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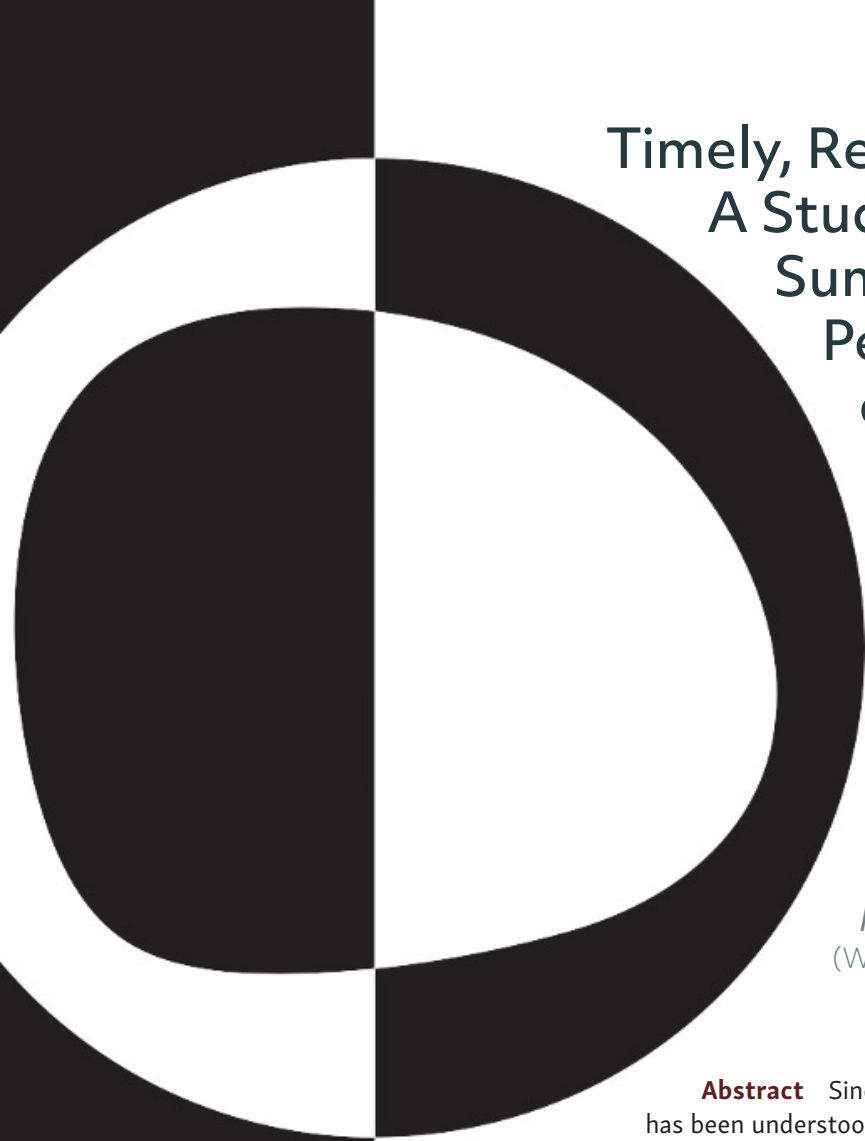
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Timely, Relevant, Practical: A Study of Writing Center Summer Institute Alumni Perceptions of Value and Benefits

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Abstract Since its inception in 2003, the IWCA Summer Institute (SI) has been understood within the writing center field to be an important professional development opportunity for new and experienced writing center professionals (WCPs). Publications on the SI to date have focused on anecdotal perceptions of the benefits to leaders and participants or on a single outcome, such as research output. Thus, the writing center field knows little about how and in what ways participants perceive the SI's benefits across cohorts and across a variety of professional areas. By gathering quantitative and qualitative data from every SI cohort from 2003 to 2019, the goal of this study was to identify and define the benefits of the SI, focusing in particular on how participants themselves understand them. The survey received 161 responses, a response rate of approximately 27%; all 17 years of the SI were represented. The study found that, despite the field's shifting priorities since 2003, the concerns and needs of WCPs have remained relatively constant over time, and that the SI serves the most pressing administrative needs of participants.

Keywords Summer Institute, IWCA, benefits, writing center professionals

Introduction

The International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) Summer Institute (SI) is a week-long intensive workshop for writing center professionals to work with experienced scholars/leaders on all aspects of writing center administration, from managing a center and

educating tutors to campus leadership and research and publishing. While experienced writing center professionals frequently participate in and gain from the SI, it is an especially useful professional development opportunity for new writing center administrators. Since its inception in 2003, many past leaders and participants have contributed blog posts and

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articles about the SI's benefits in advancing a participant's professional identity. While these publications confirm the general feeling within the writing center field that the SI is doing something important, most of these identified benefits are derived from anecdotal stories or defined based on outcomes from specific SI sessions. Less is known about how and in what ways the SI is seen to contribute to the professional development of individual writing center professionals. Having joined together as the co-chairs and leaders of the 2019 Summer Institute, Julia Bleakney, Mark Hall, Kelsey Hixson-Bowles, Sohui Lee, and Nathalie Singh-Corcoran conceived of a large-scale study of SI alumni to offer new insight into its benefits by gathering quantitative and qualitative data from every cohort from 2003 to 2019. Inspired by the Peer Tutor Alumni Research Project, which sought to understand the enduring value of the teaching and learning experience of peer tutoring, our goal was to identify and define the benefits of the SI, focusing in particular on how participants themselves understand them. Our study, the first to offer data directly from participants across multiple SI cohorts, offers an evidence-based narrative about the value of the Summer Institute to its participants and the needs of the writing center professionals who take part in it.

In our survey-based study, we examined the impact of the SI by asking participants to explain what they found most beneficial about the SI, drawing on the topics typically covered each year in the SI. We were curious about whether participants attribute things like scholarly output, tenure and/or promotion, programmatic development and growth, securing a new job, and negotiating for an improved budget or conditions to the networking and mentoring relationships established during the SI. Moreover, we sought to understand whether SI benefits to individual professionals align with the topics of interest in the writing center field, especially related to research and publishing or tenure and promotion for faculty positions. Our results confirm that the concerns and needs of writing center professionals (WCPs) have remained relatively constant over time and that the SI serves the most pressing administrative needs of its participants.

