year college, and it seems essential that they would be able to access the center via the Internet because that provides students with autism a way to access information without the anxiety that comes with phone calls or face-to-face interaction. So my first recommendation is that all Writing Centers have a dedicated website. After that has been established, specific recommendations for improving website accessibility are listed below.

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[9] This assumption is due to the fact that some websites are absent or very bare.

1. **Make the site easy to find.**

   When I started to examine the eight dedicated writing center sites, I wanted to first know how easy the sites were to find if the user began at the institution's home page. Users would be able to locate many of the sites with two to five clicks, but a few sites could only be located through a keyword search. Having to go through several different windows to locate the site would not be problematic if a student with autism was specifically searching for the writing center (e.g., if there were required visits or the center was recommended by an instructor or someone from disability services), but if students were searching on their own for additional resources then they are more likely to find the writing center website if they can access it with a small number of clicks. And students who find a writing center website are more likely to find their way into the center itself. It would be very helpful if the writing center website could be included in the kind of "Quick links" tab often found on home pages. The tab usually includes links to email portals, the library, online classrooms—places that students visit often and need easy access to. That ease of access is more likely to bring a student into a center, providing that the page content is also accessible.

2. **Review the content and the format of the content particularly for abstract language and problematic sensory stimulation.**

When analyzing a webpage for content—not just for students with autism, but for all readers—it is important to consider the following question:

- If it is organized in a question/answer or directive format could any of the questions or directives be misinterpreted?

Why You Should Come in Early for Your Writing Conference

Even though your writing project might not be due for a while, it's best to come in early for these reasons:

- If you come in early with your writing assignment and ideas, our consultants can help you understand and analyze the writing assignment

- If you come in early, we can help you brainstorm ideas

- If you schedule an appointment early, your conference with a writing center assistant can act as a mini-deadline to keep you on task and motivated

- If you come in early, you can assure yourself a spot in the Writing Center's busy schedule (this is especially important during peak times, such as mid-term and near the end of the semester).

For example, the initial directive to "come in early" could be easily misunderstood. A student with autism would likely assume that s/he should arrive a few minutes early for a session. Reading through the explanatory bullets makes it is clear that the center is advocating for students to come early in the writing process rather than for any particular session.

Questions about organization and presentation of content provide another way to think about accessibility.

- Does it provide clear instructions for navigating the space? Are there clearly marked tabs the logically order the content on the site?

- Is the information in list format? Are the lists clear and consistent?

- Is all important basic information included, like the phone number, location, and hours?

- Are there visuals to help the user picture what the center is like?

- Will the content produce a negative sensory response?

When students with autism look at a webpage, it is possible that they can have negative sensory responses to the format of the page (e.g., the page is cluttered, has bright colors, or provides animations). If the page is over-stimulating students' senses, they are

not going to continue to look at the page for information. For those who have administrative control over website design and layout, I would suggest using san serif fonts because they are crisper and less visually distracting. I would also suggest care in the use of color; find a balance between a color scheme that is appealing or inviting but not overwhelming. This can be challenging because institutional color schemes are often not optional, but when they are, students with autism respond well to high contrast colors like black and yellow to read easily. A color scheme like light blue next to dark blue would make reading the text difficult. Neutral colors like cream and beige are good for background colors, but white is not because it is reflective, which is distracting for individuals with autism. Another good rule of thumb is to have no more than three colors on a site to avoid overwhelming the viewer. It may be best to discuss these choices with a web designer who could provide options for a color scheme.

3. **Remove and/or clarify problematic language.**

When I analyzed each of the sites, I noticed some language that might be problematic for students with autism. Students with an ASD tend to have difficulty with abstract language: they find concrete language and concepts easier to comprehend. Some earlier examples I mentioned in chapter 2 include the following phrases:

- "stages of writing," "brainstorming ideas"
- "improving the quantity, caliber, and engagement of student learning"
- "improve organization, audience, arguments, and support," "drawing upon that knowledge"
- "build a stronger foundation for your paper"
- "revise for stronger content"

- "provides students with individual, tailored instruction"

- "tutors are trained to read academic papers critically and with an eye towards strengthening an argument"

- "they use their sources only to illustrate ideas"

If I were to look at these phrases from a literal standpoint like a person with autism would, I would be confused. Stages are floors that actors stand on. How can learning have caliber? Isn't that a term used to describe guns and bullets? How does one "draw on knowledge?" How can my paper have a foundation—it's not a house. Tailors hem pants and illustrations are pictures. Brainstorming? Are brains falling from the sky amid thunder and lightning?

