CHALLENGING PERCEPTIONS: EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ELL STUDENTS AND WRITING CENTERS

Joseph Cheatle
Michigan State University
cheatlej@msu.edu

Abstract

In an attempt to create more meaningful and effective assessment, the Howe Writing Center at Miami University implemented a new post-consultation/exit survey. During the course of the Fall 2012 semester, over 800 students responded to the post-consultation survey. Writing center theory has documented the limitations of the post-consultation survey; however, this type of feedback still represents the best and most accessible way to assess and expand the knowledge of writing centers. This assessment project provided important feedback concerning the writing center at Miami University about student demographics that use the writing center, including academic year and classes students wanted to work on. The assessment project also contributes to writing center theory and discourse by providing a different narrative for non-native English speaking students and native English speaking students that use the writing center. The assessment challenges the view that writing from non-native English speaking students is only concerned with so-called "lower order" writing issues and writing from native English speaking students is primarily concerned with so-called "higher order" writing issues. Instead, it was found that non-native English speaking students are interested in working on many "higher order" concerns and were very similar, after sentence-level concerns, in their writing needs to native English speaking students.

One of the many distinctions we make in writing center studies and within writing centers is between English language learning (ELL) students (also commonly referred to as non-native English speaking students) and native English speaking (NES) students. Unlike other distinctions, like those between disciplines or academic years, this one is more significant to writing centers because ELL students often disproportionately use the writing center in comparison to their native English speaking peers, and these two populations are often viewed as distinct and notably different. As ELL populations at institutions of higher education increase—due primarily to high international student enrollment—the need for writing center assistance for ELL students also grows. In response to this increase in enrollment, most writing centers have instituted special training sessions and workshops for consultants working with ELL students, often focusing on sentence-level concerns and bridging potential cultural gaps. The heightened attention to ELL students provides centers the opportunity, as Dennis Paoli contends, to reconsider a writing center's ideology and practices (171).

Writing center scholarship also reflects the increasing importance of ELL students through books and numerous articles devoted to the topic. The essays collected in *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors* (edited by Shanti Bruce and Ben Rafoth) provide a broad overview of issues confronting ELL students and Generation 1.5 Learners, as well as those who work with them in writing centers. More recently, Rafoth's *Multilingual Writers and Writing Centers* advocates that writing centers draw on the fields of second-language writing and applied linguistics in order to train consultants and tutors to meet the needs of ELL students. In the introduction, Rafoth asks, "How can directors and tutors better prepare for the growing number of one-to-one conferences with multilingual writers who will come to their writing centers in the future?" (1-2). Rafoth's question is a driving force for this project. Despite the increased attention by these works and other numerous articles published in *WLN*, *Praxis*, and *The Writing Center Journal*, there is much that is not understood about the relationship between ELL students and writing centers; furthermore, most of what we know about ELL students in the writing center comes from anecdotal evidence and personal experience. This study responds to the large number of ELL students using the writing center and the need for more scholarly attention to the relationship between ELL students and writing centers.

Working with quantitative data collected from an exit-survey, I drew four conclusions—some of which confirm the experiences of many people working in the writing center and some of which are new contributions to our understanding of the relationship between ELL students and writing centers. The first conclusion, which confirms many practitioners' experiences in the center, is that ELL students schedule consultations more frequently after their first year than NES students. The second conclusion is that ELL students and native English speaking students want to work on similar assignments. The third conclusion, which furthers our understanding of ELL students and complicates a common perception, is that beyond sentence-level concerns, ELL students are very similar to native English speaking students in what they *want* to work on versus what they *actually* worked on

during a consultation. The fourth conclusion is that ELL students want to work on, and actually do work on, many of the same "higher order" (global) and "lower order" (local) concerns as native English speaking students.

There is a tendency in the writing center to think that ELL students want help primarily for grammar, spelling, and editing. I often hear this complaint from peer tutors and colleagues who believe that ELL students view, and utilize, the writing center as an editing service. This goes against the overarching philosophy that consultant are trained, as Stephen North and Jeff Brooks contend, to "Improve the writer, not the writing" (qtd. in Hawthorne 1). According to North and Brooks, consultations should focus on transferable concepts, like organization and use of evidence, rather than localized issues, such as individualized spelling and grammar errors. While a consultation that focuses on correcting language concerns may improve the individual paper, it will most likely not improve the writer. Because writing center ideology does not focus primarily on sentence-level issues, during training consultants are consistently told that they are not editors and should not, therefore, focus primarily on sentence-level concerns or correcting spelling and grammar errors; when students ask for help correcting language issues, we are trained to steer them towards more global concerns, like thesis, organization, and use of evidence.