Context and Literature Review

From the earliest days of the IWCA Summer Institute, those involved in chairing and leading it have sought to document this professional development opportunity for writing center administrators. As leaders of the first two SIs, Paula Gillespie, Brad Hughes, and Neal Lerner (2006) detail the historical foundations of the SI, its key components, and the authors' hopes for its future. Antecedents, the authors point out, include conferences and workshops on writing labs hosted by the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) and modeled after the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) summer seminars. Precursors also include National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and regional writing center association workshops. These learning-intensive endeavors were designed to prompt a greater sense of professional identity among participants. Intended to support new writing center directors in particular, the SI was conceived of as a week-long residential format aimed at interactive learning and community building, led by multiple leaders in the field. The SI sought diverse participants from universities, community colleges, and secondary schools, large and small. Originally, key topics were identified by participants themselves, including missions and models of writing centers, theory and practice of tutoring, strategic planning, online tutoring, designing and carrying out research, writing across the curriculum and other campus partnerships, web design, support for multilingual writers, programmatic assessment, and others. Sessions with student tutors were also included. During its first year, as an opportunity to write and receive feedback during the SI, participants were also invited to begin a writing project of some kind to take home. The following year, participants were encouraged to bring some writing in progress. Central to the designers' thinking was that the SI ought to be hosted at different types of institutions and address the varied needs of different types of writing centers and administrative positions. Looking ahead, Gillespie et al. (2006) expressed their desire to foster diverse co-chairs and leaders, perhaps drawn from previous participants.

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Additionally, they expressed a commitment to support underrepresented schools and underrepresented writing center leaders. Their vision also took into consideration the need to make the SI geographically accessible.

Anne Ellen Geller and Michele Eodice (2005) surveyed the first group of SI participants about their experiences. The authors detailed three key benefits identified by participants themselves. First, participants felt a greater connection to colleagues and to the discipline of writing center studies. Second, they felt more knowledgeable about professional conversations and more supported in joining them through conferences, research, and publication. Third, as a result of taking part in the SI, participants felt greater confidence in their abilities to make decisions, negotiate, and lead as writing center administrators.

Other early studies focus on single SI cohorts as well. For example, Brian Fallon and Moira Ozias (2006) report on their experience with the 2005 IWCA Summer Institute. Among the benefits of the SI, the authors point to materials and ideas to inform staff education, as well as growing confidence in building campus relationships and interacting with upper-administration. Also key among the SI's benefits are the lasting professional relationships and sense of wider writing center community established through the SI for these two authors. In another article focused on a single cohort—this time the 2008 SI—Lisa Ede, Paula Gillespie, and Brad Hughes (2009) confirm similar findings, noting the diversity of participants and leaders from across the United States and from eight different countries. They underscore a “central tenet” of the SI, that the Institute “belongs to the participants.” With this principle in mind, leaders surveyed participants in advance, then organized plenary sessions, small group work, and discussions within sessions to address the specific needs of participants. A key challenge, Ede et al. (2009) point out, is meeting the demands of writing center professionals with varying degrees of experience. Foundational topics include tutor education, research-based principles of writing center work, design and use of learning spaces, technology, assessment, diversity, support for multilingual

writers, and campus partnerships. Writing and opportunities to foster social connections are also central to the design of the SI. In surveying participants at the end of the 2008 SI, the leaders found that participants wanted more of everything, in particular, more time devoted to research and publication and more time to address the concerns of newcomers to writing center administration.

In another study of the SI's benefits, this time drawing on data from multiple cohorts, Rebecca Babcock, Thomas Ferrel, and Moira Ozias (2011) review 30 publications authored by SI participants between 2003 and 2009 in order to explore the positive impact of the SI in terms of mentoring, collaboration, and co-learning between participants and leaders. (The authors solicited participants to report on their scholarship and research, so the actual number of publications during this time period may be higher than reported.) While Babcock et al. (2011) highlight the SI's value in creating connections among writing center professionals, they also note, more pessimistically, that the research output remains narrowly focused on a writing center audience and that contributions to conversations beyond this audience are lacking. To this extent, then, Babcock et al. (2011) use existing conversations (Boquet & Lerner, 2008) that critique the field's insular focus as a way to assess the scholarly output generated from the SI.

Babcock et al.'s (2011) emphasis on scholarly identity has been central to discussions of the state of the field, which has been subsequently addressed by Anne Ellen Geller and Harry Denny (2013), Nikki Caswell, Jackie Grutsch McKinney, and Rebecca Jackson (2016), and Sherry Wynn Perdue and Dana Driscoll (2017), among others. In each of these articles, the authors discuss how writing center professionals grapple with their conflicted identities as administrators, staff or faculty, and researchers. Although careful to avoid overgeneralizing about the job requirements and experiences of WCPs, Caswell et al. (2016) conclude, from their case-study analysis of nine directors, that “directors labor in untenable positions or in positions where they lack necessary resources, struggle for visibility, and, to the extent that they are able, thus

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select labor that brings them recognition and visibility” (p. 14). Geller and Denny (2013) find that “faculty WCPs consistently felt pulled in different directions and heard mixed messages about the usual trinity of scholarship, teaching, and service in relation to their programmatic responsibilities” (p. 112). Perdue and Driscoll (2017) examine the context-specific conditions that support or hinder WCPs in their scholarly development, focusing specifically on opportunities to conduct rigorous research.

Thus, while previous scholarship has considered the SI’s benefits by focusing on the development of writing center professional identities and research output, questions remain in terms of what kinds of benefits participants themselves perceive from their SI experience, and whether those benefits align with the field’s ongoing concerns about research output.

Methodology

Our survey-based study was designed to solicit both quantitative and qualitative responses. The survey comprised 16 closed and eight open-ended questions divided into two main categories: one set of questions asked about participants’ positions and a second set of questions asked about what the participants gained from attending the SI (see Appendix A for the full survey). In the first set of questions, we asked which year or years they attended the SI, their position title/status when they attended the SI and when they took the survey, and how their position has changed or evolved over time. We also asked questions about whether participants remained in contact with anyone from their cohort and the nature of that contact (such as social media friends, research collaborations, etc.). Finally, in this first section, we also asked about whether participants had worked on a project during their time at the SI.

In the second set of questions, we asked what topics covered during the SI were most beneficial. We provided a list and asked participants to select and rank the top three. We generated this list from previous SI programs

and from the materials we used when we led the SI in 2019. This list included 18 topics. The ways these topics were presented to participants during SIs would have varied based on the expertise and interests of the leaders, so it is impossible for us to know exactly what each session on a particular topic included. Consequently, we followed up with an open-ended question asking participants to explain why they selected the top two or three topics. The open-ended question also allowed us to gain insight into how participants perceived the benefits of these topics, and whether the benefits extended beyond the topics covered in the SI. Appreciating that the benefits might go beyond the topics covered, we also asked participants to rank, on a Likert scale, the degree to which the SI benefited them professionally. For this question, we offered options such as: aided with job advancement, scholarly output, negotiations, and networking with colleagues. We also provided a space for participants to elaborate on this question. Finally, we asked participants to explain if anything was not beneficial or was missing from the SI experience.

