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Research at the UWC: Understanding the Diversity of Students'™ Experiences

Fall 2010 / Focus

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A pilot study redesigns data collection to reflect increasing diversity in student populations and to improve writing center consultations and campus outreach efforts.

The Undergraduate Writing Center (UWC) at The University of Texas at Austin (UT) performs roughly 11,500 writing consultations each year. In addition to providing one-on-one consultations with undergraduate students, a considerable amount of activity happens behind the scenes. For example, project groups are a mainstay of the UWC and are an integral aspect of work we do beyond consulting. Up until now, the Research & Publications Project Group has primarily analyzed data the UWC collects from students' Intake Forms. The Intake Form asks students to report basic information regarding their course prefix, their instructor's information, their assignment, their writing process, and their ESL status. While these forms lend valuable information about the classes for which students request to receive help and the types of problems students encounter with their writing, there is a tremendous amount of information we do not collect (and therefore do not know) about the students who walk through our doors.

Perhaps 10 years ago the type of information the UWC collected via Intake Forms was adequate. The campus environment at UT was more homogeneous, and we saw far fewer students on a yearly basis. However, we are now located on a campus that holds over 38,000 undergraduate students who have come to UT with extremely diverse educational experiences and backgrounds.

As we become more aware of the diversity in our constituency, we have the opportunity to not only improve our services but also the ability to explore more directly how our services may impact achievement outcomes.

For example, in September of 2010 the Office of Public Affairs reported, "For the first time in the history of The University of Texas at Austin, fewer than half of the fall semester's first-time freshmen are white students." This historical shift represents a change in the university climate, and it more broadly demonstrates national shifts in diversity among institutions of higher education.

As such, diversity has become a "buzz" word across the nation's college and university campuses, and the student population at UT is representative of the growing number of diverse students who pursue higher education. Understanding diversity on numerous levels, including race, ethnicity, age, and disability status to name a few, allows writing centers and their host universities a unique opportunity to assess the effectiveness of current organizational strategies. Accordingly, the UWC is taking advantage of its unique positioning to glean information from students about their diverse backgrounds and experiences with writing. As we become more aware of the diversity in our constituency, we have the opportunity to not only improve our services but also the ability to explore more directly how our services may impact achievement outcomes. As indicated in education and composition literature,^[1] writing and skills related to writing are linked with numerous academic variables that demonstrate differential outcomes among diverse student groups. Bearing these relationships in mind, it is important to consider how current UWC recruitment initiatives, presentation approaches, and consultation strategies are supporting diverse student groups and a variety of student-educational experiences.

Quantitative data collection strategies represent one of the most efficient methods of assessing program effectiveness and providing us with a clearer picture of the diverse student groups we serve. Our goals in collecting data are twofold: to assess the frequency of UWC use among diverse student populations and to examine UWC students' experiences with writing. By examining variables related to campus diversity (e.g., race and ethnicity, ESL, SES, etc.) and student experiences (e.g., writing concerns, course for which student sought consultation), we can further assess the role of diversity in the UWC. Attaining this information will contribute to the improvement of the writing services we offer to all students who walk into our writing center's doors.

Using a quantitative survey approach to data collection, we have developed several research questions that support our efforts to explore diversity and examine students' experiences in the UWC. Our survey includes a number of self-report items that provide UWC constituents the opportunity to share demographic information and indicate their experiences with writing and in the writing center. Demographic items include: race/ethnicity, gender, international student status, and language. Other variables tap into students' perceptions of writing preparedness and their concerns with writing. Using these data, we will explore the following areas: 1) Writing concerns most common among diverse student groups; 2) the frequency of UWC use and satisfaction among diverse students groups; and 3) the average UWC student's perceptions of writing preparedness and its relation to overall school achievement. In addition, we are gathering data about the recommendations students receive to come into the UWC.

These data offer a unique glimpse into students' backgrounds and into the potential challenges they endure not only at our university but with their writing processes. We hope that other writing centers across the country can utilize this information to consider their own training initiatives, resources, and ability to attract a diverse subgroup of students into their centers.

Moreover, this valuable information also has the potential to inform our training and writing-center practice in an integral way. As of now, training modules address basic consulting strategies, including how to work with ESL students and students with disabilities. However, the UWC does not offer training or resources for students who may have a unique set of experiences. For example, bilingual or multilingual students who may struggle with specific aspects of the writing process may have unique needs that the UWC has not previously considered [2]. We will also have the opportunity to redirect our presentation efforts because we will have a fuller understanding about the students we regularly assist at the UWC. Furthermore, we will gain insight about the stages of the writing process that most concern students and our presentations can be altered to reflect these needs. Additionally, by knowing this information we can improve our resources for students to reflect the central challenges they endorse regarding the writing process. Lastly, by comparing UWC data to the UT registrar's data, we will gain an understanding of the students who do not access UWC services but who could benefit from receiving assistance with their writing.

Beyond assessing our own writing services, we hope that these data will inform other writing centers unable to collect data for various reasons. While there is variability among the types of students who attend UT in comparison to those at other universities, we hope that our results will encourage the larger writing-center population to consider important issues related to writing center patron diversity. These data offer a unique glimpse into students' backgrounds and into the potential challenges they endure not only at our university but with their writing processes. We hope that other writing centers across the country can utilize this information to consider their own training initiatives, resources, and ability to attract a diverse subgroup of students into their centers.

To date, we have over 600 survey entries that we will use to inform internal reports and peer-reviewed articles. Because we are still in the process of obtaining IRB approval, these pilot data will only be used internally. After obtaining IRB approval the Research and Publications Group will begin a second data collection phase. We look forward to sharing this information and the implications it holds with other departments at UT and with other writing centers across the country.

Notes

[1] Harklau, Linda, Kay M. Losey, and Meryl Siegal, eds. *Generation 1.5 Meets College Composition: Issues in the Teaching of Writing to U.S.-Educated Learners of ESL*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1999. Print.

[2] "Harvard Writing Project." Published online at http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic235511.files/HWP_Bulletin_Responding_to_Student_Writing.pdf [cited November 10, 2010].



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Andrea Saathoff

Andrea Saathoff is a doctoral student in **Counseling Psychology at The University of Texas at Austin**. This is Andrea's third year working at the **UT's Undergraduate Writing Center (UWC)**, and second year as an Assistant Director there. She is involved with several project groups that work together to enhance UWC's services and presence on UT's campus. She studies student anxiety as well as learning and motivation surrounding the writing process.