My own experiences in two writing centers tend to support this narrative about ELL students. In client report forms (filled out when students schedule a consultation on WCOnline or other scheduling system), ELL students usually put spelling, grammar, or editing as one of their main reasons for the consultation. When ELL students arrive in the center, one of the first things many do is state they need help on editing or sentence-level issues. Consultants are then faced with a difficult decision—address these issues or go against ELL students' stated desires by focusing on more global issues. Jennifer Staben and Kathryn Nordhaus noticed this same dilemma in consultations with ELL students,

> "Because writing centers strive to be student-centered, writing conferences with English as a second language (ESL) students often make tutors feel that they are faced with an impossible choice: comply with the ESL students' invitation to focus on grammar and other surface errors or ignore the ESL students' requests and focus on the whole text." (78)

This tension can result in dissatisfaction from the student, the tutor, or both. Causes of frustration for all parties, according to Sharon Myers, include

> "unrealistic expectations about language learning embedded in our institutional arrangements for ESL students; the historic de-emphasis of sentence pedagogies; a conception of culture which excludes the structures of languages; [...] and the failure to recognize the depth of the 'sentence-level' problems involved in second-language processing." (52)

Myers raises a number of important concerns, including unrealistic expectations as well as the lack of specialized consultant training for working with language issues and ELL students; in particular, this lack of language training results in confusion and frustration because tutors are often unequipped to teach language to ELL students. As Myers points out, these issues are widespread among writer centers and, I would argue, systemic among entire institutions.

One reason ELL students could view the writing center as an editing service is that they are under pressure to talk and write like a native English speaker. According to Carol Severino, ELL students receive pressure to speak and write like native English speakers from numerous sources, "[...] the feedback and pressure they receive from their professors, their supervisors, their dissertation advisors, and their journal editors convinces them that they need to feel this way" (57). This can be especially true for ELL students taking disciplinary-specific classes with teachers who either are not trained, or do not feel required, to teach the English language to students. In addition to a lack of training or desire to teach language, Muriel Harris and Tony Silva point out that faculty can also have unrealistic expectations for ELL students (referred to as non-native English speaking students by Harris and Silva), "[...] but there are faculty who do have unrealistic demands about the level of correctness, who expect non-native speakers of English to write error-free prose, not to have a written accent, and so on" (531). The demand for error-free prose is unrealistic because language-acquisition takes many years of language immersion and study, time ELL students may not have. The focus on language issues is a problem because, for Staben and Nordhaus, it can result in a situation that ELL students

> "are so focused on the language—on trying to wrestle their complicated thoughts onto paper using language abilities that are not yet sufficient to the task—that they may not realize that the change in language and in culture necessitates a different approach to

communicating those thoughts to others." (80-81)

Language functions are such an overwhelming concern that even though ELL students may want to work on more global issues, they remain focused on language issues because language proficiency is viewed as the initial step that must be completed before addressing more global issues.

Understanding and addressing these concerns and tensions is important because of the significance of writing centers to ELL students: writing centers are often the best learning resource for ELL students of all academic years, majors, and disciplines. In this time of limited academic resources, writing centers take on amplified importance for ELL students because, outside of ESL classes completed early in their academic careers, there are often very few resources for ELL students to work on English language acquisition; writing centers may not even provide the desired benefits for those ELL students seeking help with English language acquisition. Ilona Leki highlights the significance of the writing center to ELL students:

> Writing centers may be the ideal learning environment for students whose first or strongest language is not English: one-on-one, context rich, highly focused on a specific current writing need, and offering the possibility of negotiation of meaning (i.e., conversational back-and-forth that is thought to promote second language acquisition). That bilingual and multilingual writers recognize the benefits of writing center support is clear from the increasing numbers of second language (L2) students who take advantage of it. (1)

For Leki, writing centers provide the one-on-one help that ELL students need while also being specific and meaningful. Writing centers also offer ELL students a chance to work on their writing while also participating in language learning. They are also places where ELL students can go to understand an assignment prompt or when they are confused about the requirements for an assignment. And while the writing center may be an ideal learning environment for ELL students, it is also one of the primary, and sometimes only, supportive learning environments at an institution.

One way to examine and help explain this relationship between ELL students and the writing center is through assessment. At the Miami University Howe Writing Center, where this project was conducted, one important form of assessment is the consultation exit survey, administered after a consultation, which was modified to focus on the relationship between ELL students and the writing center. Drawing on the learning outcomes of the university and the writing center, this project had three guiding research goals that could be significant to other writing centers and contribute more broadly to writing center research: 1) Provide an overview of native English speaking and ELL students who schedule consultations with the writing center, 2) Understand the type of writing both groups of students *wanted* to work on and the type of writing they *actually* worked on during the consultation, and 3) Explore differences during consultations between ELL students and native English speaking students.