After receiving IRB approval, we distributed the survey in May 2020 to all former SI participants whose contact information we could locate. Finding emails was a laborious process. We started with the participant lists from our own records and from other SI leaders. Many of these lists had out of date or missing email addresses. A student researcher helped us track down current emails via university websites, LinkedIn profiles, and Google searches. Of the 759 individuals who participated in the SI since 2003, we were able to contact 603, or 78%. Of the 156 we were unable to reach, the majority did not have an email address available; some of those had retired and a few, sadly, had passed away.

In the end, our survey was sent via email to a total of 603 participants and leaders of the SI; 147 SI participants and 14 leaders responded for a total of 161 respondents (a response rate of about 27%). Those 161 respondents represented all 17 years of the Summer Institute. We also collected demographic data (see Table 1) from the participants who chose to complete this portion of

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Table 1. Demographic Data of Respondents to the SI Survey (n = 129)

White	108 (83.7%)
Asian	6 (4.7%)
Hispanic or Latinx	5 (3.9%)
Black or African American	3 (2.3%)
American Indian or Alaska Native	2 (1.6%)
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1 (0.8%)
Other	3 (2.3%)
Prefer not to answer	1 (0.8%)

the survey ($n = 129$), but we cannot say how representative these demographics are with regard to all SI participants. Additionally, we did not ask for the type of institution participants worked at. However, the survey respondents who completed the demographic portion of the survey indicated their ethnicity and their gender, as presented in Table 1. In addition, 88 (71.5%) respondents identified as female, 34 (27.6%) identified as male, and one preferred not to say.

Coding

Because our study consisted of both open and closed questions, different questions called for different coding approaches. However, across both quantitative and qualitative questions, our approach was recursive as we continually returned to our results and analysis in order to identify patterns in themes across all questions and to reach consensus. Our emergent coding process did not attempt to exclude our own perspectives and experiences with the SI; rather, our prior knowledge as leaders and participants, by necessity, informed not only the questions we asked but also the perspectives we brought to the analysis; this “wider lens” (Charmaz, 2010, p. 159) allowed us to achieve a more nuanced, contextual understanding of the survey results. After several meetings in which the whole team discussed sample responses to questions and our coding scheme, we split into two smaller teams to analyze specific questions.

Quantitative Analysis

For questions with closed responses that required numerical analysis, one team completed

a manual count for each question. This team met to identify patterns and themes from the results and to reach consensus. We chose manual counting because it enabled us to discuss and make sense of the responses as we were working through them. Although participants could rank all 18 topics, because we only asked them to rank their top three, we started by isolating the top three topics for each respondent, which we then counted by topic and by cohort. For example, we totaled the number of times a topic was ranked as first, second, or third: in 2019, “tutor education” was ranked first choice eight times, second choice two times, and third choice one time; our total for tutor education in 2019, then, is 11. We combined the first, second, and third choices in this way because we asked participants to “rank their top three” and we could not be sure how carefully respondents completed the ranking. For the purpose of analysis we also combined two topics: diversity/inclusion was combined with linguistic diversity; similarly, research was combined with publishing.

Qualitative Analysis

We chose two questions from the survey to focus our qualitative analysis because these questions asked participants to expand on the benefits they received from the SI in an open comment box:

- Please explain why you selected your top three topics.
- To what degree did the SI benefit your work as a writing center professional in the following areas? If you selected other, please tell us what was most beneficial about the SI.

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Table 2. Three Layers of Coding: Outcomes, Categories, and Topics

Types of Outcomes				
Explicit Outcome		Implicit Outcome		Neither
Categories				
Learned Something New	Relevance	Not Relevant	Revised Practices	Revised Thinking
Shaped Identity	Mentorship	Cohort Learning	Relationship Building	Time
Topics				
Leadership	People Management	Professionalization	Tutor Education	Diversity and Inclusion
Program Design	Collaboration	Writing Center Administration	Networking	Teaching (not Tutor Education)
Scholarship	Assessment	Physical Space		

The first question addressed the topics that participants most valued, while the second addressed the professional benefits participants experienced as a result of their experience at the SI.

To analyze the qualitative data, we used Johnny Saldaña’s (2015) collaborative coding method. Collaborative coding helped us to work through different interpretations of participants’ responses, which were often nuanced. During this process, we wanted to know if the outcomes participants described were tangible or not by examining the way participants wrote about the benefits. And of course, we tracked *what* they said was beneficial as well. These foci developed into a three-layered coding system (see Table 2). In the first layer, we coded broadly for the type of outcomes the participant described—implicit, explicit, or neither—to help us determine how tangible participants’ benefits were. Explicit outcomes were coded when the participant clearly connected the content or experience at the SI with a concrete application during or post-SI. For example, one participant learned about multilingual tutor and literacy policies and used that information to implement translingual pedagogies, expanding tutor services in multiple languages. An implicit outcome code, on the other hand, was applied when a participant described a general outcome that wasn’t explicitly connected to an application post-SI. For example, participants

often noted that a topic or experience was important or valuable without attaching a concrete application of the topic or experience. There were few responses that did not fit as either implicit or explicit. These were coded as neither (see Appendix B for examples of all codes).

The second layer of our coding system identified ten categories of experiences described by participants through in vivo coding. This layer of coding involved each of the three readers reviewing the original language of the participants, coding the descriptions of benefits in categories based on the way participants described the topics, and finally comparing our coding in these categories as a group. We noticed that when participants talked about topics that were beneficial, they nearly always explained the nature of their experience. For instance, some said linguistic diversity was beneficial because it was something new to them, whereas others said linguistic diversity was beneficial because it changed their professional identity and how they conceive of writing center work. To capture the range of experiences, we developed coding categories such as “relevance,” “mentorship,” “revised practices,” and “relationship-building.” About half of the categories described an experience at the SI (i.e., “time,” meaning time to focus on the topic), while the other half described the experience before or after the SI that made the topic important (i.e., “revised practices,”

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meaning the participant changed something about how they implemented writing center work). Of the latter, one code, “relevance” stood out. We coded “relevance” when participants described information, knowledge, or skill discussed at the SI as relevant or timely for their position in the writing center.

While the categories mapped how participants described the outcomes impacting them (e.g., significant change in identity as an administrator, opportunities to learn collaboratively), the final layer of coding described the common topics of each outcome, such as “leadership” or “tutor education.” This final coding layer allowed us to map topics—both participants’ selection of 18 topics (collected earlier in our survey) as well as participants’ write-ins—through their own articulation of benefits. Sometimes outcomes involve multiple topics. By coding responses in this layered way, we were able to identify code co-occurrences¹ among types of outcomes, categories, and topics. Our coding helped us to determine if common findings from the literature, such as the benefit in furthering participants’ knowledge of the field (Geller & Eodice, 2005) or in fostering social connections (Ede et al., 2009) is consistent across cohorts. In addition, this layered coding allowed us to explore whether SI benefits in general are tied to specific topics *and* if participants report implicit or explicit outcomes as a result.

