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Writing Centers' Entanglements with Neoliberal Success

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Abstract

Throughout the 2010s, "success" became a common descriptor in writing centers, academic units, and student services. While the term carries connotations of professional achievement and economic improvement, it is rarely explicitly defined. This ambiguity is an example of how the interests of public institutions of postsecondary education are entangled with neoliberalism. Using a corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis approach, this essay examines uses of the ideograph "success" within an original mini-corpus comprising the webspaces of eight writing centers from one large state university system in the United States. The analysis considers how writing centers contribute to neoliberal discourses of "success" that are defined by specific political and business ideologies, reinforce white supremacist ideology, and require students, tutors, and others associated with writing centers to adopt those same perspectives.

EXIGENCE

In their keynote address at the 2018 International Writing Centers Association Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, Kendra L. Mitchell and Robert E. Randolph show how "student success" reinforces hegemonic and racist expectations of

student language and writing. They argue that because the discourse of postsecondary institutions of public education is rooted in “social capital” that “either confines or regulates people to the margins of our society,” the legacies of racism and white supremacy are continuously reaffirmed (28, 30). This calling out of “success” struck a nerve for us and likely rang familiar for other writing center folks who have recognized how neoliberalism and white supremacy permeate our everyday lives.

In the Fall 2015 semester, the Writing Center at our institution — a large, public, emerging research, and Hispanic-Serving Institution located in a US/Mexico border region — was reassigned to the newly-minted “Student Academic Success” administrative unit. This shift was matched by a physical move from its place in the university’s library to a corner office on the third floor of a new building at the edge of campus. The new space was presented as an improvement in many ways: it was bigger, with state-of-the-art technology, modern furniture, and a lovely vantage of the surrounding suburban city. Yet, the move relocated the Center from a position that benefited from frequent student cross traffic to the literal periphery of the institution, both in terms of disciplinarity and physicality; a place students would go to only if they already intended to go there.

The repositioning of the Writing Center was illustrative of institutional, state, and national shifts in policy, such as the updated strategic plan from the state’s higher education coordinating board, which sought “to increase *student success* through the combined expertise and resources of many stakeholders” (“Texas Higher Education Strategic Plan”), as well as the 2015 “Every *Student Succeeds* Act”, which replaced the by-then-much-maligned 2001 “No Child Left Behind Act” (emphases ours). Concurrently, “success” quickly became a ubiquitous descriptor across our campus and statewide university system, and indeed across the discourse of public institutions of postsecondary education (PIPE), showing up in program mission statements, student learning outcomes, names of administrative units, and strategic plans (Rihn; Höög). And yet a consistent, coherent definition of “success” is rarely articulated. As a result, the many people who have an interest in writing centers—students, tutors and consultants, writing center directors and staff, faculty, and publics—are left to assume what success means within the context of their work in the writing center (Buck).

This project contributes to ongoing scholarly discussions that explore how discourse creates a shifting reality for institutions of higher education, for students and educators, and for the public. The goal of this research project is not to commit to a single definition of “success.” Instead, we interpret this key term as an ideograph, slogan-like argot employed to shape language, behavior, and reality for members of groups (McGee). We chose to use “ideograph” as our framing device over related concepts like “god term” because ideograph draws specific attention to how ideology is facilitated through writing and discourse. Further, ideographs are not inherently good or bad; framing a word or phrase as an ideograph is a methodological move to draw attention to how language functions for different audiences. Terms like “neoliberalism” and “white supremacy,” when not used critically or sincerely, can also function as ideographs. Our efforts to document and reflect on the emergence of

"success" in PIPE are not aimed at revealing a subversive or hidden agenda. Rather, the increased and prominent use of "success" indicates an *intentional* rhetorical move on the part of institutions that facilitates a broader discourse of neoliberalism, and thus, white supremacy.

In order to learn more about how writing centers use "success," we collected and analyzed an original mini-corpus of eight writing center webspaces from a single public university system. Based on our analysis of writing center webspaces and our observations in the local context of our institution, it becomes clear that the myriad ways that "success" is used do not always align with Writing Center Studies's (WCS) disciplinary identity of prioritizing ideals such as collaboration, equity, and student agency, but instead results in, "visions of student success that deny student agency and epistemological justice," particularly for minoritized students, tutors, and writing center directors and staff (Faison et. al. 82). This is even true for those writing centers that clearly articulate missions of social and restorative justice, antiracism, decoloniality, and accessibility (Brooks-Gillies et. al.; García and Kern). Despite good intentions, dominating ideologies can't be resisted if we continue to use oppressive language. The uses of "success" by the writing centers we will discuss in this article assume that everybody begins at the same starting line, has the same opportunities, and is working towards the same goal. These assumptions are not only wrong but lead to further marginalization of already oppressed groups. When student success is identified as economic advancement, then people who already have economic advantages are defined by the institution as better and are by default more successful. Moreover, students without economic advantage, either because they represent historically marginalized groups or because their academic major isn't considered economically beneficial for the institution or state, are default coded as less successful.