Institutional Background Information

Located in Oxford, Ohio, Miami University is a medium-sized four-year institute of higher education focused on undergraduate teaching and learning. The school enrolls about 15,000 undergraduate and 2,500 graduate students. The Howe Writing Center completes nearly 4,000 consultations each academic year and is utilized by a significant portion of Miami University's undergraduate population. With a generous donation from the Howe family, the Howe Center for Writing Excellence was established in 2006 and is well funded, supporting consulting, faculty outreach, and writing throughout the university.[1] The writing center, housed in the Provost's office with a full professor tenured in English as director, employs about 40 undergraduates and 6 graduate students, in addition to an associate director, student writing center manager, international program specialist, and specialized graduate students working as assistant directors.[2]

In developing this post-consultation survey, it was important that consideration was given to both the Howe Writing Center and the larger writing center community. The survey drew upon Neal Lerner's belief that "we need to link writing center outcomes to larger writing center values and theories, as well as to college/university-wide goals" (1). Therefore, this assessment builds upon the learning outcomes of the institution while connecting to broader writing center discourses. Having a dual focus ensures that the center can join discourses particular to the institution as well as discourses important to the broader writing center community. Because Miami University is focused primarily on undergraduate education, the assessment only considers undergraduate students. In addition to the orientation of the university towards undergraduate students, two of the center's stated primary goals affected this project. The first goal is "To foster a culture of writing in which students welcome the writing instruction they receive in their courses, seek

additional opportunities to write outside of class, and strive continuously to improve their writing skills."[3] The second goal is "To assure that all students—from the most accomplished to the most needful—have ample help outside of their classes as they strive to improve their writing."[4] As the two goals state, the center seeks to appeal to all different levels of writing, majors, and classes throughout the university; therefore, our survey attempted to obtain information about a wide range of students. Meanwhile, the broader questions that the survey asks do have potential significance for writing centers outside of Miami University because they further our understanding of ELL students—an issue that applies to nearly every writing center and institution.

Methodology

After each one-on-one consultation, students were asked to complete an online survey at computers located in the writing center. All research subjects were at least 18 years of age and were required to sign a consent form to participate in the survey. Survey results remained anonymous and the research project received IRB approval. Data collection took place during the duration of the Fall 2012 semester. Survey questions were designed to elicit from students the following information:

1. Distribution of majors and class standing among students visiting the writing center
2. Types of writing students bring to the writing center
3. Course assignments students bring to the writing center
4. Topics students initially sought to address in their appointment
5. The topics actually addressed in their appointment
6. Attitudes about writing
7. Satisfaction with the session—both how it was conducted and its outcome
8. Perception of the writing center after the consultation

The survey consisted of 44 questions and took about 5-10 minutes to complete (see the endnotes for a link to the survey).[5] In addition to general demographic questions, the survey asked students to self-identify as either a native English speaking student or a non-native English speaking student. For questions about student satisfaction with the consultation, students used a Likert scale and were able to check strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree. The

consultation questions were divided into what students *wanted* to work on during the consultation and what they *actually* worked on during the consultation. Students were able to check multiple options because they usually *want* to work on and *actually* work on a variety of (and sometimes different) things during the consultation. Open-ended questions were used where students could respond in more detail to questions about the improvement of the writing center, improvements for the consultation, and about whether or not, and why, students will use the writing center again. The goal for all of the questions was to encourage students to give responses about themselves, the writing process, and the consultation.

Limitations

There were two primary limitations to this study: the first is the use of a survey to collect information, while the second is the attempt to use assessment in one center to make broader arguments about writing centers in general. Because the survey was optional and required student consent, only about half of the students who scheduled a consultation at the writing center completed a survey. While this is a sizeable number of participants, some may not have participated as a result of "survey-fatigue" that college students can experience or the fact that students are less likely to complete a longer survey that takes up too much time. Even if students are willing to take the post-consultation survey, a bias against exit-surveys exists among some centers because they are viewed as ineffective and unable to provide meaningful responses. Beth Kalikoff, in an examination of exit-surveys at the University of Washington-Tacoma, warns that students often "perceive themselves as having little enough time to go to the Writing Center and even less to fill out evaluations. They gave perfunctory answers or left the Center without completing a form" (5). For example, students may check the same box for each question as a way to complete the form as quickly as possible; additionally, students rarely provide useful responses to open-ended questions in surveys. As Kalikoff points out, when actually completed, students usually give little thought or time to exit-surveys as they hurry to leave the center.

In "How Are We Doing? A Review of Assessments within Writing Centers?," Miriam Gofine also questions the value of exit-surveys, pointing out that responses are generally overly positive. She notes that these positive responses are not helpful in creating meaningful assessment: "the feedback from the surveys was not conducive to the greater goals of improving services or detecting variation in client experiences of

the writing center" (Gofine 42). Isabelle Thompson, who echoes Gofine's concerns, believes that the results from post-consultation surveys at the writing center at Auburn University were "too positive to be useful or believable" (44). Students generally provide positive results immediately after consultations because that is when they perceive the most help on their writing; sometimes, over time, satisfaction with the consultation may go down.