It is important to note that I am not suggesting that students with autism would be incapable of understanding this language: I am merely highlighting the potential for unnecessary difficulty or confusion. But something else important to remember is that non-native speakers may also struggle with the culturally specific ways Americans use these words and phrases. It stands to reason that if we edit sites to favor concrete language, we could improve understanding not only for students with autism but also for students who are not native speakers of English. And there are some places in which it is possible to just clarify. For example, one site advertises that the center can help "revise for stronger content." That could easily be clarified by adding a term or phrase like "better," "more effective," or "more purposeful" in parentheses after the word "stronger" to read "revise for stronger (more effective) content."

4. **Provide information to help the students understand how to find the center, how the center works, and what a tutoring session will look like.**

When basic logistical information is not included on the main page of the site it reflects poorly on the center. Why would students want to come for help with writing when the writing center personnel haven't even edited the website to make sure it is complete? This is not just for students with an ASD but for any first-time user. It would also be helpful for students to know what the check-in process will be like. At some centers students are asked lots of questions during check-in. It would be helpful for those questions to be listed online so students could choose to write down their answers for the person checking them to avoid being bombarded with a barrage of innocuous but boring questions when they walk in the door. This process can especially irritate students who come to the center frequently—they wonder why they are asked the same questions every time they return to the center. It should be clear what information they will need to know and what they should bring with them.

The site would also be a great place to include pictures or videos. Some sites include pictures of the center or the tutors. Some include video tutorials that show students how to make appointments online. It would also be helpful to include a video of a mock session so students would know exactly how they could be helped and the approach that tutors take

Consultants (A-L)

Alyssa, Graduate in Psychology

Specializations:

Discipline: Clinical/Community Mental Health (Clinical Psychology)

Genre: Career Writing, Research Papers, Reports, Literature Reviews
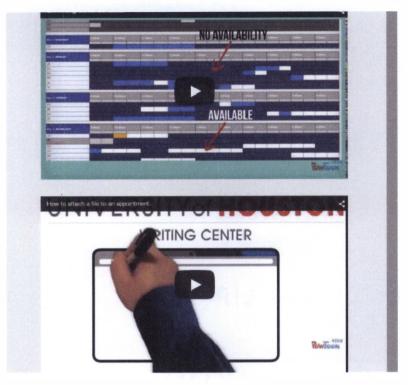
Documentation Style: APA

Hello! I am a second year student in the Clinical/Community Mental Health program. I graduated from Southern Illinois University Carbondale with my degree in Psychology and a minor in Philosophy. In my free time, I enjoy reading, watching movies and television, enjoying the outdoors, and hanging out with friends.

Figure 1

toward sessions. See Figures 1 and 2 for some examples of excellent visuals.

These recommended changes to writing centers' websites would better enable students to visit the center and avoid exacerbating their anxieties by making it clear what takes place in writing center sessions.

5. **Ask for help. More specifically, ask people who have autism for user reviews of the website.**

When I was looking for a student who had autism to interview, I sent a request to the Director of the Office of Student Disability Services who then emailed students with autism asking them if they would be willing to participate in my project. I was only contacted by one student, but his feedback was crucial and helpful to the whole project. He provided me with a user's perspective of how a student with autism views a session, tutors, and the physical layout of the writing center.

In Lisa Meloncon's collection, *Rhetorical Accessibility: At the Intersection of Technical Communication and Disability Studies* there are a lot of great resources for considering people with disabilities when using technology and designing websites. Elizabeth Pass, in her article "Accessibility and the Web Design Student," makes some excellent suggestions when teaching her web design students to consider accessibility for people with disabilities. She begins by defining *disability* according to the legal definition and then pushes the definition further to examine areas she believes the legal definition fails to include. When teaching accessibility she begins with a series of steps: (1) "discuss the legal and technical definitions of disability, (2) evaluate whether example websites follow the legal and technical definitions, and (3) find places where the legal and technical definitions may fall short" (119). These steps are a great place to start because they prompt us to think about the difference between meeting what I call the "letter of the law" versus the "spirit of the law." We might look at our website and know that it meets ADA guidelines, but it is also important to make sure it goes beyond the legal rules and is truly accessible for people with disabilities.