CONTEXT

Institutional discourses reflect and prescribe the values, norms, and expectations of immediate stakeholders and surrounding communities. Michelle LeFrance and Melissa Nicolas link institutional goals with ideological discourses, which together set norms for behavioral expectations and establish permission structures that "offer a sense of continuity across individuals, practices, times, and sites" (7). In line with the state's higher education coordinating board's strategic plans, our state university system identified three aspirational pillars for achieving success: financial stability, academic and employment advising, and a sense of belonging with the institution ("Student Success"). Maria Fotiadou shows how official institutional discourse such as this, "reproduces and promotes neoliberal ideology," which privileges the agency of institutions and corporations with whom people are required to form meaningful relationships (1). Following Manuel Piña, we find Karen Barad's concepts of agential realism, intra-action, and the material-discursive, to be intriguing metaphors for considering writing centers' place within neoliberal institutions because they illuminate the ways we do work, how we measure it, and how our work leads to certain outcomes and excludes others (19). Webspaces epitomize how writing center identities are co-constituted through what Barad describes as entangled "causality, materiality,

agency, dynamics, and topological reconfigurings" (160). Even though writing centers strive to be accessible to all students and are one of the few places on a university campus where there is no additional student cost at the point of use, they nevertheless are part of neoliberal, white supremacist institutions, necessarily entangled with those ideologies.

Writing Center Studies and the Problematic Literacy of Success

Critical Discourse Analysis begins by identifying a social problem that you want to learn more about and ideally improve. Despite our historical efforts to support social justice, writing centers can be "perpetrators or subverters of the hegemonic, White supremacist, middle-to-upper-class discourse privileged in higher education" (Morrison 120). These contrasting identities provide a new interpretation of what Shannon Carter refers to as the "writing center paradox," wherein "the writing center functions as a democratic institution representing both our students and the literacy demands of the academy, especially as we resist the autonomous model of literacy dominating most rhetorical spaces over which we are not in control" (138). Discourses of "success" highlight this paradox.

Historically, "success" has been defined by writing centers in various ways. According to Kaidan McNamee and Michelle Miley's analysis of writing centers, "success [is] measured in monetary terms, with quantitative data being the only evidence of research," and in this way positions student achievement as a placeholder for economic advancement. Marguerite P. Murphy identifies writing centers' "need to define success" and gestures towards objectives like students seeing "themselves as intelligent human beings" who are capable of "improved performance in writing" (2). Beth Rapp Young and Barbara A. Fritzsche align success with avoiding procrastination and attaining "higher grades, greater satisfaction, and lower evaluation anxiety" (47). In a foundational shift, Terese Thonus positions success as being the result of "mutual satisfaction," between the tutor and student (125). More recent scholarship has built from Thonus by defining writing center success according to alignment between anticipated and demonstrated student learning outcomes (Fledderjohann) and the professional advancement of writing center administrators (Brooks-Gillies & Smith).

And yet, Rogers notes that, "most writing center claims of success are not evidenced-based" (56 qtd. in Salazar 33). For many working-class students, Harry Denny et.al argue, "the more 'success' they achieve, the greater the symbolic and material separation between them and their families and home communities" (71). Similarly, Brett Griffiths et. al. argue that a centralized definition of "success" is *necessarily* decontextualized from students' goals and contexts and thus prioritizes institutional interests.

"Success" in critical discourse studies and higher education

Critical discourse analysts align "success" with neoliberal objectives of economic advancement (Mooney), individual accomplishment (Shoshana), and employment with preferred industries (Fotiadou). Within educational contexts, Mary Ryan notes that "success" means "doing the 'right' thing for

minority and/or marginalized groups, and of budding potential for transformative social action" (220). Yet, as Ryan also notes, these well-intentioned goals can be contradicted by individual biases against members of racial, ethnic, and religious groups, particularly during periods of economic stress. These warnings align with earlier research by Rudolf P. Gaudio and Steve Bialostok who link a "neoliberal cultural model of success" (57) with "the everyday racism that pervades White middle-class discourses about cultural difference and social inequality in the United States" (52). Ultimately, when students attempt to assimilate to the expectations of neoliberal institutions under the promise of personal economic benefit, they also inevitably reify the structural power imbalances and hierarchies inherent within that system.

Our recognition of "success" as a dominant ideograph within higher education in the contemporary neoliberal era parallels Bill Readings's characterization of "excellence," which similarly ensures subjects' participation in an academic system without affording them either agency in or protection from the bureaucracy of that system. Rebecca Hallman Martini connects excellence to another neoliberal concept: innovation, which "does not necessarily carry any specific content, but is rather used as an adjective to describe the next best thing in pedagogy worth selling" (11). Since none of these terms have a fixed definition, a positive interpretation of their ambiguity is that they permit individuals to feel their contributions, assumptions, and even dissent are valued. But as others have noted, neoliberal institutions allow strategically created spaces for diversity and inclusion only as long as those efforts are within the profit-seeking terms prescribed by the institution (Azima et. al.).