Despite the limitations of consultation exit-surveys, they are a valuable way of collecting data. Building upon an already established form of assessment made it easier to collect data from students who had come to expect to complete a survey after a consultation. Furthermore, the number of students who completed the survey was much higher than was possible using other forms of assessment, like focus groups or observations. Also, because of the number of students who completed the survey, there was a diverse student demographic represented in the data.

The second limitation is using assessment in one writing center to make arguments about other writing centers. Writing center assessment is often difficult because centers across higher education are rarely the same: they can be small or large, well-funded or not, part of the English department or independent, and often have different roles and goals dependent on their institution. According to Diana Bell and Alanna Frost, these differences result in a difficulty isolating variables between centers. However, Pam Bromley, Kara Northway, and Eliana Schonberg, in their exploration of cross-institutional quantitative assessment, "suggest the need for a new disciplinary focus beyond the local" (15). Bromley, Northway, and Schonberg point out that assessment does not need to focus only on specific institutions, but can focus on writing centers as a discipline. The result of this kind of disciplinary focus means that, when framed this way, local writing centers can contribute to broader writing center theory and praxis.

The key to this assessment was to make sure that the research questions were not based on a unique problem for a single writing center but focused on disciplinary issues beyond the local. From the start, we wanted to focus on ELL students, including differences and similarities between them and NES students. The first concern was to determine during which academic year both groups of students were scheduling consultations. The second was to determine what class students scheduled for. The third was what students *wanted* to work on versus what they *actually* worked on during the consultation. And the fourth was to view consultations within the framework of "higher" and "lower" order concerns. While these issues may be

locally important to our center, they also have implications for other centers that grapple with how best to serve ELL students and how to meet student expectations during consultations.

Results and Discussion

About 800 exit-surveys were completed. Using self-identification, 548 NES students completed the survey while 258 ELL students completed the survey. Survey results were first used to create a profile/demographic of students that scheduled one-on-one consultations, including academic year, major, type of writing, and class (if applicable) that assigned the writing. This demographic information is writing center-specific, and most likely differs for each writing center based on numerous institutional factors. The remaining results are divided into four sections, each contributing to an understanding of the relationship between ELL students and the writing center. The first section, "First Year and Beyond," examines during which academic year students schedule consultations at the writing center. "Class Assignment" examines the class for which students are scheduling consultations. The third section, "What Students Wanted to Work On and What They Actually Worked On," looks at writing needs before and during the consultation. The last section, "Higher and Lower Order Concerns," builds on the previous section by looking at what order of writing ELL students and NES students are working on by placing their writing within the categories of "higher" and "lower" order concerns.

First Year and Beyond

Among self-identified NES students, the vast majority of students (72%) who scheduled consultations indicated that they were in their first year (see Figure 1). Student visits dropped off by a large margin between the first year and subsequent years, with fewer NES students scheduling consultations during their sophomore (12%), junior (7%), and senior (9%) years.
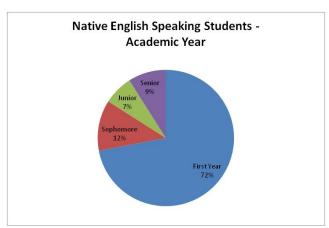
Native English Speaking Students - Academic Year

Figure 1. Writing center consultations for native English speaking students based on academic year.

Meanwhile, first year ELL students used the writing center the most, but the drop-off during subsequent academic years was not as drastic as among NES students (see Figure 2). First year ELL students comprised 34% of students, sophomores 30%, juniors 22%, and seniors 14%. First year and sophomore ELL students used the writing center 64% of the time while juniors and seniors made up 36% of consultations. ELL students were more likely than NES students to continue to use the writing center after their first year, with 66% of ELL student consultations occurring after their first year, while only 28% of NES student consultations occurred after their first year.
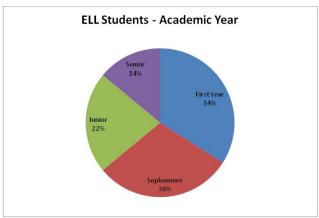
ELL Students - Academic Year

Figure 2. Writing center consultations for ELL students based on academic year.

As responses show, after their first academic year, NES students (see Figure 1) were much less likely to schedule a consultation with the center compared to ELL students (see Figure 2). There are many possible explanations for these results, four of which are posited below. One possible explanation is that the center is highly publicized during international student orientation, which suggests that more information about it as a resource circulates among international students. A second possible explanation is that ELL students are likely to take composition classes beyond their first academic year. This might explain the high number of sophomore students but does not sufficiently account for the high number of junior and senior ELL students who schedule consultations. A third possible explanation is that writing centers function as one of the primary resources for ELL students on campus; ELL students continue to use the center in high numbers because of this reason. This explanation highlights the continued need by ELL students for the services that writing centers provide for all years of schooling. A fourth possible explanation is that faculty and staff encourage ELL students to visit the writing center throughout their academic careers. Most likely some combination of these explanations, and perhaps more, contributes to the high use of the writing center by ELL students, and the data highlights the importance of the writing center for ELL students beyond the first academic year.

