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Assessment Strategies: Differentiating Maximum Values of Writing Center Support

SLIDE Four: In his article “Writing Center Assessment: Searching for “Proof” of Our Effectiveness,” writing center guru Neal Lerner asks “how do we begin to investigate” just how “our writing centers contribute to the teaching and learning goals that our institutions hold dear” (64), which is a question we can and should ask of any academic support center. He looks briefly at the few attempts that have been made to *quantify* student learning outcomes in writing centers over the past thirty years before offering “real life assessment from the writing center [he] directs” (58). Today, I will present the various types of assessment that have emerged at our writing center. One of our strengths is that we can contribute quantitative data to the mix because of the Metro Writing Studio’s *collaboration* with the Programs in Language, Culture, and Professional Advancement (PLCPA), a department that quantifiably tracks the learning outcomes of its international, non-native English speaking students. While it is not unusual that the Studio and the PLCPA independently collect and analyze data for purposes of improving our respective services, it is the *layering of our data* that makes it possible for us to document for ourselves and our institution how the Studio contributes to the learning outcomes of the PLCPA students and how our goals connect with those of the University. **SLIDE Five:** Collaboration provides greater opportunities for any academic support center not only to collect more robust data but to target a specific cohort of students for close examination to determine what, if any, effects it has on this group.

As Jason Mayland notes in a podcast discussion with Neal Lerner, it is important for writing centers to determine where they have the greatest influence; while Mayland says that writing centers have

value for all students, he advises directors to “look at specialized populations” such as returning, or mature, or ESL learners that haven’t yet been studied in this context in order to “differentiate maximum value.” While Jessica Williams acknowledges that “there are multiple factors that are important in the development of student writing such that it would be foolhardy to attribute improvement directly or exclusively to their WC experiences,” she also insists that “difficulties notwithstanding, it is both possible and essential to establish whether what happens in WC sessions makes a difference” (118). We discovered that while the least proficient international students benefit the most from the Studio, all of the PLCPA students receive some benefit; and so now I will discuss our methods and share our findings regarding the maximum value thresholds of writing support we have established and validated for these students.

Like most writing centers, the Studio provides individualized sessions during which tutors review a student’s writing with the student to discuss higher and lower order writing concerns; papers are not edited or proofread for students. Because almost as many graduate student writers are tutored as undergraduates, the staff is comprised of individuals who hold or are pursuing Master’s degrees in a writing-related field and who have experience either as adjunct instructors of college writing and/or as writing tutors; there are no undergraduate/peer tutors.

SLIDE Six: All students who wish to be tutored fill out a paper form that records the student’s name and identification number; the class and professor for which writing is being done; and the date, arrival time, and start and stop time of the tutoring session, all of which document usage and are useful for assessing institutional effectiveness. Students are also asked to communicate their goals for the session, and tutors record what in their view was addressed, which reveals as much

about students' perceptions regarding their needs as it does about what they believe writing centers can do for them. The tutor's report indicates whether the student-identified needs were attended to and/or if the session took a different turn. Much qualitative and some quantitative information can be culled from these statements, information that reveals just what kind of advice tutors are imparting to students—or what of value students might be taking away from the sessions that could affect their writing.

This information allows me, the Coordinator, to improve my management of the daily operations, which makes the Studio more user-friendly, and to make the case that the Studio is being utilized efficiently—in other words, cost-effectively. These data get entered into a dedicated, web-based server created so that the Studio and the PLCPA can generate customized reports and have restricted access to each other's information. The development of this specialized database is an indication that our institution *values* the data we track, which gets reported to the Campus Provost and the Dean of the College, both of whom provide portions of the Studio's funding. Clearly, counting students is not assessing them, as Neal Lerner articulates, but determining which students are shared can lead not only to more productive collaboration but to more creative and robust ways to undertake *assessment* and to document the writing center's effectiveness. **SLIDE Seven:** In other words, even utilitarian record keeping can become significant when it is layered with other data whether collected in the writing center or elsewhere in the institution.

Each year, our campuses enroll roughly 500 new international students with a total enrollment of about 1200 international students. All of the international, non-native speakers of English take a written, essay placement test upon their arrival to campus, which determines whether they must

complete the PLCPA course or are exempt. The majority of the international students who make use of the Studio's services are enrolled in one of the classes offered by the PLCPA. These undergraduate and graduate students work towards proficiency in English by taking, during their first semester, a three-credit PLCPA English class specific to the discipline they have enrolled to study with a co-requisite lab component that focuses on academic writing.