By situating writing centers within programs and departments identified by "success," and demarcating writing centers' objectives as promoting "success," PIPE, the systems they belong to, and by extension, the state, implicitly assert that the purpose of writing centers—and perhaps of writing education as a whole—is to sustain neoliberal, and therefore white supremacist, interests.

Neoliberalism in the University

Neoliberalism is contentiously and inconsistently defined, even by those who endorse it. Generally, neoliberalism in the university endorses rationality, privileges market-based thinking and problem solving, and can be recognized by policy positions such as austerity measures, individualized culpability, debt funding, rent seeking, outcomes based planning, and what Hallman Martini calls a "political climate driven by college administrators who are strongly influenced by a business-model mentality, corporate interests, and post-Fordist values, including privatization, efficiency, cost-cutting, and mass production" (7). Since the 1970s in the United States, neoliberalism has become a synecdoche for a reactionary response to domestic civil rights movements. Lisa Duggan cites the project of neoliberalism as intentionally implemented at various moments in the 20th Century to "separat[e] class politics—the critique of economic inequality—from identity politics" (7). Jeff Bale and Sarah Knopp note that this separation impacts educational institutions by "privatizing new sectors of the economy once thought to be the domain of the public sector, slashing government spending on social services, and promoting anti-union, 'flexible' labor policies" (111). In addition to acknowledging how these ideas

are discursively related, it's important to document how the movements supporting these ideas are materially connected. In many instances, the same groups that organized to install neoliberal policies in response to civil rights advances in the 1960s and 1970s, are, in the 2020s, installing anti-abortion policies, legislation attacking transgender people, school and library book bans, anti-vaccine initiatives, union busting tactics, and school voucher programs. All but the first of these are typically framed as matters of "choice," even though the consequences are communal, and are indicative of a mentality that permeates higher education: students are expected to act as atomized individuals making choices about their own education under market conditions, whether that's a choice about selecting a marketable major, taking out loans, or, relevant to writing centers, seeking additional academic help.

A common but still useful catch-all is that neoliberalism re-defines students, faculty, and staff as entrepreneurial individuals entering contracts with the institution and each other, and as such are expected to assume all financial culpability and continually update their skills to meet changing workplace needs (Mautner, "The Entrepreneurial University"). This individual responsibility is often packaged around ideas of "choice," wherein the neoliberal agent has the freedom to make market-based choices regarding anything from what brand of toilet paper to buy to what college major to pursue. What is left out of these claims of student choice is that those choices are directed—by program requirements, by laws, by advisors, by registration software—in ways that are not always clear to the students. For example, if a particular course is required for students, many students will attempt to enroll in the course, sometimes resulting in a waitlist, and upper administration will determine that students are "choosing" that course. Respecting student choice, however, rarely extends to instances where the data run contrary to the expectations or preferences of those in institutional power. If a writing center has a backlog of online asynchronous consultations, but there are free spots available for in-person consultations, the institution won't necessarily fund more online asynchronous support if the institution is trying to increase on-campus activity.

As Mery F. Diaz et. al. point out, "[i]nstitutions that embrace neoliberal ideals value independence, self-reliance, efficiency, and non-relational helping relationships" (192). Objectives framed around these kinds of terms illustrate how neoliberal ideologies are not spread through discourses that directly harm or oppress others, but rather, they reproduce discreetly through discourses that claim to offer support (Kauppinen). For instance, M. Remi Yergeau et. al. argue that student accessibility services which are meant to support student needs can deny accommodations if rigor is affected because it would create an unfair disadvantage for able-bodied students.

Returning to the point introduced by Mitchell and Randolph, writing centers perpetuate the inherent racism of both academia as a whole and the English discipline, where white supremacy is built in as the default state. In fact, as Wonderful Faison and Anna Treviño argue, "many ableist, racist, classist, xenophobic, and/or sexist assumptions and institutional practices are embedded in student success initiatives, under the guise of generosity or altruism." At issue here is not just that any ambiguous space allows for participants to create their own meanings, which can be confusing for

individual students as well as for writing centers. It's also that because success as a term is so closely aligned with neoliberal capitalism, specifically with financial gain at the expense of others' suffering, people will fill in that objective as "natural" absent any other definition.

In the case of writing centers, they stand as a platform that offers services to any student in need of writing support. For students to receive these services, they have to position themselves as customers who have self-diagnosed themselves as having a need. Here, we don't mean to critique self-advocacy, rather we point out how treating students like customers is indicative of neoliberalism and that can lead to outcomes that may run contrary to a writing center's mission.