Class Assignment

A second significant result is the similarity between ELL students and NES students on the assignment they work on during a consultation. Students were asked which course, if applicable, they were working on. Among NES students, 278 of 466 (60%) consultations were for introductory English composition classes; among ELL students, 99 of 146 (68%) wanted to work on introductory English composition assignments. One explanation for the high use of the writing center for introductory composition classes among both demographics is that writing-intensive courses lend themselves to the use of the writing center. Additionally, composition faculty members tend to highly promote the writing center among their own students. Another consideration is that students struggle with composition courses because they are not usually discipline-specific, and composition classes ask for modes of writing with which students may be unfamiliar. However, there may be other factors that contribute to this result.

All students at Miami University must complete required writing courses, which helps explain the high number of students scheduling consultations for help in those courses. Because introductory composition classes are required for all students as part of the core curriculum, they are some of the most highly enrolled classes at Miami University. In addition to the two composition courses required for all students, ELL students must complete two additional ESL composition courses.[6] Both ELL students and NES

students can test out of composition classes and complete credit before enrollment. However, the fact that introductory English composition classes are required does not sufficiently explain why students do not bring as much work from other classes or their major to the writing center; rather, the high number of consultations for composition classes—and the low number of consultations for classes other than composition—reinforces the fact that, despite rigorous outreach to faculty and students, the common perception remains that the writing center is for introductory composition courses.

What Students Wanted *to Work On and What They* Actually *Worked On*

One implication of this assessment project for the broader writing center community is the examination of what aspects of writing students *wanted* to work on versus what they *actually* worked on during the consultation. While most writing centers, through services like WCOnline, can track what students want to work on prior to the consultation, tracking what they *actually* worked on is much more difficult. Even if centers wanted to track consultation/client reports, doing so for a large number of students would be extremely time-consuming and difficult. The method used in this assessment provides one way to examine this important type of information after the consultation. As part of the survey students completed after the consultation, they were asked to check boxes concerning their writing before and during the consultation. These are self-reported responses and may differ from what consultants may report happened during the consultation.

The writing-specific results to these questions were divided into four categories: drafting, revision, editing, and other.

Drafting	Revision
Brainstorming	Meets assignment requirements
Organization	Discuss professor's comments
Sentence structure	Expanding the paper
Introduction	Shortening the paper
Thesis	Clarifying ideas
Body paragraphs	
Topic sentences	
Transitions	
Conclusion	

Editing	Other
Grammar	General review
Spelling	ELL concerns
Sentence fragments	Another reader
Passive voice	

Editing (cont.)
Verb choice
Paragraph structure
Formatting
Citing sources
General editing
Polishing
Language concerns

Rather than limit student responses, students were able to check as many boxes as they wanted in each category.

The top ten areas students *wanted* to work on and what they *actually* worked on, along with the percentage of students, are included below.

Writing Aspects Students *Wanted* to Work On

ELL	Native English Speaking
1. Grammar 63%	1. Meets assignment requirements 48%
2. Organization 43%	2. Organization 47%
3. Meets assignment requirements 40%	3. Clarification of ideas 44%
4. General review 34%	4. Grammar 44%
5. Sentence structure 30%	5. General review 42%
6. Body paragraphs 25%	6. Body paragraphs 29%
7. Spelling 25%	7. Polishing 29%
8. Thesis 24%	8. Brainstorming 28%
9. Clarification of ideas 24%	9. Sentence structure 26%
10. Brainstorming 23%	10. Formatting 26%

Writing Aspects Students *Actually* Worked On

ELL	Native English Speaking
1. Grammar 55%	1. Meets assignment requirements 47%
2. Organization 40%	2. Organization 44%
3. Meets assignment requirements 38%	3. General review 41%
4. General review 34%	4. Grammar 37%
5. Sentence structure 28%	5. Clarification of ideas 36%
6. Brainstorming 22%	6. Body paragraphs 29%
7. Sentence fragments 21%	7. Polishing 29%
8. Spelling 20%	8. General editing 27%
9. Thesis 19%	9. Thesis 26%
10. Body paragraphs 10%	10. Brainstorming 23%

The results both reaffirm the common perception that ELL writers are visiting the writing center for sentence-level concerns ("editing"), while also challenging this simplistic understanding of ELL writers. Grammar was the first category for what ELL students *wanted* to work on and what they *actually* worked on during the consultation. It is not surprising that ELL students would choose grammar because the term "Grammar" often functions as a catch-all for any sentence-level, editing, or language concerns in ELL writing. ELL students may also gravitate towards "Grammar" because it is a word that students actually

know and understand (as opposed to other aspects of the writing process, which may be less clear). As Sharon Myers notes in her work "Reassessing the 'Proofreading Trap': ESL Tutoring and Writing Instruction," ELL students "present a common dilemma to writing centers—the desire for sentence-level interventions from their tutors" (51). Anecdotally, consultants in the Howe Writing Center expressed their own concerns that they are functioning more as editors of grammar and spelling rather than as collaborative consultants. The perception, and reality, that writing centers are utilized for sentence-level intervention and local concerns by ELL students is prevalent and widespread, which leads to a sense of frustration for both consultants and students as needs and services may not match.