Because the PLCPA welcomed its inaugural class in the fall of 2006, Director Mutiara Mohamad was particularly cautious, in the absence of benchmarks, about monitoring student progress. **SLIDE Eight:** Granting that students who score fifteen to the maximum eighteen points on the placement pre-test *place out* of the course, the remaining students came to be distinguished by their proficiency levels according to three ranges for purposes of tracking improvement and support: those who score between 3 (the lowest score) and 9.4, between 9.5 and 12.4, and between 12.5 to 14.4. These ranges will be referred to as Clusters One, Two, and Three, respectively.

At the end of the first academic year, in the spring 2007, Mohamad noticed a reduced improvement across all three clusters in the spring as compared with the students in the fall 2006 semester, and she feared that the weakest students might not achieve adequate English proficiency with just the one semester of single-level instruction. Informed by the emerging data, Mohamad decided in the fall 2007 to require only the least proficient PLCPA students seek Studio support by receiving tutoring and/or attending writing workshops. These Cluster One students would now have to complete fifteen hours of support each semester—the idea being to add an average of one additional instructional hour to the four existing contact hours per week without having to add additional

levels and/or semesters of instruction. The expectation was that these required hours of writing support would ultimately contribute to improved post-test scores of the weakest students.

At the end of fall 2007, the students in Cluster One, all of whom were mandated to seek fifteen hours of support, *did* see an improved increase from pre- to post-test with a 4.18 point average improvement compared with their counterparts who in the spring 2007 had achieved a 3.88 average improvement with course instruction only. Even with the new mandate, not all of the Cluster One students completed the requirement, however. In isolating the data further to factor out the students who did not pursue the support, Mohamad discovered that the average improvement of those who completed or exceeded the fifteen hour requirement and completed the course was even higher at 4.46 points. **SLIDE Nine:** These data suggest that writing center support positively contributes towards improving student writing outcomes for the least proficient students, doing much to put them on par with the initially more proficient students.

Considering that the maximum score for the test is eighteen, and the students who did complete the mandated tutoring improved on average 4.46 points, that makes for a 24.8% improvement from the pre- to post-test. Conversely, these data suggest that the weakest students who did not receive fifteen hours of academic support did not fare as well as those who did. Notably, that same semester the post-test results in the other two clusters, those with higher initial proficiencies who took the PLCPA course but were *not* mandated to receive writing support, dropped even lower than their counterparts in the previous semester. Based on the positive trend Mohamad had just observed with the Cluster One students in fall 2007, in spring 2008 she aimed to close the loop by mandating ten

hours of Studio writing support for Cluster Two and five hours for Cluster Three students. While the pre- to post-test scores also did improve for these Clusters, their gains were not as dramatic.

SLIDE Ten: What we have confirmed over the ensuing semesters is that the least proficient PLCPA students benefit the most from mandated writing support, that such support is beneficial to all levels of PLCPA students, and that the Studio contributes in demonstrable ways to successful student learning outcomes in the PLCPA, which impacts their ability to succeed at the institution. We can only speculate as to why there is a point of diminishing returns for the more proficient students: first, the course is designed to bring all students to a certain proficiency level and no more, and the Cluster Two and Three students have less of a score gap to close to achieve this proficiency; and, second, arguably, students' performance on these written exams (if not other writing tasks) can plateau at a certain level of proficiency before they can advance to the next level.

A word about the exams: Since the essay format of the PLCPA pre- and post-tests are identical, they provide a good measure of actual writing skill improvement that the Studio can tap into. Examining single pieces of writing that these students had reviewed with tutors at the Studio for evidence of improvement would ascertain whether or not each *piece* had improved but not whether the writers had acquired skills (for example: idea development, essay coherence, and mechanical accuracy) that could be retained and applied to future writing. Furthermore, the consistent samples of pre- and post-test scores designed to isolate and evaluate writing ability provide a *direct* measure that avoids those variables that factor into course grades (for example: attendance, extra credit, and/or late submissions), which make grades a less precise reflection of actual writing ability (Lerner, 2003). That the Studio does not administer the tests or collect the scores is a good thing for

two reasons: On the one hand, doing so could be construed as an unnatural and so potentially self-serving venture for a writing center; and, on the other hand, the PLCPA provides conditions that the Studio could not replicate in that its students take their pre- and post-tests seriously as the former determines whether they have to take the course or not and the latter functions as their final exam.