The conditions of neoliberal institutions in the United States cannot be separated from the contexts in which they arise, what hooks identifies as an "interrelated system of domination" designed to promote "white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (*xi*). Neoliberal success, therefore, is intertwined with, "the dominant epistemology (of white privilege)," which, according to Faison et. al. "provide[s] white people with the privilege to insist that race is not/no longer an issue in the U.S., as well as the privilege to insist that the dominant epistemology is not only the norm, but also the only epistemology" (81). This context is accentuated by writing centers' institutional precarity, especially for contingent staff who are often excluded from their own centers' decision-making processes (Fels et. al.). It also includes writing centers at schools that have received less attention in terms of historical research and archiving in WC scholarship such as HCBUs, HSIs, women's colleges, and tribal colleges (Denny and Boquet), but are nevertheless forced to play a part in maintaining the racist expectations of the institution (Barrera Eddy et. al.) Critical observations such as these reveal the limits of critiques or theories that focus mainly on economic concerns, because neoliberalism and white supremacy are engaged in overlapping projects. Central to both is rendering their hegemonies at once invisible and self-evident. An idea of "success" rooted in neoliberal ideology necessarily perpetuates racism, patriarchy, classism, ableism, and restricts efforts to promote justice, equity, and inclusion.

METHODOLOGY

Artifact

The university system at the center of our analysis identifies "student success" as being "core to the mission" ("Student Success"). The system includes eight academic institutions with writing centers, and although each institution is an autonomous entity, enacting its own missions, strategic plans, and developing its own degree and support programs, they are all governed by a single Board of Regents, a shared set of system policies, and common state laws. Emerging as a guiding principle as well as a series of academic programs, "Student Success" demarcates system-wide and locally enacted administrative units facilitated by "coordination and collaboration across…institutions, and with partners beyond the System" that value certain kinds of accessibility, degree attainment, and career preparation ("Student Success").

Writing centers produce all kinds of artifacts that tell researchers a lot about what writing centers do and why they do it (Faison and Condon). Webspaces are important contributors to writing center discourse, and include, for instance, official institutional websites, social media pages and accounts, management systems like WCOnline, and videoconferencing services. As Eric Camarillo argues, the decisions writing centers make with their webspaces on design and functionality aren't neutral; they reflect the values of the institution ("A Parliament of OWLS"). Our mini-corpus consists of the webspaces for each writing center in the university system including the home/landing page and all other levels of "child" pages. PDF attachments were not included, nor were pages located elsewhere on an institution's website that mentioned the writing center. This helped ensure that we were able to obtain comparable information from each writing center webspace.

These webspaces prominently display hours of service, location, contact information, and descriptions of services. In addition, webspaces variably include photos of the center itself, short bios of center staff, resources for writers and instructors, and supplementary content like blogs, journal articles, and instructional videos. All of these features are common across WCS, making this mini-corpus sufficiently representative of the broader disciplinary community.

Our data were collected during the Fall 2021 semester. Since then, some of the writing centers represented in the mini-corpus have changed personnel and updated webspace designs and content. Likewise, the university system and state higher education coordinating board have both revised and updated their missions and objectives. Our mini-corpus artifact serves as a snapshot of writing centers at the time it was created, a strategic approach to documenting historically relevant moments in the field during an era of accelerating technological and political change (Azima et. al.).

Critical Discourse and Corpus Analyses

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) refers to a range of approaches designed for understanding and critiquing how power is created, reproduced, and circulated through language and practice across societies and institutions. Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) is the commonly used name for the associated academic discipline. Gerlinde Mautner grounds CDA's metadisciplinary application by defining *critical* as the work of "unveiling and challenging taken-for-granted assumptions about language and the social" ("Checks and Balances" 123-124). *Discourse* is defined as authentic texts that perform social functions. *Analysis* accounts not just for an institution's stated intentions but considers how discourse was created, its material impact, its effects, the interactions and networks that result from and create it, and the physical and digital spaces that are modified or created for such interaction. It is the systematized linking of text and context. Finally, recalling Shawn Wilson, who writes, "researchers, no matter how objective they claim their methods and themselves to be, do bring with them their own set of bias," CDA considers the observer as part of the apparatus, and so the researcher is entangled in that meaning making (16).

CDA can be augmented by methods like Corpus Analysis (CA) to analyze patterns in language across large quantities of textual data, known as a corpus, using computer-mediated concordance software (Höög). Following Charlotte Taylor, rather than starting "from the corpus," our project uses "a discourse-analytical frame," resulting in the modified approach of Corpus-Assisted Critical Discourse Analysis (CACDA) (22). To complete our analysis, we primarily used concordance software to help us identify the extent, instances, and contexts in which the broader phenomenon of "success" is enacted. This approach places our project in line with CDS's objectives of analyzing discursive power in discrete as well as broader societal contexts by giving us a bird's eye view of writing center webspaces while also zooming in on the target ideograph.