However, as this survey shows, three of the top four aspects of what students *wanted* to work on are the same: grammar, organization, and meets assignment requirements.

Wanted to Work On

ELL	Native English Speaking
1. Grammar	1. Meets assignment requirements
2. Organization	2. Organization
3. Meets assignment requirements	3. Clarification of ideas

While Grammar was the most frequent concern for ELL students, it was also an important consideration for NES students. The percentages for both groups of students for Organization and Meets Assignment Requirements were similar. Organization was the second aspect that both groups of students *wanted* to work on the most, and the difference between ELL and NES students was only four percent. Both groups were also separated by only eight percentage points for Meets Assignment Requirements. Among the top ten that each group indicated they *wanted* to work on, the only differences were that ELL students indicated Spelling and Thesis while NES students indicated Polishing and Formatting. The fact that eight of ten areas that students *wanted* to work on were the same indicates the similarities between these two groups in terms of their desires during a consultation.

Much like what students *wanted* to work on, what they *actually* worked on during a consultation was similar between ELL students and NES students. The top four areas that ELL and NES students *actually* worked on during consultations were the same: Grammar, Organization, Meets Assignment Requirements, and General Review. While it is assumed that ELL students want to work on local concerns and that NES students want to work on more global concerns, data points out that what these two groups *actually* worked on during consultations was similar. Out of the ten areas that students indicated they worked on during consultations, only three were different: ELL students chose Sentence Structure, Sentence Fragments, and Spelling while NES students chose Clarification of Ideas, Polishing, and General Editing. Despite the ELL student's sentence-level concerns, ELL students and NES students are very similar.

Higher Order and Lower Order Concerns

The data concerning what students *wanted* to work on and what they *actually* worked on can challenge assumptions about "higher order" (global) concerns and "lower order" (local) concerns as they are used to think about ELL and NES student writing. A common assumption is that NES students want to work primarily on so-called "higher order" concerns, such as organization, brainstorming, and thesis statements. There is also an assumption that ELL students want to work primarily on so-called "lower order" concerns, such as grammar, spelling, and editing. This perception of student writing, regardless of how simplified or wrong it might be, permeates institutions, writing centers, and the student body. In examining what students *wanted* to work on and what they *actually* worked on within the context of higher order and lower order concerns, I drew three conclusions. The first is that ELL students are concerned with "higher order" issues in their writing. The second is that NES students are concerned with "lower order" issues. And the third, which flips a common narrative, is that there are more similarities than differences between ELL students and NES students.

A commonplace perception about ELL student writing is that they want to work primarily on "lower order" concerns. However, when the top ten aspects of writing ELL students *wanted* to work on were examined, the evidence presented a different story.

ELL Students *Wanted* to Work On

Higher Order Concerns	Lower Order Concerns
1. Organization (2)	1. Grammar (1)
2. Meets assignment requirements (3)	2. General review (4)
3. Body paragraphs (6)	3. Sentence structure (5)
4. Thesis (8)	4. Spelling (7)
5. Clarification of ideas (9)	
6. Brainstorming (10)	

While grammar ranks first for ELL students, six of the top ten aspects of writing ELL students *wanted* to work on are considered "higher order" (global) concerns: Organization, Meets Assignment Requirements, Body Paragraphs, Thesis, Clarification of Ideas, and

Brainstorming. In terms of what ELL students *actually* worked on during the consultation, five parts were "higher order" (global) concerns and five were "lower order" (local) concerns.

ELL Students *Actually* Worked On

Higher Order Concerns	Lower Order Concerns
1. Organization (2)	1. Grammar (1)
2. Meets assignment requirements (3)	2. General review (4)
3. Brainstorming (6)	3. Sentence structure (5)
4. Thesis (9)	4. Sentence fragments (7)
5. Body paragraphs (10)	5. Spelling (8)

One of the more unexpected findings is that nearly a quarter of ELL students wanted to work on their thesis and 43% on organization. These findings suggest that ELL students know the many different components of the writing process and may want to work on those considerations during a consultation. Moreover, findings suggest that ELL students *wanted* to work on more "higher order" (global) concerns than native English speakers did during consultations.