If it's possible, I would recommend that directors either find people they might know who have autism or contact the Office of Disability Services to seek out user reviews from people who are actually autistic. In her article "Embracing Interdependence: Technology Developers, Autistic Users,[10] and Technical Communicators," Kimberly Elmore advocates asking people with autism to provide user reviews when technology developers are trying to make technology user-friendly for people with an ASD. I have found that asking people with autism for their opinions has been helpful and productive.

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[10] While this article had some helpful points about using people with autism to provide feedback for products designed to help people with autism, the language in the article was especially problematic due to the labeling language that was frequently used.

We can research autism and try to make recommendations based on that research, but asking the people we want to make it more accessible for is going to go far beyond what that research alone will provide for our administrative choices.

Physical Environment

After checking and improving the website to invite students into the center and help them envision what will happen there, it is important to consider how students will react to the physical space. Would they be nervous to talk with other people or to discuss their writing? What will happen when they walk through the door?

As I made my visits to other centers and evaluated the spaces, the research questions I considered were as follows:

- Once students arrive will they be comfortable sensory-wise?
- Is the décor dull, neutral, or busy?
- Can stimulants be removed or added?

Many of the directors surveyed noted that they felt equipped to tutor students with physical disabilities because the layouts of the centers and/or building complied with ADA guidelines and were wheelchair accessible. But autism is not a physical disability, though it can impair a student's ability to function in physical spaces. Some suggestions for making the physical environment more accommodating of students with autism include the following:

1. **Examine the space for things that provide too much stimulation.**

Sensory overload is frustrating for many people, but some students with autism have extremely sensitive sensory input systems, and they can become overloaded very easily. I have worked with a student who sometimes wore noise reducing headphones to avoid

feeling overwhelmed by noise. With those special headphones, he can hear me just fine. In this type of situation, I would ask if the student is comfortable working in the center or if it is too loud. If it is too loud, I would look for ways to lower the noise level in the room or relocate to a quieter space.

I would suggest going through the center and using your senses to see where stimulation is coming from and how much is going in through your senses. It would also be a good idea to use an eye mask or noise reducing headphones to heighten other senses. When you can't see the hustle-and-bustle of the center, does it sound louder? Are there strong smells in the center? Can the lights be lowered? Is there a way to reduce noise? If the fabric of the chairs disturbs a student is there another place for him to sit while he is working? At some of the centers I visited, there were dividers or separate rooms for individual tutoring sessions to take place. This is excellent for providing that flexibility to remove some stimulation for these students.

2. **Look for ways to add stimulation when it is necessary.**

While some students receive simulation through their senses too easily, other students seek stimulation. Some students with autism might need us to find ways to add stimulation to satisfy their needs before we can even talk about their writing. It would be good if we could find ways to add additional light to the space they are working in; this could be as simple as adding a desktop lamp or using a light box (Figure 3) to stimulate their senses.

Figure 1 Artists often use light boxes to trace pictures or view images. A tutor could either turn on the box near the student or could place a hard copy of the student's writing on top of the lit box to stimulate the senses of the student so he or she could concentrate on discussing the writing.

Some soft, neutral music to play in the background that is unlikely to distract other students could be used. It is also possible to use a fan for noise—a gentle hum could satisfy the student with autism (it could also help dissipate smells) without distracting students who prefer a quieter atmosphere. Students could be given stress balls to keep their hands busy.

My personal favorite suggestion involves placing one or more yoga balls in the writing center. Students with autism who do not like the chair fabric or who just need to be constantly moving can sit on one of those balls and bounce throughout their session. This equipment would also appeal to students who have ADHD or other students whose bones and joints become sore sitting in regular chairs (e.g., pregnant women, people with diabetes, obese students, students who have suffered back or neck injuries). In addition, some tutors might enjoy those options when they are not being used by students who need them.