Of significance is that our tracking of these students enabled maximum value thresholds to be established for the three clusters. The two clusters with higher proficiency, those mandated to receive five and ten hours of support, achieved maximum benefit when they sought one additional hour, or six and eleven hours respectively, but not necessarily hours beyond these thresholds. For the least proficient group, fifteen hours emerged as the maximum value threshold and validated that support level. Beyond the PLCPA, these thresholds demonstrate to the *University* the relative value the Studio holds for this cohort of students.

While these data convinced us that the Studio has a positive effect on the ability of the PLCPA students to write academic English, we next decided to ask the students themselves for their perceptions; we designed surveys that were distributed at the end of term in PLCPA classes. Because these surveys were *not* distributed at the close of a tutoring session nor at the Studio, the tendency of students to give overly favorable responses was ameliorated, which was a problem I encountered when I surveyed students at random in the Studio in the fall 2008. **SLIDE Eleven:** Of the 111 PLCPA students who completed the survey, 104 or 94% indicated that “the Studio contributed to their success in the PLCPA course” while six students believed that the Studio did not (one student did not respond). When asked if “the Studio contributed to their success more generally” at our institution, 94 or 85% of the students indicated that it did, while eleven students

felt it did not (eleven did not respond). Since seeking academic support is compulsory for students while they are enrolled in the PLCPA course, we also inquired as to whether these students would likely return of their volition to the Studio in the future; 94 students or 85% said they would return for tutoring, and 86 or 77% indicated they would attend writing workshops.

In terms of the written responses students gave to the open-ended questions of our survey, we detected telling patterns; for example, students often indicated how they have used and will use the writing skills and strategies they acquired in the Studio for classes other than the PLCPA course—that they have acquired *transferable* skills. Overwhelmingly, the comments specifically acknowledge in their own words that the tutoring sessions address issues of content, language, and organization, which are those categories the PLCPA rubric assesses for all of the writing the PLCPA students do. Many of the students also registered the importance of tutor effect; some students indicated that the personal, professional, and/or individualized attention they received from tutors helped to improve their writing while others indicated that tutors had a positive effect on their confidence not only as writers but as speakers of English. Notably, students identified that conversing with different tutors gave them useful practice with oral communication. And finally, they indicated that they appreciated the tutors' patience and that they found the Studio itself to be a welcoming, comfortable, and non-intimidating environment. The responses to this survey speak to the fact that the students have come to recognize the Studio as support that can help *sustain* their academic success, and this indirect, qualitative data adds a corroborating layer to the direct, quantitative data that the pre- and post-test scores reveal.

SLIDE Twelve: Mohamad's controlled tracking of students' pre- and post-test results combined

with my consistent tracking of these students' attendance and tutoring session activity at the Studio allows for a sustained inquiry into learning outcomes, which reveals that the Studio has positive effects not just on student writing but on the student *writers*. These findings have important implications for the Studio and for writing centers more generally. While the Studio does measure what we call our utilization rate—how many of the hours tutors are available (and “on the clock”) are spent tutoring—this rate measures effectiveness only in terms of whether payroll dollars are being maximized. It does not assess student satisfaction, nor does it assess how the tutoring impacts students' writing ability, of learning outcomes, which should be the real measure of a writing center's effectiveness, not to mention what all directors would like to know and administrators would presume could be demonstrated. In other words, when the Campus Provost and the Dean provide the Studio payroll and operating budgets—and expect no revenue in return—the University is investing in the expectation that the Studio will, in fact, *produce better writers*, to borrow a phrase from Stephen North.

In the case of the thresholds established through our collaboration, we can demonstrate that the Studio contributes to improved PLCPA student writing outcomes to the degrees described, as well as helps to make the single-level course feasible, so the University can be assured it is getting a tangible return on its investment in the Studio both in dollars and “sense.” While the PLCPA students represent a portion of the students the Studio serves, and the Studio has yet to find a way to demonstrate its effectiveness for other cohorts, it is significant for our units and our institution that we have been able to document effectiveness for a specific population by means of differentiating maximum value. Equally satisfying is that through their survey responses, these students confirm that they, too, value the Studio's contribution in improving their written English proficiency.

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