It is useful to recall Karen Barad's framing of discourse, which she says is the "field of possibilities" that "constrains and enables what can be said" and through which we "define what counts as meaningful statements" (147). This perspective accounts for expanded definitions of discourse that are grounded in political practice (Gee), includes "semiotic systems such as images, layout and typography" (Bednarek and Caple 136), and attends to the overlap of the "textual details" of composing practices and the "social structures" of institutional policies (Huckin et. al. 112). LaFrance and Nicolas found that, "the apparatus of the writing center … is constructed to minimize the ambiguity of the relationship between any two people working together in an academic setting," (104-105). Accounting for all of these factors, it becomes necessary to consider not just an institution's stated intention; we must also consider how the discourse was created, its material impact, the effects of that discourse, the interactions and networks that result from and create the discourse, and the physical and digital spaces that are modified or created for such interaction. Our comprehensive approach affords us the opportunities to directly concern ourselves with the stated objectives of writing centers and their broader institutions, and identify how those objectives are manifest in subtle and incremental ways (Parnell).

Methods

In this subsection we overview our step-by-step process for collecting data and analyzing our artifact. First, we created a mini-corpus populated with text data from every page of every writing center webspace within the selected university system. This required converting individual web pages into text files that could be processed by the concordance software. This was done by inputting the URL of each page of the corresponding writing centers' webspace into the *iPodulator* online conversion application which would return a plain text file version of each page's content (Krupa). The resulting text data from each individual page were compiled into larger text files, one file for each writing center webspace in its entirety, resulting in eight files total.

Second, we sorted the data using Laurence Anthony's *AntConc* concordance freeware, starting with the word "succe*." Stylizing the search term with the asterisk (*) tells the concordance software to include all suffixes and word endings, which accounts for a word's various forms and usages (success, successes, succeed, etc.). Since our analysis is concerned with the different

ways in which the key term was used and not on word frequency, we did not consider duplicate content as separate plots for our coding. This approach is referred to as focusing on unique instances of use.

Third, Crystal and Monty individually read through each "succe*" plot and coded each instance according to themes we felt best represented the way "success" was being used in context (Tekla was responsible for checking the coded data for any inconsistencies). To avoid influencing each other's coding processes, we waited until we had each concluded our coding to share and discuss our results. After discussing how we coded each plot, and coming to consensus on any convergences and discrepancies in our coding, we organized the data into a finalized list of seven collocate themes. These themes were cross-referenced with contemporary WCS scholarship, searching for direct matches of terms as well as for relevant cognate terms (eg, "writer" and "author" were both counted in instances where they referred to the student as the one doing the writing). We discuss those themes in the "Results" section of this essay.

This process was time and labor intensive, making real Barad's materiality, particularly the role of the apparatus as co-constitutive of epistemology and ontology. That is, our methodological approach mattered in what data we were able to collect, how we were able to analyze those data, and what meaning could be derived from our research. For instance, our data collection and analysis process were partially shaped by the affordances and constraints of the *AntConc* freeware. Converting the webspaces into text files made using the concordance software possible, but it was not conducive to analyzing key features of web-based discourses, such as visual design (e.g., color, arrangement, logos), audio/video content (tutorials, podcasts, sound effects), accessibility (typeface, transcripts, captions on a/v content), and end-user experience (pathways, number of clicks to find content, individual technologies or software), which Catharina Nyström Höög identifies as a shortcoming of corpus analysis.

DATA

The mini-corpus that forms the basis for our analysis includes a total 313,815 individual word tokens, representing 12,431 different words. The key term "succe*" plotted a total of 382 times across the mini-corpus, with 63 unique instances. Figure 1 indicates how the key term token "succe*" is plotted in the mini-corpus, along with the most common forms: "success," "succeed," and "successful." This figure also shows how these terms rank on the reference corpora, the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and the Academic Journals genre corpus (ACAD). By comparing how frequently the key term occurs within the mini-corpus to its frequency in the two reference corpora, two preliminary conclusions can be drawn: "succe*" is more frequently used in the mini-corpus than the other corpora and, based on the frequency in both the mini-corpus and the ACAD, the key term is more prominent in academic discourse than in more general discourse.

Corpus	Success	Succeed	Successful	Succe*	n Tokens
Mini	343	1	35	386	313,815
COCA	102,914	21,294	78,042	271,362	1 billion
ACAD	23,370	3,249	17,953	61,792	81 million

Fig. 1. Occurrences of key term plots in mini-corpus and reference corpora

RESULTS

This section includes seven thematic subsections, one for each collocate theme that we identified: academic objectives, independence and service, writing, professionalization, branding, and abstract. Each subsection indicates the number of relevant plots, and is then defined, analyzed, and supported by relevant scholarship. Two instances of "successive" were coded as not relevant. Following standard practice with CACDA, individual institutions are cited anonymously, while benefit terms and cognates are indicated in aggregate.