Limitations

In our initial study design, we had hoped to be able to understand which topics were most beneficial based on the year participants attended the SI and based on their current position. By charting topic benefits over time, we had hoped to identify changes in participants’ interest and concern over time and to consider how these changes might tell us something about how our field’s interests and concerns have evolved. However, because of the variation in topics covered in the SI across the years (despite some consistency—tutor education was always covered, for instance), variation in participants’ positions both then and now, and an uneven number of responses

from each cohort, we do not have enough data to draw these conclusions. Regarding the latter of these points, for example, we had 15 respondents from 2019 but only two respondents from 2013. An additional limitation of our study was that we did not ask participants to tell us which type of institution (based on Carnegie Classification) they worked at when they attended the SI or when they took the survey. Knowing this information would have helped us understand whether perceived benefits varied depending on institution type as well as which types of institutions are over or underrepresented in SI participation.

Findings

Participants’ Top Three Topics

Participants ranked their top three topics as: tutor education, research/publishing, and staff management. As Table 3 illustrates, tutor education was by far the most important topic for SI participants, with 79 selecting it as one of their top three topics, followed by research and publishing (55), staff management (51), leadership (45), diversity and inclusion/

Table 3. Top Three SI Topics Ranked by Survey Respondents

Topic	Respondents
Tutor Education	79
Research/Publishing (scholarship)	55
Staff Management	51
Leadership	45
Diversity/Linguistic diversity	41
Assessment	40
Building productive collaborations/Partnerships	21
Teaching	11
Decision-making	7
Programming	6
Other	6
Technology	5
Cultural competency	3
Negotiating	3
Time/Project management	3
Fundraising	2

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linguistic diversity (44), and assessment (40). Topics that were selected less frequently—such as fundraising, negotiating, or technology—may have been important to more participants than the results show, but they weren't among the three most important topics over time.

Participants' Description of SI Benefits

Our analysis of open-ended responses revealed that participants talked about the benefits of SI topics in nuanced ways and brought more contextual understanding to the top three topic choices from the ranking question. Our analysis revealed, for instance, that far more participants described implicit outcomes rather than explicit, or tangible, outcomes of SI benefits: 80% of responses (196 out of 245) were coded as implicit benefits, and 20% were coded as explicit benefits (49 out of 245). For example, we coded the following as explicit: "I started professional development sessions as a result [of the] SI." Here the participant describes a concrete or applied outcome of the SI. In contrast, we coded the following as

implicit: "At the time, I was just learning about writing centers and their role in their institution. I was interested in the leadership role of writing center administrators." This is an implicit outcome because the participant writes generally about the benefits and does not specify an application. As we explain further in the discussion section, this finding suggests that the majority of survey participants experienced indirect benefits from the SI.

Of the second layer codes (see Figure 1), relevance appeared as the most common benefit category across implicit and explicit outcomes. The relevance code was applied to responses that described information, knowledge, or skills discussed at the SI that were important because they were timely for the participant's position in the writing center or particularly relevant because of the participant's context at the time of the SI. For example, one participant wrote: "I had just started a writing center from scratch and was most interested in building tutor education and staff mentoring." This response also exemplifies the largest coded category, implicit

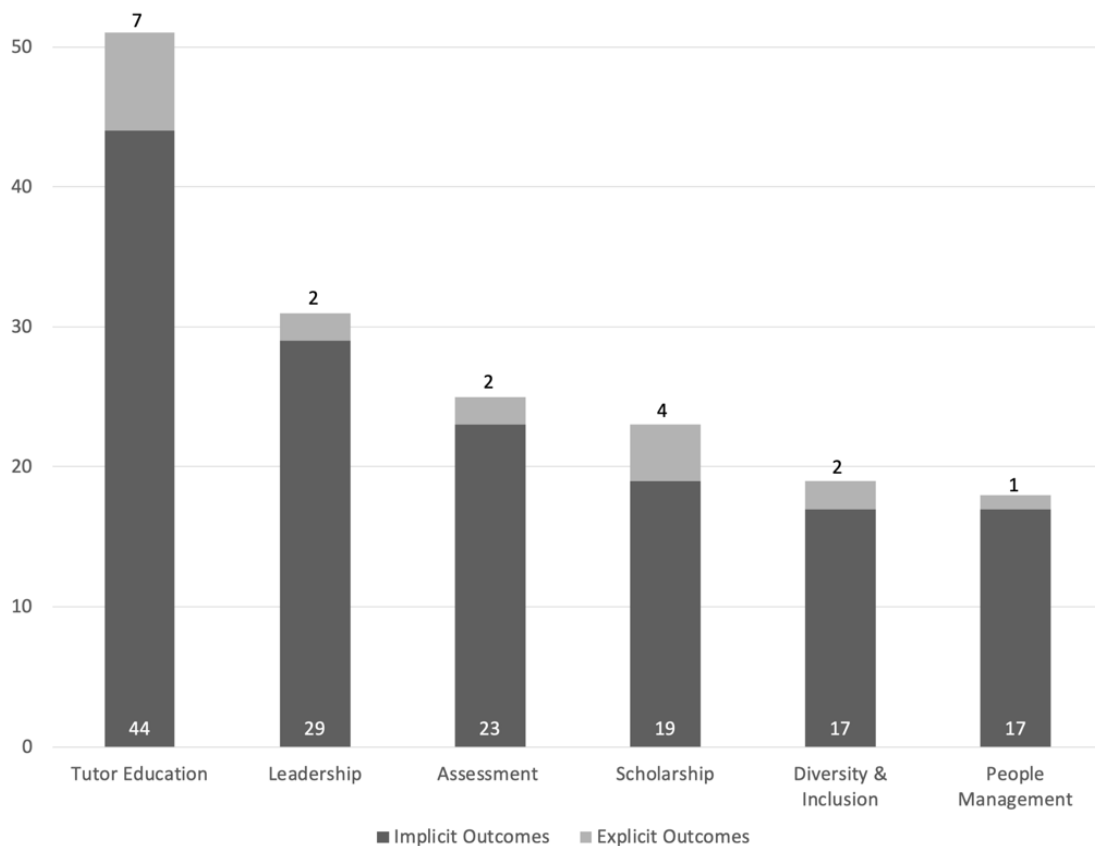


Figure 1. "Relevance" Coded with Top Six Topic Categories

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relevance (46%, 91 out of 196), suggesting that the topics were important because of their relevance to the participant’s job and/or campus climate at the time. In addition, relevance was also the largest coded category in explicit outcomes (22%, 11 out of 49), suggesting that for some participants, the topics were important to the participant’s context and provided a tangible outcome after the SI. Relevance as the most common category in both implicit and explicit suggests that, perhaps unsurprisingly, participants found topics beneficial when they were most relevant to their current job conditions. This has important implications for the tensions between everyday operations and the production of scholarship, as we describe in the discussion section.