3. Be flexible.

Being flexible is important and relevant to all aspects of writing center *praxis*, but let's consider it in relation to the physical environment. It is a fact that not every writing center has an unlimited budget to purchase specialized equipment or décor that can be changed or moved around. Sometimes students with autism would be unable to work effectively a tutor in the space that the writing center provides. In that case, it would be helpful if there was an option for a student to reserve a session with the advantage of a campus location they feel comfortable in. Maybe this is a particular spot in the library or in the campus coffee shop. This type of accommodation is, however, something that

needs to be thoroughly discussed between a tutor and director to ensure the safety and comfort of the tutor.

Tutor Training

Tutor training covers a myriad of topics—writing center-specific practices, genre, ESL students and language barriers, minimalist tutoring, troubleshooting sessions, and more. There are so many aspects of tutoring, diverse learners, and content knowledge to address that trainers probably prioritize the need-to-know over the good-to-know topics. It has become clear that a rise in students with autism in college means that tutors will need to know how to tutor this population, but research indicates they do not yet know how. The questions that drove my research are listed below.

- How do tutors view the issue of tutoring students with autism?
- Do they feel confident in their own abilities to teach this student population?
- Are they supported by the administration when they do encounter this new type of student?

One trend evident in survey responses is that tutors acknowledge that this population is coming to the center looking for help, and they are trying to accommodate them, but they are not always sure how to do so. Twenty-one percent of the tutors surveyed in my study discussed specific experiences of tutoring students with an ASD, which is proof that there are students with autism coming to the writing center. But more than half (52%) are not confident that they can effectively tutor this particular type of student. Additionally, the tutors who do have a knowledge base concerning autism do not always receive this knowledge from the writing center but have acquired it through personal experiences interacting with people with autism:

- ▪ "Yes, I have several friends with autism and some knowledge about how it affects people"

- ▪ "I have basic knowledge of the autism spectrum, which I have learned from my sister who works with children with autism"

- ▪ "Yes. I have a son with autism. I am aware of his needs, styles, and limitations"

This trend suggests that tutors would benefit from some training on tutoring students with autism.

The suggestions below are geared toward directors. Some of the suggestions are specific to those writing centers that provide formal training, but they are intended to be as universal as possible.

1. **Give tutors a basic understanding of ASD so they might be able to identify and adapt to characteristic issues or behaviors.**

When I was conducting my research, I was contacted by only one student who was willing to be interviewed for my project. I remembered tutoring him in the writing center during my first semester working there because I remembered that session as one of the most frustrating. I was recalled feeling like I could not communicate with this student and that the session was completely ineffective. I had followed my training: I asked a lot of facilitative open-ended questions, I handed the student a pencil to take notes, and tried to be very friendly. I later found out this student had been diagnosed with an ASD. I wished I had even a basic understanding of autism so that I could have been able to adjust my tutoring approach. Even if I had just hypothesized that he might have had autism, I could have changed my tactics and seen if they had worked any better.

Providing students with even a small knowledge base helps to prepare them for this special population. Attention to their needs also shows tutors that these students are a priority in the writing center and provides an opportunity for directors to make sure tutors know that students with an ASD are capable of learning. In my tutor training, the directors indicated their respect for genre and writing across the curriculum when they asked us to explore different academic and disciplinary genres by giving short individual presentations and providing handouts to our colleagues about the features and characteristics of the genre. A similar assignment could be a great way to explore core features or issues for not just autism but also other conditions or situations that impact diverse learners: returning or non-traditional students, part-time students, and students with different types of learning or physical disabilities. Tutors could reach out to different services on campus that might be able to educate us or help the student, do some independent research, and then make some concrete suggestions for how to accommodate that type of student. They should also explain how tutoring that type of student would be challenging. When they present their findings, tutors could describe their own experiences tutoring that particular type of diverse learner. The handouts could be used to fashion a new type of tutor training manual of reference points for present and future tutors. Every couple of years, the manual would probably need to be updated with current information and reference materials, but that is what down time in the writing center is for.