Academic objectives (8)

The theme of "success" as an academic objective refers to those instances where a student indicated having met the stated or assumed objectives of a course, assignment, or instructor. For example, among a list of services that includes disciplinary-aligned objectives like developing critical thinking skills and supporting other programs on campus, one center frames student success as "defined by completion, improved grades, or publications." Another center identifies successful students as effective writers who "use controlling ideas: thesis statements, hypotheses, questions of inquiry, etc. to signal intent, provide direction, and summarize main points for their readers." Along similar lines, other centers reference "success" in classes, on dissertation defenses, and in general "academic endeavors." Students, too, associate "success" with classroom performance, noting that, "I do believe the tutoring will help me be more successful in my class."

Each of these reflects the idea of "success" as defined by meeting predetermined standards that lie outside of an individual student's learning or objectives. Meeting course objectives is a kind of "success," one that Readings identifies as having, "no content to call its own," which is to say, anything the institution chooses can be considered a potential indicator of "success" (24). There are instances where meeting course or instructor objectives could be viewed as in-line with WCS's social justice goals, such as if the student learning outcomes of a course or program specifically articulate these goals. However, given how language and goals of social justice and diversity, equity, and inclusion are being made illegal for academic programs and support services, particularly in Republican-led states, assessing whether course outcomes lead to positive social outcomes will be increasingly difficult.

For writing centers, an emphasis on doing what an instructor "wants" the student to do reproduces the "banking model" critiqued by Paulo Freire (Hull). Accordingly, there is less evidence in the mini-corpus of common WCS

scholarship themes, such as collaborative practice, and there is only one reference to “meaning making practices.” This could be due to centers preferring not to foreground disciplinary concepts out of concerns that it would confuse or turn off potential students. Another interpretation is that these writing centers—and by extension, their institutions and system—are wary of critiques of collaborative work as somehow lesser than individual work. A prejudice against collaboration shows up in policies that frame collaborative practices as cheating, and in annual review guidelines that favor single-author publications over collaborative writing. Further, the idea of collaboration runs contrary to the neoliberal concept of the atomized individual.

Independence and service (5)

Writing center independence, which Hallman Martini, in a gesture towards post-human interaction, refers to as “agency,” can be understood in terms of institutional place, including the allocation of space and resources (63). Most writing centers “belong to,” or are dependent on, academic departments or larger administrative units that may not hold the same views of writing support and the role of writing centers. Absent its own independent academic identity, Lori Salem observes, a writing center is typically relegated to the role of “service unit” (“Opportunity and Transformation” 27). Under a service model, interactions between students and tutors take the shape of consumers purchasing a product, with tutors and other center staff acting as customer service agents.

Independence can also refer to the student writer gaining confidence in their ability to complete their own writing. However, as student writers become more self-sufficient and confident in their writing, they may become less reliant on the support provided by the writing center (Carillo). Writing centers are “supportive” spaces that meet institutional objectives according to quantitative measurements, such as improved student grade point averages, matriculation, retention, graduation, and job placement (Nordstrom). Since quantitative measurements like usage rates are “the market-based logic of evaluating writing centers,” lower usage—ostensibly the result of effective tutoring operations—can be viewed as indicative of poor performance (Salem, “Decisions” 151). Taken in the inverse, writing centers are dependent on students feeling like they lack “independence.”

Throughout the mini-corpus, the writing center is positioned as successful because it helps students. Considering writing centers’ histories of providing support for non-traditional and marginalized students—while also acknowledging that history has not always led to equitable representation in hiring practices or publication—defining writing center success according to the help it provides students would seem to be in-line with WCS’s social justice and antiracist objectives. Put another way, writing centers’ positive desired outcomes do not compensate for the broader desired outcomes of the institution. In other words, writing centers can promote independence, but often it can only achieve a certain kind of neoliberal-approved independence.

A lack of evidence within the mini-corpus to frame writing center success in terms of institutional or disciplinary autonomy, contributions to the

advancement of scholarship, or tutors developing as researchers or learners in their own rights (outside of job training to meet service objectives), is noticeable. Not surprisingly, "success" across the mini-corpus was less frequently attributed to the center or tutors and instead revolved around the student. The instances coded as "center and tutor services" reaffirm this framing, by emphasizing the centers' roles in meeting external expectations.

Writing (14)

Expectedly, helping students to become better writers is considered a successful outcome for writing centers. Better can mean a lot of things, such as: effective at reaching and persuading intended audiences, able to situate writing within different contexts, aware of their disciplines' expectations. Centers in the mini-corpus accomplish this through individualized, contextual feedback, with one center noting that "there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to successful writing" (D). Topics such as coherent organization and transitions, developing ideas, supporting arguments with credible evidence, and transfer of writing and languaging skills are frequently mentioned. Further, successful writing demonstrates "metacommentary" on and "synthesis" of ideas, arguments, and sources. It incorporates arguments and claims supported by various forms of secondary and primary evidence, the value of each determined by differing audiences and disciplinary contexts.