Consistent with the quantitative findings, tutor education was coded as the most common topic in the “relevance” category for both implicit and explicit outcomes (see Figure 1): 48% (44 out of 91) of participants’ experiences in tutor education were coded under “relevance” for implicit outcomes. One participant’s response exemplifies this layered code well: “I had been wondering about tutor education going into SI. At my institution, we had a three-credit tutor education class that was creating a bit of a bottleneck effect in recruitment, so it was really useful talking with many other conference participants about their tutor education.” This quote had other categories applied in addition to relevance, but the participant’s clear description of why tutor education was relevant to their context at the time demonstrates what many participants shared. For explicit outcomes, 14% (7 out of 49) of participants’ experiences in tutor education were

coded under “relevance.” These findings suggest that tutor education appears to be the topic that is identified as the most immediate need relative to their job position and that this topic is consistently the most commonly identified with an implicit and explicit outcome across all cohorts.

Tutor Education as a Benefit

Across the responses to both questions—the question asking participants to rank their top three and the question asking them to explain their ranking—the same six topics were identified as being most significant, demonstrating that the open-ended question served to confirm the participants’ ranking of the previous question, although there is some variation in order. By far, across both questions and all cohorts, tutor education is the most important topic (see Table 4). As our analysis of the open-ended explanation shows, the fact that these topics were relevant is of crucial importance to the participants.

To understand whether topic preference evolved over time, we counted the responses to the closed, ranked question by cohort (see Figure 2). We note that tutor education has remained consistently important across time, relative to the number of responses. The time period when this pattern alters is 2013–2014, when it appears that tutor education was not as important to as many survey respondents. Analysis of the other five topics of the top six most important topics shows that in this time period, a wider variety of topics were important for participants. For instance, staff management, leadership, and assessment were each selected six or more times by participants from the 2013–2014 cohorts.

Table 4. Order of Most Beneficial Summer Institute Topics

Ranking of Topics	Open-Ended Explanation of Ranking
Tutor Education	Tutor Education
Research/Publishing (scholarship)	Leadership
Staff (People) Management	Assessment
Leadership	Scholarship
Diversity/Linguistic Diversity	Diversity and Inclusion
Assessment	People Management

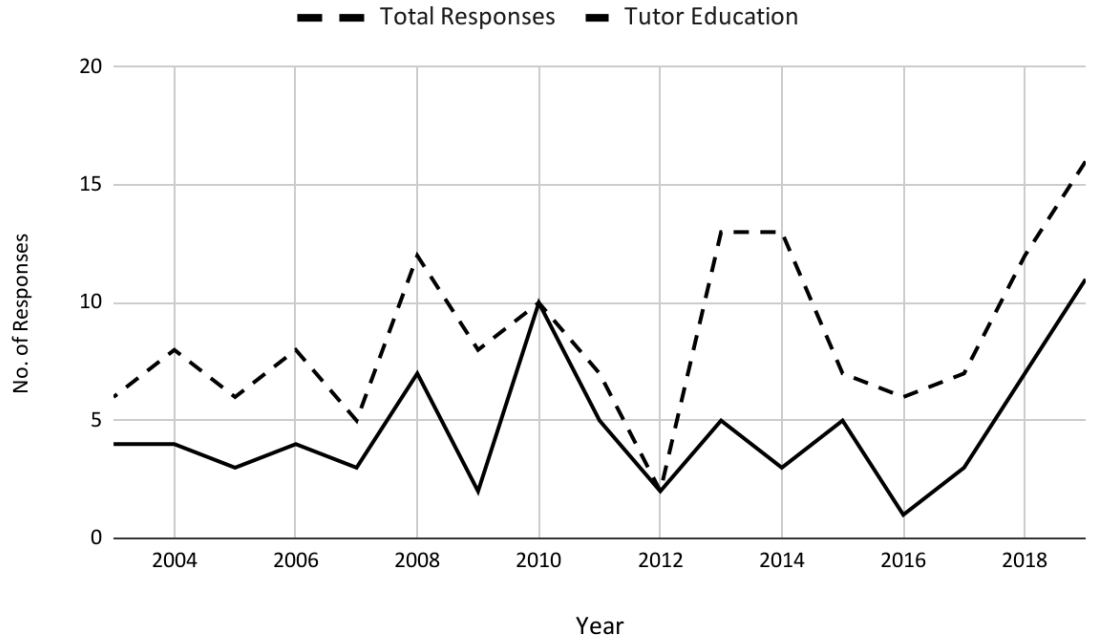


Figure 2. Tutor Education Ranked in the Top Three Across Time

Benefits as a Writing Center Professional

In another question, we asked participants to select, in response to a Likert-scale question, the degree to which the SI benefited their work as a writing center professional in several areas (see Figure 3). We added this aspect of benefit as we understand that the SI’s benefits go beyond the content covered in the workshops. For this question, we generated a short list of options to choose from: the list was informed by the previous literature (e.g., Geller & Eodice, 2005) and from what our prior experience as SI leaders taught us was important

to participants. For example, we added “provided materials,” as we know that participants often keep the binder of resources that they receive from the SI. This question invited participants to indicate “to what degree” the SI benefited them; respondents could slide a tab from “least beneficial” to “most beneficial” for each option.

We counted the number of times respondents selected either four or five (beneficial or most beneficial), and we combined them to produce the totals in Figure 3. Twenty respondents selected “other” and were prompted to provide a written explanation: often this was

