

BY ANY OTHER NAME: THE VALUE OF USING CORRECT PERSONAL PRONOUNS

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Abstract

This article proposes that by articulating their values, writing centers can have meaningful impact on issues of cultural significance: specifically, in this case, the use of correct personal pronouns. The article presents a study of one writing center's policy of asking tutees for their personal pronouns. The policy has practical and ideological implications. It is intended to help tutors correctly represent all tutees in reports written about tutoring sessions and to show support for individuals who identify differently from the traditional gender binary (he/she). The study combines practical assessment and RAD research to help the center improve its policy, as well as contribute to a larger and growing cultural conversation. Surveys and interviews solicited tutee reactions to the policy. The data suggest that though there are exceptions, reservations, and suggestions for changes, overall, students share the writing center value of using an individual's correct personal pronouns.

This article reports on a study of one writing center's policy to ask visitors for their personal pronouns. Identifying individuals by using their correct personal pronouns is an issue of great cultural importance and currently the subject of much discussion. For example, in 2018, the International Writing Center Association (IWCA) explicitly stated its position on the matter:

One way that academic spaces inflict violence is through linguistic marginalization or exclusion surrounding gender, particularly through pronoun usage. It is time for professional organizations, especially those committed to teaching, to challenge the deep-rooted structures that have been used to uphold a binary that denies access for entire communities. (Position statement)

This study adopts the IWCA position, asserts the value of asking for and using an individual's correct personal pronouns, and shows how such a practice can be enacted, as well as how that practice may be perceived.

Again, the conversation about the value of correct personal pronouns is not new to the writing center community. The same year of the IWCA statement, Travis Sharp and Karen Rosenberg published an article asserting that centers (or centres, given their Canadian context) should seriously consider the implications of pronoun usage, especially for those individuals who do not conform to the traditional gender binary of "he/she." Sharp and Rosenberg consider that binary restrictive, denying individuals their choice of how to

express their identity, and they conclude with a resolution: "to operate alongside minoritized subjects on our campus, the writing centre must acknowledge the necessary role disidentification plays in their lives and experiences" (224). Here Sharp and Rosenberg seem to echo concern about a value expressed earlier by Mandy Suhr-Sytsma and Estelle Brown: "how can tutors better identify and challenge the everyday, often subtle, language of oppression in their own discourse and in that of other tutors and writers in the writing center?" (13-14) Though their focus is not specifically on pronouns, Suhr-Sytsma and Brown nonetheless recognize writing centers' potential to have an impact on these issues of linguistic identification.

Actually, writing centers may be an ideal space for examination and articulation of this value. Harry Denny et al. suggest so: "writing center practitioners must engage in dialogue involving the ways in which tutors, writing center administrators, and writers can most productively and effectively navigate personal or public issues that involve identity" (4). The use of the imperative "must" and the conditionally superlative "most" emphasizes the urgency and significance of this particular writing center value. Harry Denny, on his own, staked a similar claim:

writing centers are sites par excellence where these issues [of identity] are worked through in ways that wider composition studies and teaching across the disciplines can learn from. Writing centers make local, material and individual all the larger forces at play that confound, impede, and make possible education in institutions. (*Facing 6*)

Here Denny broadens the impact beyond even writing centers and into the wider composition and education communities.

While Sharp and Rosenberg's promotion of correct personal pronoun usage prompts vital reflection, this article follows Ellen Schendel and William Macauley's guidelines for practical writing center assessment, as well as Dana Lynn Driscoll and Sherry Wynn Perdue's calls for RAD research, to add empirical evidence to the conversation. Specifically, this article presents a qualitative study of response to the Franklin & Marshall College Writing Center's policy of asking tutees for their preferred personal

pronouns, to use in the reports written about tutoring sessions. These reports, a long-standing part of the center's recordkeeping practice, are also sent, with students' explicit permission, to the appropriate professors.

It is important to note that since beginning this research, I have come to understand that the term "preferred" pronouns itself is not preferred by all, and I have minimized my use of the term throughout this essay. However, "preferred" was the term in use during the implementation of the policy under discussion, and throughout much of the research, so I have used it in the text where necessary to reflect the policy and the research with accuracy.

The policy, which was tutor-initiated, was intended to help tutors correctly represent all tutees in reports written about sessions and to show support for individuals who identify differently from the traditional gender binary of he/she. Thus, there is both a practical and an ideological component: a desire to be right (linguistically, that is), and to do right (ethically, that is). This desire reflects the writing center values articulated by the IWCA, Sharp and Rosenberg, Suhr-Sytsma and Brown, Denny, and Denny et al. Hopefully, this work will encourage other centers to consider adopting similar practices, while also acknowledging the challenges such practices pose.

Background

Although the study presented here began as assessment of one writing center's practice, more significantly, the work answers Schendel and Macauley's call "to show how the writing center contributes to established values and best practices in higher education" (85). The value under discussion here is the importance of writing centers exploring issues of gendered and sexual identity: specifically, the use of correct personal pronouns.