Writing centers in this mini-corpus are less likely to advocate their services for writing conventions—grammar, spelling, punctuation—even as those features might be areas of evaluation in disciplinary writing assignments. This stance is in-line with WCS lore, although more recent scholarship signals a shift in disciplinary thinking. Salem, for instance, notes that "affecting a genteel disregard for grammar makes no sense if we are working with English language learners, with students who spoke a less-privileged version of English at home, or with any student who feels anxious about grammar" ("Decisions" 163). Only one center in the mini-corpus indicates that they offer language support in languages other than English—or, at least, that their tutors also speak Spanish[1].

When writing centers privilege English language writing, they reinforce what Caswell critiques as "the narrative that academic mobility is tied to [Standard Academic English]" (113). At the same time, helping students to become successful writers often means guiding them to be more aware of and skilled at deploying English language conventions and SAE. Writers and consultants alike are aware of this pressure. For Instance, Faith Thompson describes consultants as "'playing the game,'" wherein they "communicated to students that code-switching was the only way for academic success." These conditions highlight the disharmony that writing centers face within neoliberal institutions. Centers are compelled to reinforce white language dominance while our scholarship recognizes that doing so reconstitutes racist linguistic hierarchies.

Professionalization (10)

Plots coded as “professionalism” included those that describe writing as a prerequisite or component of job or career attainment. Writing centers endorse neoliberal ideology by aligning writing with markers of professional success such as job procurement, appeal to potential employers, and field-specific outcomes like journal article publication and “book contracts.” Sometimes, these connections are less explicit. For instance, the mission statement of one writing center links critical thinking to external pressures “including assessment and shifting demands from a variety of writing cultures in higher education.” Although the referent for the “shifting demands” language is unstated, its proximity to “including assessment” implies familiar external pressures associated with the neoliberal academy.

Professionalization is listed as something to strive for regardless of degree type. For example, one center notes that, for undergraduate students, “the ability to communicate in writing is one of the most important keys to professional success,” while for graduate students, success is marked by an ability “to communicate the value of your research to people inside and outside of your discipline.” These examples position successful writing at both the undergraduate ("professional") and graduate ("value") levels in terms of economic signifiers. In doing so, writing centers suggest that students gain independence by accomplishing tasks and goals that could help them procure gainful employment.

However, professionalization as a marker of success aligns with writing centers’ administrative outcomes more so than with learning objectives. Since institutions value economic outcomes like job placement for their graduates, writing centers are successful when they contribute to that outcome by helping students improve their professional prospects. This principle applies to consultants who gain professional experience and develop hirable skills through their work in the writing center. However, these kinds of measures are different from learning outcomes in that they are indirect evidence of achievement but not direct evidence of student learning or student writing.

Returning to our initial exigence, emphases on professionalization are connected to institutional racism, as noted above by Mitchell and Randolph. Because it is taken as a given that it is a desirable outcome, professionalization in the writing center has the effect of rendering institutional racism less visible because it is laundered through language of academic success.

Branding (18)

Given our methodological and thematic focuses, it was not surprising that the “branding” theme was the most frequent hit in our analysis. This is because services, workshops, academic departments, and writing centers themselves frequently include the word “success” in their titles (Monty). One “Success Center” has the slogan “Success is not an accident. It’s a result.” prominently displayed on its homepage. It reinforces the idea of accountability, demonstrates how neoliberal discourse functions tautologically (as it’s not immediately indicated what success is the result *of*), and equates personal

identity with brand identity. For individuals, this means defining an education as the accumulation of marketable and employable skills.

Writing centers' branding of success reflects the influence, values, and control of their institutions. Although more autonomous centers may have control over their webspaces, most writing centers enact the same designs, color schemes, and user experiences as their institutions. Yiqiong Zhang and Kay L. O'Halloran find that this has the effect of conflating "ideas, values, and identities" (438). In other words, when writing center webspaces look like every other website, students associate the center with the values of the institution, not the other way around. Similarly, Höög notes, "visual elements like background colors or photographs, giv[e] university webspaces a more sophisticated – and perhaps more commercial – appearance than public sector texts in general" (213 - 214). This effect also occurs when writing center webspaces link to programs like career services, which Fotiadou notes are where students receive writing services at institutions outside the U.S., and where objectives of academic success and employability are more explicitly connected.

Within the mini-corpus, workshops promise "success" in writing lab reports and literature reviews, while student feedback of writing center services is presented as "Success Stories." Centers offer "Success Camps" and are housed in programs with names like "Undergraduate Success" and "Student Academic Success." Linked-to services such as "Military and Veterans Success Center" and "Career Success" reveal networks of specialized support services framed in terms that subtly normalize higher education's role in the U.S.'s military-industrial complex.

When writing centers incorporate the ideograph "success" into their own branding, they commodify themselves as tools students utilize to improve their own brands, and as marketable and employable commodities. Thus, the term "success" is used to sell what can be gained through success: independence. With slogans like "The sign of a good tutoring session means you find yourself relying on a tutor less and less. In other words, our Success Center focuses on empowering students," it is easy to see students buying into the idea of free thinking and growth as promised by the writing center. Within neoliberal institutions, branding is seen as a logical and necessary move, as the *only* move. A disharmony presents itself when understanding branding as another aspect of neoliberalism and all the contradictions that it carries with it.