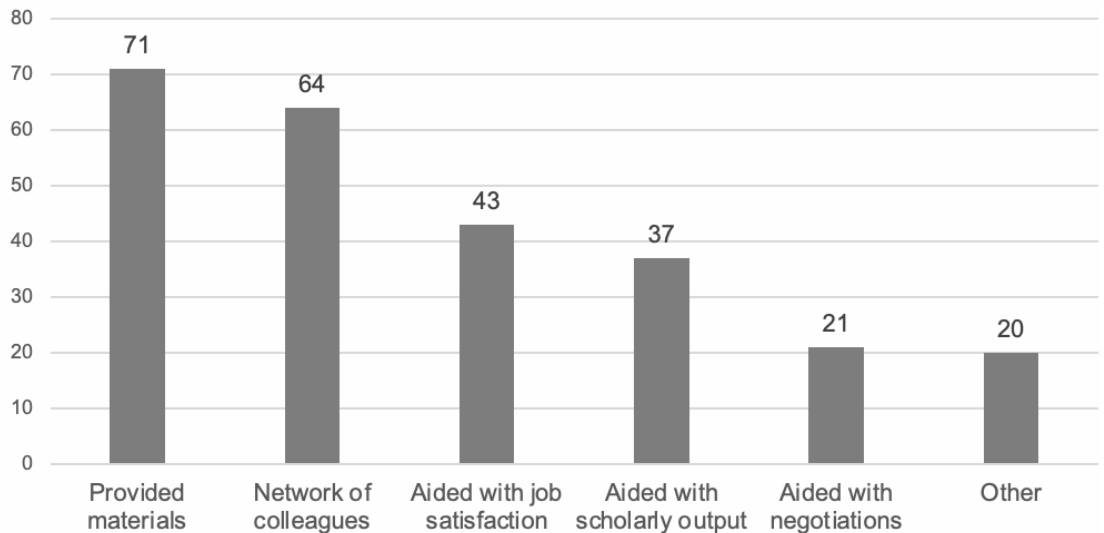


Figure 3. Benefits as a Writing Center Professional

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an elaboration on why they selected one of the other categories (e.g., “Simply being able to spend time with others who did Writing Center work was enlightening, as I work alone at my institution. There was such a wide range of experiences and situations, and it was refreshing to share the week talking about common interests and concerns”).

What Was Not Beneficial

Finally, we also asked participants to explain how the Summer Institute may not have been beneficial, or to highlight what was missing from the experience. While some respondents answered as we intended, others used this question as an opportunity to elaborate on a previous answer, underscoring praise for some aspect of the SI or reiterating a benefit mentioned elsewhere in their responses. This type of response was not anomalous. Of the 66 responses to this question, 15 (or 23%) named a benefit, instead of saying what was *not* beneficial or what was missing. For example, one respondent wrote, “The experience was a deeply satisfying one. Nothing particular stands out in my memory as having been absent from the Institute. What impressed me most substantially at the time was the ambiance of shared goodwill—I learned that the writing center world was an especially collegial, warm, mutually supportive one.”

For those answers that *did* identify what was not beneficial or what was missing from the SI (77% or 51 respondents), the most frequently mentioned we categorized as: target audience, depth, research, and networking. We arrived at these categories by first coding all the responses, identifying patterns of keywords and repeated themes, then calculating their frequency.

The most common concern was the sense from participants that they were not the intended audience for the SI. Twenty respondents (approximately 30%) identified this problem, with two distinct themes arising among these responses. First, some more experienced writing center administrators wanted a separate track or specific opportunities to address their professional development needs, distinct from those of novices. Second, some respondents wanted more diverse

representation among participants, from more high school writing centers or writing centers outside the United States, or they wanted SI leaders to demonstrate greater awareness of the varied contexts and needs of diverse writing center administrators. For instance, one respondent wrote: “I found myself saying ‘We’re not all Americans here’ more than once.”

Three other main concerns were expressed. Ten respondents (15%) raised concerns regarding the amount of attention given at SI to producing writing center research. Participants with jobs or aspirations that included the expectation of producing published scholarship wanted more time and attention directed at helping participants design and develop research projects. By contrast, participants in positions without the expectation or support for research productivity wanted less attention on this issue. This connects to a related third concern, expressed by eight respondents (12%), regarding the lack of sufficient attention paid to certain topics and a desire for more in-depth discussion. An example of this type of comment is: “We covered topics in a general way, and it would have been better to do deeper dives into specific topics where we could have a take-away from each topic.” And finally, six respondents (9%) wanted more opportunities for networking and to connect with leaders and/or participants, both during and after the SI. For instance, one respondent suggested, “It might have been helpful to make a formal plan for specific directors to be in contact with each other after the conference was over. I would have appreciated the chance to be in contact with someone who was well experienced since I was quite new to this field.”

In sum, responses tended to group into two broad categories: some aspect of SI that was present, but participants wanted more of or less of, and aspects of SI that were absent altogether, which respondents saw as a deficit. Together, responses to the question “In what ways was the SI not beneficial, or what was missing from the experience?” underscore what participants found valuable in the experience, while pointing to repeated concerns, which future leaders of the SI might take into consideration in their planning and implementation.

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Summary and Discussion

Our first question asked what benefits were most commonly identified by participants. Our quantitative data pointed to tutor education as the highest ranked topic overall, and the qualitative data revealed that this topic could be understood as important to participants for a variety of reasons (for instance, due to “relevance” to the job, or “learning something new”). Second, this study was designed to help us better understand if identified benefits led to tangible outcomes beyond the SI. We found that most of the responses suggest implicit benefits rather than explicit benefits or outcomes beyond the SI. The study also examined whether there were any patterns of benefits across cohorts and time. Although we were unable to map these patterns for all questions, our findings show that tutor education was fairly consistently identified as the most important topic across cohorts and time. Finally, our results showed that while some participants found some parts of the SI experience lacking, when asked how the SI benefited participants professionally, respondents named “provided materials” and “network of colleagues” most often.

The importance of tutor education is particularly interesting as it is a topic that is not addressed in previous scholarship on the SI, which has focused on research and publishing practices coming out of the SI or networking experiences (cohort learning, mentorship, and relationships). Given the “state of the field” scholarship, some of which we discussed earlier, which often puts everyday administration and the need to produce scholarship in tension, our findings suggest that—at least for the time that participants are attending the SI and as they reflect back on its value to them—everyday administration is most pressing. Of course, we recognize that most tutor education programs are rooted in scholarship and praxis and therefore that everyday administration is an endeavor informed by scholarship, theory, and evidence; however, our point is that the need to publish depends on the local context and the positions that participants have and that WCPs can and do engage with scholarship without publishing. In other

words, our findings confirm that, as a field, we need professional development that supports both our administrative and scholarly activities.

Given the scholarship on the SI and the efforts we and other SI leaders have made to ensure that participants leave with concrete resources and/or progress on projects, it was a little surprising to find that participants overwhelmingly reported implicit benefits over explicit benefits, especially given the frequent code co-occurrences with “relevance” and “tutor education,” which imply a fairly straightforward application. Having reflected on these findings, we suggest the following explanation. There are precious few opportunities outside of a graduate program where writing center professionals can acquire a comprehensive understanding of the job. For many, the SI serves as a crash course in learning the major responsibilities, strategies, best practices, and resources required to administer a writing support program. Further, the SI is first and foremost designed to cover a core curriculum—leadership, strategic planning, tutor education, diversity and inclusion, fostering partnerships, fundraising, assessment, and scholarship. Participants often experience information overload. By the time they integrate what they have learned at SI, they have likely experienced other professional development, scholarship, and conversations that have also influenced their thinking on an endeavor such as tutor education.