When I interviewed the student with autism, he suggested that we ask students if they have a disability that the tutors need to be aware of. While this is not illegal to ask, I do not think that it would be appropriate to put students "on the spot" by asking if they have

a disability. But tutors could sit down with a new client and ask something like, "Is there anything I should know about the way you learn or the way you write?" "Is there something any of your teachers do or have done that has been really helpful when it comes to learning or writing in the classroom?" This opens an opportunity for the students to disclose but does not pressure them to reveal information they are not comfortable sharing.

2. **Carefully consider the language that is being used when discussing people with autism.**

When I was taking a special education course for my high school teacher certification, I was taught that when writing and speaking about students who had special needs I was supposed to use non-labeling language, also known as person-first language. It is very important to make the distinction between "autistic student" (labeling) and "student with autism" (non-labeling, person-first). I had to consciously re-train my brain to edit this labeling language out of my vocabulary, but it did not take long for the change to be complete. Now I flinch every time I hear someone talk about an "autistic student." This might feel like an insignificant distinction, but revamping our language when speaking or writing about this specific group of students shows a willingness to accommodate and purposeful tone of respect.

3. **Teach them to listen and observe carefully.**

In a perfect world, students with autism would come into the center, self-identify, and then help us understand the ways they are best and least able to learn. They could be provided with a regular tutor who would know how to accommodate their particular

needs. That would be magical. But unfortunately we live in reality, not in best-case scenarios.

Students are not always going to disclose their disability, and even if they do, they are not always going to be able to articulate what they need us to do for them. It is this reality that makes me adamant that tutors need to have some working knowledge of autism to highlight the option of possibly adjusting their tutoring if they suspect a student has autism. When they notice a session does not seem to be going well, they should be able to identify what is prompting that feeling and ask if the student is showing impairments in communication and socialization and then try to make some accommodations. When I was tutoring a student who had autism, I kept trying to ask facilitative, open-ended questions and the student just shut down. He would not make eye contact with me or respond to the questions I asked but would respond with a general "I do not like my teacher/this assignment." If I had suspected he had autism and knew he might not respond well to constant questioning, I might have tried asking a more direct question, or writing down the question and giving him plenty of wait time to process. I also would have taken notes for him while he spoke so he could just focus on processing information.

There is no guarantee any of these modifications would have kept the session on track, but making adjustments to the tutoring approach might have made the difference between a productive and an unproductive session.

4. Remind them not to be discouraged by a seemingly unfriendly student.

The first student with autism I tutored was perceived as rather alarming by some of the tutors in the center. He didn't ever smile; he seemed annoyed by us. He would also

become loud and agitated when he became overwhelmed or angry about a miscommunication. Knowing what I know now would have made it much easier for me to tutor him. I realize that that perceived unfriendliness is just impairment in mirroring my nonverbal friendliness and that "tantrums" reflect an inability to see how his tone frightened us. I realized that when he was becoming loud and agitated I could respond in a slightly raised voice and that extra stimulation was enough to calm him down so we could proceed with our sessions. It is important that we train tutors to not take these interactions personally, but to view them as challenges professionals need to meet.

5. **Build collaborative relationships with other campus services and know what other services are available to students.**

Sometimes students walk into offices or spaces looking for something that they do not yet know how to navigate; sometimes they do not realize what they are looking for is actually somewhere else. It is important for this reason that tutors are able to refer students to the places they can go for help. The writing center is not a counseling center, a reading lab, an editing service, or a place to print things for free. But it is always helpful then when tutors know where students can go for those needs to be met. If tutors don't know where to point a student who has come to the wrong place, it can leave the student feeling humiliated for not knowing where to go. Making some extra effort to avoid making students feel silly is likely to later draw them into the center when they do need some help with writing.

I also think it is essential that a collaborative relationship exist between the writing center and other offices or programs that support specific student populations, like language learning labs, or in this case disability services. These relationships could be so

important in this situation. When students identify to the school and provide documentation in the office of disabilities, the office could easily refer students to the writing center and provide us with suggestions for how to accommodate those students. Professionals from that office could come and do workshops for tutors that help reinforce that awareness of students with different abilities and needs. That is probably one of the best tools at our disposal when we want to know more about tutoring students with an ASD.