Abstract ideas (6)

The final group of coded hits were characterized by their lack of continuity, yet, in a way, the items coded as "abstract" are the best representatives of "success" as a neoliberal ideograph. Across higher education, "success" is always used metaphorically, signifying an assumed achievement or positive outcome. Its usage signifies to the audience, "you know what we mean," without ever actually stating what they mean. But in some instances, that metaphor is a tautology related to another circular logic of the neoliberal academy: the market cost justification that argues that a program or service is worth sustaining if it generates capital. Writing centers are typically free to students at the point of use, drawing their operational budgets from student

fees or allocated funds, and so they are perceived as programs that cost money rather than make money. For Denny, writing centers having to constantly justify their budgets and actions isn't just about the centers, but rather it "speaks into the influence of corporate-style management discourses and philosophy on college education as well as a historical distrust of and ambivalence toward education." In these abstractions, success doesn't mean anything specifically, and that's perhaps where its usage is most insidious, reiterating ideologies of neoliberalism and white supremacy.

For instance, one writing center webspace directs students to find external resources to support their writing: "There are many useful and comprehensive resources for becoming a more effective and successful writer that can be found online." Outsourcing writing support to copy editing services like Grammarly and tutoring feedback mills like Smarthinking, or requiring them to use surveillance tech like Turnitin's plagiarism checker or Respondus's browser lockdown, are common in business schools and disciplinary writing courses. Drawing on Angela Davis, among others, we see these practices as making a kind of sense within the context of the neoliberal academy, reiterating a throughline in U.S. history that connects prison-military-industrial complexes, chattel slavery, and policies of writing education.

CONCLUSION

Analyzing "success" as an ideograph reveals that this term reinforces neoliberal ideology that defines "the outer parameters of a society" while "signifying a collective commitment" to success's contextual meaning and use (McGee 8, 15). Understanding how writing center discourses function, and revealing potential motivations for these functions, particularly when they contradict disciplinary objectives, is fundamentally important work because discourse(s) at once produce material conditions and reproduce ideological power. If writing centers are not aware of and able to reconcile the neoliberal contexts in which they operate, they will inadvertently continue to serve the material and intellectual interests of a capitalist, white supremacist hegemony (Azima et. al.). Our analysis draws attention to the institutional conditions that prevent critical interpretation in favor of accepting self-evident meanings and subsequent policies. Even though writing centers promote a form of student and tutor collaboration that is unique within institutions of higher education, our analysis shows how these objectives are contingent upon a range of neoliberal contextual factors that inform each other: social practices, physical and online spaces, human interactions, and access to capital (Singh-Corcoran and Emika). Indeed, these imperatives are accelerating. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's most recent strategic plan explicitly ties student success to economic advancement, and boasts to "be *the first state in the country* to tie our completion goals directly to the wage premiums associated with postsecondary credentials" ("Building a Talent Strong Texas," *emphasis in original*). At the same time, the state has outlawed diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives on college campuses, a directive that some institutions have been willing to over-comply with, by eliminating DEI initiatives, renaming and repurposing diversity offices, and enacting policies to avoid non-compliance even before the law went into effect in January 2024 (Xia & Dey).

The language of neoliberalism and white supremacy "in the writing center occurs not because of linguistic/dialectic clashes of a genuine misunderstanding of linguistic meaning, but because of racism/racial supremacy" (Condon et. al. 37). There is no anti-neoliberalism without antiracism, and vice versa. Yet, we're hopeful about efforts that decenter academic discourse and white supremacist audiences (Treviño and Ozias), emphasize transfer of and respect for students' multiple literacies (Stock and Liechty), critique writing centers' hegemonic, iterative roles within institutions, offer pathways for remediation and response, recognize systemic and institutional change as enactments and processes of becoming (Zhang et. al.), empower students to reflect on their writing processes and define successful writing for themselves (Blackmon), and promote interdisciplinary collaboration to create new visions for writing centers based on shared goals and values (Hallman Martini).

We are critiquing neoliberalism at the discursive level in a moment when Neo-Confederate fascism is attacking higher education out in the open. Why are you paying attention to *that,* when there's all *this*? The counterargument to our project from the contemporary neoliberal movement would likely hinge on the premise that positive outcomes of egalitarian, pluralistic, and democratic institutions and societies can only be achieved through economic opportunity and advancement. However, those attacking higher education have used the logics and systems of neoliberalism—unfettered economic privilege, so-called free speech absolutism—to achieve their recent gains. To continue to facilitate the positive outcomes that writing centers have been working towards for decades, it is necessary for writing centers to disentangle from neoliberal discourses of success and redefine their work according to collaboration and community.

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NOTES

1. At the time of writing, one other center represented here now indicates on their website that they offer Spanish language writing support.

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