What is clear from the findings is that participants value the materials and relationships they gather during the SI. These resources offer participants a toolkit to navigate the challenges they were aware of before the SI and the ones that arise when they return to their writing centers. It is not surprising that materials and a professional network were the two most frequent professional benefits that participants recognized, given the diverse positions that WCPs can inhabit. The flexibility and broad application of materials and relationships tend to serve most folks well.

Still, our findings demonstrated that the SI can’t be everything for every writing center professional. Results revealed that the SI has historically centered United States-based, 4-year university, peer tutor writing center

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models. Given that the typical SI leader as well as the typical SI participant share this context, we are not surprised to see this finding. However, this finding speaks to the varied needs of WCPs outside of these contexts and offers organizational leaders an opportunity to better serve WCPs.

Conclusion

For individuals considering the SI as a professional development experience, it might be useful to think about the different ways participants described the benefits. Sometimes the experience of the SI was beneficial in and of itself (cohort learning, time to focus, etc.) and for others, it was what happened before or after the SI that made the experience beneficial (relevance, professional identity-making, etc.). Individuals should also reflect on what they need from a professional development experience. Do you want a comprehensive survey on all aspects of a WCP role? Do you need space and mentorship to develop a project? Do you want to deep-dive into a particular part of the WCP experience? Clarity around these questions can help folks choose the best opportunity for them.

For writing center organizations interested in better serving the diversity of positions and goals of writing center professionals, we need a variety of professional development opportunities that focus on different aspects of our wide-ranging work. This was formally acknowledged in 2020, when IWCA scheduled two versions of the SI: a leadership track and a writing track. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 global health pandemic and changing leadership, the writing track SI was canceled that year. Between the attempt to host two SI tracks and various regionals offering professional development focused on scholarship or specific aspects of administration, it is clear there is an appetite for professional development with a narrower focus than what the SI offers. For those interested in creating professional development opportunities for writing center professionals, there are many opportunities.

There is a place for smaller institutes or retreats that target specific tangible outcomes, such as assessment plans/tools, tutor education curricula, grant writing, and so on. These could be organized with more space built in for participants to create products and workshop them together. They could also be shorter and less expensive than the traditional SI model. At the same time, week-long, in-person writing retreats to support writing center scholarship would also be a useful offering for our field. Another option to consider is a longer, mentorship-based model that includes structured workshops and discussions, essentially slowing down the SI experience and allowing participants to integrate what they've learned into daily life while still having access to a mentor.

All of these events could be offered virtually, reducing the cost for participants and leaders, as well as increasing access to WCPs with less institutional support. This was a welcomed consequence of the first virtual SI in 2021. With fewer costs, the 2021 virtual SI registration was more than 50% less expensive than past in-person SIs, and many participants reported that they have always wanted to go to SI, but it was cost-prohibitive and required them to be away from their families for too long. While virtual meetings may entail fewer costs and increase access, given the importance participants attach to the networking opportunities provided by the SI, care needs to be given to shoring up social connections in virtual spaces. In short, as our field grows, so too should the diversity of offerings in our professional development.

Acknowledgments

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We dedicate this article to the life and memory of our colleague Lisa Ede (1947–2021), who mentored the authors of this

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article through the Summer Institute and other venues.

Note

1. We used the collaborative coding software Dedoose to facilitate data analysis.

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Appendix A: Survey Questions

- When did you attend the IWCA Summer Institute?
- Have you served as a SI Leader or Co-Chair?
 - How has this additional experience benefited you in your professional life?
- Please select the options that best describe you when you attended the SI. (If you attended more than once, refer to the first time.)
 - I was in graduate school, pursuing an MA or a PhD
 - I was in the Rhetoric and Composition field (either as a student or a faculty member)
 - I was in the English field (either as a student or a faculty member)
 - I was in another academic field (either as a student or a faculty member)
 - I was a director/coordinator of a Writing Center
 - I was an assistant director/coordinator of a Writing Center
 - I was not currently in a leadership position but planned to move into one
 - I was a consultant in a Writing Center
 - Other
 - None of these apply
- If you were in a Writing Center position or moving into one, tell us what percentage of your position was contractually designated for Writing Center work.
 - 100% (40 hours)
 - 75–99% (30–39 hours)
 - 50–74% (20–29 hours)

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- 25–49% (10–19 hours)
- Less than 25% (less than 10 hours)
- None of the above
- Please select the options that best describe your status now. Please select all that apply.
 - I am in graduate school, pursuing an MA or a PhD
 - I am in the Rhetoric and Composition field (either as a student or a faculty member)
 - I am in the English field (either as a student or a faculty member)
 - I am in another academic field (either as a student or a faculty member)
 - I am a director/coordinator of a Writing Center
 - I am an assistant director/coordinator of a Writing Center
 - I have been promoted at my university and am no longer in the Writing Center
 - I have left academia
 - None of these apply
 - Other
- Elaborate on the nature of your Writing Center work during the time you attended the SI and on your position/role now. Please provide us with additional information related to how your career has evolved since you attended the SI.
- Are you currently in contact with anyone who attended the SI the same year as you?
- How many of your SI cohort are you in contact with?
- If yes, what is the nature of the contact? Please check all that apply:
 - Social media friends
 - Chat or meet up at conferences
 - Speak on the phone or email regularly
 - Arrange to meet socially/personally
 - Nothing regular but I feel like I could reach out if I needed/wanted to
 - Research/project collaborations
 - Other
- Did you work on a project during the SI? If so, what became of it?
- Thinking about what topics covered in the SI were most beneficial to you, please rank the following by reordering the list with the three most beneficial on top. You will have an opportunity to explain your ranking in the next question.
 - _____ Tutor education
 - _____ Staff management/mentoring
 - _____ Leadership
 - _____ Assessment
 - _____ Research
 - _____ Publishing
 - _____ Teaching
 - _____ Diversity/inclusion
 - _____ Technology
 - _____ Decision-making
 - _____ Negotiating
 - _____ Fundraising
 - _____ Building productive collaborations/partnerships
 - _____ Time management/project management
 - _____ Programming
 - _____ Cultural competency
 - _____ Linguistic diversity
 - _____ Other
- Please explain why you selected your top 2 or 3 topics.