It is often assumed that NES students want to work on "higher order" (global) concerns in their writing. But when the top ten aspects of writing that native English speakers *wanted* to work on during their consultations are examined, only five are "higher order" concerns while five are "lower order" concerns:

Native English Speaking Students *Wanted* to Work On

Higher Order Concerns	Lower Order Concerns
1. Meets assignment requirements	1. Grammar
2. Organization	2. General review
3. Clarification of ideas	3. Polishing
4. Body paragraphs	4. Sentence structure
5. Brainstorming	5. Formatting

NES students indicated a desire to work on more "lower order" aspects of their writing than ELL students. When the top ten aspects of writing students *wanted* to work on are compared with what they *actually* worked on during a consultation, there is little difference between ELL and NES students in both categories. Eight writing aspects are the same for what students *wanted* to work on during consultations and seven are the same for what students *actually* worked on. These similarities point out that there is more in common among these two groups of students than what is often anticipated.

Conclusion

This project drew on quantitative data to provide important insights into, and further the conversation about, the relationship between ELL students and the writing center. One of the significant contributions of this research is the finding that ELL students do not want to work on just local editing issues but are also interested in working on more global issues. Writing centers are already positioned to work on these non-language issues; however, in order to get to this point, writing centers must overcome the common misperception among administrators and faculty that the writing center can, and should, address language concerns; in fact, for some it seems inconceivable that the writing center does not primarily address these concerns. According to Steven Bailey, "From an institutional standpoint the dominant assumption among administrators and faculty alike is that writing centers should perform remedial work with non-native speakers of English" (1). Administrators and faculty may send ELL students to the writing center with the express command to ask for help with sentence-level concerns. At least two factors, among many, are contributing to this view of the writing center. The first is that some faculty members expect that ELL students should be proficient in writing and speaking the English language—expectations that are too high because, after introductory ESL classes, there are very few opportunities for students to learn the English language. The second factor, building upon the first, is that ELL students are under pressure to correct language issues in their work; the result of this pressure is that ELL students seek out institutional resources, primarily the writing center, that may be able to help them "sound like a native speaker." But, writing center consultants are usually not trained or equipped to work as English language teachers and instructors. Because of the prevalence of the assumption that writing centers are fix-it shops for papers, it falls to the writing center—as one of the only and often best learning resources for ELL students on campus—to change perceptions that consultants are there to "fix" the English of international or ELL students (Bailey 1).

Instead of relying on the writing center to address the language concerns of ELL students, institutions should provide more resources for ELL students to learn the language after the introductory ESL classes often taken during a student's first year. If institutions can provide the language learning resources that ELL students need, then writing centers can play an important role in ELL student learning; rather than focusing solely on sentence-level issues, writing centers can improve the writer and not just the assignment. Furthermore, consultants can help ELL students to bridge the cultural knowledge disparity gap. ELL students, particularly international students, can struggle learning in academic institutions that may value different types of knowledge, learning, and

thinking than they are used to. As Susan Blau and John Hall suggest, and as this project points to, the differences between ELL students and NES students may be more cultural rather than as part of the composition process. Blau and Hall point out that

> "we have to spend more time—perhaps more than we already do—educating ourselves and our tutors about cultural differences which affect writing and accept that an understanding of cultural differences is essential knowledge for a tutor working with NNES [non-native English speaking] students" (25).

The video *Writing Across Borders* also highlights some of the cultural differences between students: some cultures do not present the main point at the beginning of an essay but circle the main point; some only use information from classroom lectures and readings in their work; some are not very direct; some rely on readers to differ pronouns rather than the writer; some expect more reader participation; some have different preferences for style and word choice; some may rely on long and elaborate sentences versus short and direct sentences; and some may not place as much emphasis on citing sources. Additionally, some cultures may have difficulty bridging the student/teacher relationship because of the tendency to view the tutor as a teacher rather than as a peer.[7]

In searching for a solution to these broad cultural differences, Blau and Hall suggest that we need to change how we tutor non-ELL students (29). In addition to functioning as a cultural informant, Blau and Hall believe that "One way to resolve this bind over how to organize a session with NNES writers is to interweave the discussion of global and local concerns" (35). For example, focusing on the thesis can effectively address both local and global concerns by addressing sentence-level concerns while also challenging students to think about how the thesis functions as an argument for the entire paper. This strategy also works well for topic sentences, use of evidence, etc. In each instance, students can address specific examples of language while addressing global concerns. Since language concerns are rarely the only problem in ELL student writing, or any writing for that matter, there is ample room for intervention by consultants into global concerns. According to Staben and Nordhaus, "Acting as a cultural informant about U.S. academic expectations—rhetorical or otherwise—and focusing the writer's attention on the text as a whole is vital precisely because no matter the background of the ESL writer, language can be an overwhelming and blinding concern" (80). By moving beyond language issues and focusing the writer's

attention on the text as a whole, writing centers can help provide a lexicon for ELL students to articulate their learning needs as well as provide a way to improve the writer and not just the specific assignment.