6. Lead by example.

Directors, administrators, and even veteran tutors should create an atmosphere that encourages students to want to help all students. When I first started noticing students with autism were coming into the center and I did not know how to tutor them, I met with my director, who provided me with opportunities for learning, people to network with, and resources to consult. I have also seen that she has taken my research and applied it to the center when she can: for example I was asked to give current writing center staff a short presentation on the core features of autism and tips for tutoring based on my research. At the time I was asked, the tutors had already finished their semester of training; I came in for a special staff meeting to present my research. This year was also the first year in a long time that tutor training included a presentation from the Office of Student Disability Services. That was due to my observation that we weren't really prepared to tutor any students with disabilities. The request that they present to the tutors was intended to give the tutors some basic knowledge of students with disabilities, but also to show them where they could seek more specific information. And now there is a stronger collaborative partnership between the writing center and disability services. I

had complete support, even when I was being critical of our center: that critique never led to a defensive attitude or unwillingness to make changes to accommodate these students. I am certain a project like this would have been unsuccessful if I had a director who thought my topic was trivial because there are not very many students with autism in college or that we would not be able to accommodate them if they do not disclose their disability. The atmosphere in our center is one that facilitates questions and answers and provides support for those looking to further explore how to help particular groups of students.

Conclusion

In 2004, statistics indicated that 1 in 166 individuals in the US was diagnosed with autism. In 2015 1 in every 68 children is diagnosed with an ASD. As prevalence rises and we become better with early interventions, we will soon see a generation of students with autism who move from high school to college in large numbers. Therefore, colleges need to be ready to accommodate this growing population—in the classroom, in campus facilities, but especially in student resources like the writing center. My research indicates that at this moment, many centers are not ready for these students. But it also indicates that centers with personnel who have an open-minded attitude and a willingness to make some adjustments will be ready to accommodate these students. It is true that the ratio of students with autism to the general population is small, but having low numbers does not negate a particular group's right to have their needs met—especially in a place like the writing center, where we boast about our mission to work with *all writers*.

I understand what I am asking for. This is a challenge with no easy solution. No case of autism is universal—each student with autism presents a unique tutoring

situation. There is also an additional complication when students come to the center and do not self-identify. Autism does not have the visibility that assists identification of students in other diverse groups like non-native speakers, returning students, and physically challenged students. The situation is complicated, but it is not impossible. The first step toward successfully accommodating students with autism is acknowledging these basic principles: (1) there are students with autism in college; (2) these students are capable of learning; (3) they might need special accommodations in the writing center; and (4) that this is an issue that needs to be addressed. After that first, important step, writing center personnel need to do some research on the core features of autism and accommodations usually required for students with autism, then use the research to make adjustments to our practice. The information I have provided and the recommendations I have made are intended to assist writing center professionals achieve our shared goal of accommodating all student writers.

As evidenced by the director survey results, there are so many who believe that not having confirmation from the student with autism means we are excused from accommodating their needs. But it doesn't. If we create an inviting atmosphere that makes it clear we are here to help all writers, eventually students will be more comfortable disclosing their diagnoses to us. There might even come a day where they do not fear that social stigma anymore—and they are more likely to be free from that fear in a center that has made an effort to show them they are welcome. Small adjustments to our *praxis* now could lead to significant institutional changes in the future.

In his original 1984 essay "The Idea of a Writing Center" Stephen North argues, "Nearly everyone who writes likes—and needs—to talk about his or her writing,

preferably to someone who will really listen, who knows how to listen, and knows how to talk about writing too" (440-41). It is this fundamental principle that drives our current writing center practice. North then goes on to say, "Maybe in a perfect world, all writers would have their own ready auditor—a teacher, a classmate, a roommate, an editor—who would not only listen but draw them out, ask them questions they would not think to ask themselves. A writing center is an institutional response to this need" (441). North does not insist that only writers that are convenient for us to help need our assistance. Instead he argues that all writers need to talk about their writing. And that writing centers are the answer to this need. Until we learn to accommodate students with autism in the writing center, writing centers are not living up to their potential. We fail to meet the basic tenets of our philosophy that we are here to be inclusive to all writers.

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