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- To what degree did the SI benefit your work as a Writing Center professional in the following areas?
 - _____ Aided with job advancement
 - _____ Aided with scholarly output (publications or presentations)
 - _____ Aided with negotiations for additional budget or increased resources
 - _____ Provided me with materials and resources (such as for tutor education) that I continue to use
 - _____ Provided a network of colleagues
 - _____ Other
- If you selected other, please tell us what was most beneficial about the SI.
- In what ways was the SI not beneficial, or what was missing from the experience?
- Have you attended the SI as a participant more than once?
 - If yes, how was your experience different the subsequent times?
- What is your current job title?
- What is your gender?
- What is your race/ethnicity? Choose all that apply.
 - American Indian or Alaska Native
 - Asian
 - Black or African American
 - Hispanic or Latinx
 - Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander
 - White
 - Other
 - Prefer not to answer
- Have you held a leadership position in the Writing Center field, such as serving on the board of a regional Writing Center affiliate or on the International Writing Centers Association?

Appendix B: Codes for Outcomes, Categories, and Topics

Types of Outcomes. What are the types of outcomes the participants described to determine the tangible benefits during or post-SI?

Explicit outcome: Did the participant clearly connect the content or experience at the SI with a concrete application during or post-SI?

- Example: “I ended up subscribing to scholarly publications related to writing centers after hearing about them at the conference, and I am grateful to learn about, and ultimately use, textbooks by the conference leaders for my tutor training class.”

Implicit outcome: Did the participant describe a general outcome that wasn’t connected to a specific application post-SI?

- Example: “At the time, I was just learning about writing centers and their role in their institution. I was interested in the leadership role of writing center administrators.”

Neither: Did the participant describe why they ranked topics the way they did without connecting the experience to an interest or beneficial outcome?

- Example: “Based on my reflection about speakers and events.”

Types of Categories. What was the nature of the experience?

Learn something new: Did the participant describe new knowledge or skills gained?

- Example: “Assessment was presented to me in a way that I hadn’t considered for WC studies, e.g., correlating WC usage with retention. This discussion was really eye-opening for me, and this is a research area of interest for me now.”

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Relevance: Did the participant identify information/knowledge/skill that is timely or relevant to their position?

- Example: “For the institution I work at, cultural competency and diversity are areas lacking, and therefore, vital for student-centered services.”

Not relevant: Did the participant describe unmet expectations?

- Example: “I felt like the topics were more for very beginning directors. I had some experience, and so I would have loved to have more on research, publishing, etc.”

Revised practices: Did the participant describe how the SI significantly changed, revised, or influenced their writing center practice?

- Example: “I started professional development sessions as a result of SI.”

Revised thinking: Did the participant describe how the SI significantly changed, revised, or influenced their thinking about writing center work?

- Example: “I had never deliberately thought about leadership in the context of writing centers before the SI. Even the term was very strange for me in the beginning (unfamiliar in my German background). It became my research field for the next years!”

Shaped identity: Did the participant describe how the SI significantly changed, revised, or influenced their identity (as researcher, administrator, leader, scholar, etc.)?

- Example: “Even though I was fairly knowledgeable about writing centers, I felt a sort of awakening (there’s not really a better way to put it) to the writing center field and an urgent need to become part of the field/conversation and put so-called best practices into place in my local context. [. . .] In essence, I began to realize that I wanted to become part of this community of practice. And I did.”

Mentorship: Did the participant describe how the SI provided mentorship and guidance in writing center work?

- Example: “These were the areas I went seeking and discussed with a mentor at the SI.”

Cohort learning: Did the participant describe how the SI provided opportunities to learn collaboratively with other participants?

- Example: “I worked closely with a breakout group on developing a plan to support a course with embedded tutoring, and that conversation helped me think about how to approach collaboratively with faculty, a key component of my work.”

Relationship-building: Did the participant describe the interpersonal connections, professional or personal, that they built with other participants?

- Example: “I built relationships and had models from some of the top people in the field and knew them personally for later assistance with programming and socially at conferences.”

Time: Did the participant describe how the SI gave them time/space to do work?

- Example: “I didn’t move those topics around much—not because the SI wasn’t useful, but because what was most useful was the time it gave me to talk with my colleague [name redacted] and have uninterrupted time (as the parent of three small children) to think about administrative work.”

Topics. Which SI-related topics did the participants comment on?

Leadership: Did the participant describe their interest or involvement in topics related to leadership?

- Example: “A good portion of the SI focused on leadership and how to approach wc as a new director, which I found to be most valuable going into the role.”

People management: Did the participant describe their interest or involvement in topics related to managing staff and people?

- Example: “I was new to working with staff so management was interesting to me.”

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Professionalization: Did the participant describe their interest or involvement in topics related to professionalization?

- Example: “I needed some help transitioning from being a graduate student to a professional faculty member at a university that expected publications.”

Tutor education: Did the participant describe their interest or involvement in topics related to tutor education?

- Example: “I am always looking for ways to better address the needs of our tutors and students; sessions related to tutor training have been useful in introducing me to effective methods for running these training programs.”

Diversity and inclusion: Did the participant describe their interest or involvement in topics related to diversity and inclusion?

- Example: “Diversity/Inclusion is always an important topic for our center and our small liberal arts campus, especially after student protests which took place in 2016.”

Program design: Did the participant describe developing general programming or a specific program (i.e., course-embedded tutors) managed by writing centers?

- Example: “At the time as a graduate student, I was most focused on leading tutors and developing programming for our writing center. Those aspects were very useful (even if only tangentially related to my current work).”

Collaboration: Did the participant describe their interest or involvement in topics related to collaboration?

- Example: “I really appreciated the discussion of collaboration with different people and departments. I feel that collaboration was such an important part of my work as a WC director, and the relationships I built in that role are still there for me today, even though I am no longer in the Center.”

Writing center administration: Did the participant describe their interest or involvement in topics generally related to writing center administration?

- Example: “Each year I came to SI with distinct questions on my mind because I was building a center from scratch—on a desert island. I needed information.”

Networking: Did the participant describe the professional and social contacts they made with other writing center professionals?

- Example: “I found the networking to be most helpful.”

Teaching: Did the participant describe teaching (non-tutor-training instruction)?

- Example: “Teaching writing workshops and a summer course is a major part of my job.”

Scholarship: Did the participant describe activities related to scholarship including but not limited to conferences, research, publication, etc.?

- Example: “I was really interested in growing as a scholar there, and made it a point to work on a research project, getting feedback from queer and ally colleagues about a LGBTQIA+ WC research question.”

Assessment: Did the participant describe ways the SI assisted them in evaluating their writing centers?

- Example: “What I learned at the conference(s) I attended helped me understand how assessment practices were a vital tool for ensuring the effectiveness of our practice and for advocating on behalf of my program.”

Physical space: Did the participant describe the physical space of the writing center as a topic?

- Example: “The session that stays with me is one on writing centre spaces—what we have, what we want, what ‘good’ space consists of. It felt aspirational and inspirational, esp. since my current space is not good.”