The last result of this assessment is the way in which it prompts future projects. First, we can research ways to change administrative, faculty, and student perceptions of the writing center. We can also work even more closely with ELL students in order to match writing center services with student needs. I recommend starting with Rafoth's *Multilingual Writers and Writing Centers* as a way to think about how the presence of multilingual writers has "required directors and tutors to rethink what they know about their own language, learning languages, and academic discourse generally" (136). Lastly, we can explore ways of improving training for consultants to work with ELL students by focusing on communication and cultural information. While we take as a starting premise that writing centers should not be focusing on correcting sentence-level issues or editing, perhaps other institutions may find that addressing these concerns as a primary focus during consultations is necessary in order to best help ELL students; in which case, consultants need to be trained as English language instructors to meet this focus. Despite the limitations of this project, I believe that it addresses Kristen Welch and Susan Revels-Parker's high expectation that "Assessment embodies the potential for change if used to its fullest advantage" (1). Building on their expectation, this assessment project has the potential for institutions and writing centers to reconsider expectations for ELL students while changing the way we think about ELL students in the writing center.

Notes

1. For more information, please visit the website of the Howe Writing Center at http://muohio.edu/howe.
2. These numbers have changed since the project was completed.
3. "About." *Miami University Howe Writing Center*, 7 June 2013. www.miamioh.edu/cas/academics/departments/english/academics/resources/writing-centers/index.html.
4. Ibid.
5. The entire survey can be accessed at http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/HoweWritingCenter.
6. The composition requirements for ELL students and native English speaking students have since changed due to a restructuring of the core writing curriculum.
7. Blau and Hall 28.

Works Cited

"About." *Miami University Howe Writing Center*, 7 June 2013. www.miamioh.edu/cas/academics/departments/english/academics/resources/writing-centers/index.html.

Bailey, Steven K. "Tutoring Handbooks: Heuristic Texts for Negotiating Difference in a Globalized World." *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2012, www.praxisuwc.com/bailey-92/?rq=Steven%20K.%20Bailey.

Bell, Diana Calhoun, and Alanna Frost. "Critical Inquiry and Writing Centers: A Methodology of Assessment." *The Learning Assistance Review,* vol. 17, no. 1, 2012, pp. 15-26.

Blau, Susan, and John Hall. "Guilt Free Tutoring: Rethinking How we Tutor Non-Native-English-Speaking Students." *The Writing Center Journal* vol.23, no.1, 2002, pp. 23-44.

Bromley, Pam, et. al. "How Important Is the Local, Really? A Cross-Institutional Quantitative Assessment of Frequently Asked Questions in Writing Center Exit Surveys." *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 33, no.1, 2013, pp. 13-37.

Shanti Bruce, and Ben Rafoth, editors. *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2009.

Gofine, Miriam. "How Are We Doing? A Review of Assessments within Writing Centers." *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 32, no.1, 2012, pp. 39-49.

Harris, Muriel, and Tony Silva. "Tutoring ESL Students: Issues and Options." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 44, no. 4, 1993, pp. 525-537.

Hawthorne, Joan. "'We Don't Proofread Here': Re-Visioning the Writing Center to Better Meet Student Needs." *Writing Lab Newsletter*, vol. 23, no. 8, 1999, pp. 1-7.

Kalikoff, Beth. "From Coercion to Collaboration: A Mosaic Approach to Writing Center Assessment." *Writing Lab Newsletter*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2001, pp. 5-7.

Leki, Ilona. "Before the Conversation: A Sketch of Some Possible Backgrounds, Experiences, and Attitudes Among ESL Students Visiting a Writing Center." *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors*. Edited by Shanti Bruce and Ben Rafoth, 2nd ed. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2009, pp. 1-17.

Lerner, Neal. "Choosing Beans Wisely." *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, vol. 26, no.1, 2001, pp. 1-5.

Meyers, Sharon A. "Reassessing the 'Proofreading Trap': ESL Tutoring and Writing Instruction." *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2003, pp. 51-70.

Paoli, Dennis. "Tutoring in a Remedial/Developmental Learning Context." *The Writing Center Director's Resource Book*. edited by, Christina Murphy and Byron L. Stay. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2006, pp. 165-178.

Rafoth, Ben. *Multilingual Writers and Writing Centers*. Boulder, CO: Utah State University Press, 2015.

Severino, Carol. "Avoiding Appropriation." *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors*. Edited by Shanti Bruce and Ben Rafoth. 2nd ed. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2009, pp. 51-65.

Staben, Jennifer E., and Kathryn Dempsey Nordhaus. "Looking at the Whole Text." *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors*. Edited by Shanti Bruce and Ben Rafoth. 2nd ed. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2009. 78-90.

Thompson, Isabelle. "Writing Center Assessment: Why and a Little How." *The Writing Center Journal* vol. 26, no.1, 2006, pp. 33-61.

Welch, Kristen and Susan Revels-Parker. "Writing Center Assessment: An Argument for Change." *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2012, www.praxisuwc.com/welch-101/?rq=kristen%20welch.

Writing Across Borders. Directed by Wayne Robertson, Oregon State University Center for Writing and Learning and Writing Intensive Curriculum Program, 2005.