In their call for more queer scholarship from and about writing centers, Andrew Rihn and Jay Sloan assert that a center can be "a distinctive institutional site for the study of sexual identity." Denny concurs: "Our classrooms and writing centers, like any space where people interact, are terrains where people must come to terms with (or are coscripted into) positions that dovetail with mainstream, dominant expectations of roles" (*Facing* 94). Much more than merely helping writers to correct comma usage, or to address higher-order concerns like organization and argumentation, writing centers can offer a safe and helpful space for the better understanding and articulating of identity. Denny et al. directly charge centers to "make urgent conversations on the complexity of identity and of

oppression in order to create meaningful educational experiences and to promote agency for social justice" (11). To take part in these conversations is both a privilege and a responsibility.

However, with privilege and responsibility also comes risk. Suhr-Sytsma and Brown (2010) realize the potential good and the potential damage in how words are used when they write about "the 'everyday language of oppression' [that] is subtle as well as ubiquitous...[and] often goes unnoticed" (15). The (mis)use (or not) of personal pronouns is an example of such oppressive language. While Suhr-Sytsma and Brown mention pronoun usage not in a gendered context, it is not hard to see a gendered significance when they recount a tutor's statement, "Pronouns say a lot!" and the authors' agreement: "They do, and the habit of using them in ways that exclude certain readers is hard to break" (26). Suhr-Sytsma and Brown know the task of breaking such habits is considerable: "It will take local as well as large scale efforts to challenge systematic oppression" (18). But they also know it is possible: "Tutors can indeed productively address structural oppression by carefully attending to the actual words of individuals in their writing centers" (18). Here, Suhr-Sytsma and Brown identify a problem—oppressive language—and an ambitious goal of change.

Embracing the challenge of change, however hard, is necessary. It is imperative, if writing centers are to avoid reinforcing what Denny calls "structuring binaries" and "dominant codes" ("Queering" 41, 48) and instead to raise awareness of and sensitivity to them, much less resist or subvert them, as he also urges. To do so, however, individuals in the center must inform themselves first. How can centers complicate binaries or break codes if they remain unaware of the implications of oppressive language? It would then be impossible to push back on what Rihn and Sloan call "an unconscious ideological bias toward heteronormativity [that] has dominated writing center scholarship."

That bias is far from limited to writing centers, of course. It is the subject of a much larger and growing cultural conversation in academia, and beyond. That conversation is marked by a rising frustration with the status quo, as well as uncertainty about how to challenge it. In 2011, for example, Dean Spade offered "guidelines for referring to students by their preferred names and pronouns" (57). Spade suggested that instead of the traditional roll call, reading from the institutional roster and risking misidentifying students, one could ask students to self-identify. This practice could help avoid "incorrect pronoun assumption" (57), instead "providing a safer space in the classroom" (58).

The “pronoun go-round” has since been adopted by many educators (myself included), but recently Jen Manion challenged Spade’s suggestions, asserting that while such practices were once “a valuable exercise in visibility and solidarity,” their “practicality...has run its course.” Manion argues that “the gesture of compulsory pronoun reporting” can come across as merely performative and can put unwelcome pressure on individuals unprepared to self-identify in such a public way.

Spade quickly answered Manion’s argument. Spade recognizes the legitimacy of the anxiety Manion expresses, calling it “thoughtful and provocative,” and acknowledging that the pronoun go-round cannot possibly address the whole complexity of identity. However, Spade reaffirms the practice’s value and offers suggestions for reducing potential pressure. Spade provides an example of a possible introduction to the pronoun go-round, explaining its purpose and framing it as an invitation rather than a requirement: “We want everyone to participate here, and we want everyone to know how to refer to each other respectfully.” Spade’s suggestion may satisfy some, but likely it will not satisfy all, and it is worth noting that in any situation of self-identification, there is a fundamental element of vulnerability; avoiding all possibility of pressure, whether applied intentionally or not, is simply impossible. When self-identification is requested or required by a teacher or a tutor, the undeniable power imbalance affects the interaction, and students’ agency can be compromised, as well their anxiety intensified. However, Spade insists, while some anxiety may be inescapable, the pronoun go-round challenges the assumption that “we know what someone goes by just by looking at them.” Such a challenge is valuable, and if handled carefully, it can make a step towards creating a space that is inclusive and welcoming.

Once again, the writing center can be such a space and can help spread awareness of this important issue. As Denny puts it: “the writing center obviously cannot speak in the conventional sense, yet its visibility and reputation on campus articulate and inscribe meaning” (“Queering” 59). That meaning may transcend matters of grammatical or analytical proficiency, making deeper impact on individuals and communities. Denny describes the opportunity:

By making conferences potential spaces to challenge what’s natural or not, conventional or not, received wisdom or not, our pedagogy makes possible and internalizes widely transferable critical thinking and active-learning, both of which lead to stronger, more engaged staff and students, vibrant

intellectual communities, and better citizenship, whether on campus or beyond. (*Facing* 111)

Writing center administrators and tutors can either reinforce the received wisdom or question convention, hoping to lead to positive change. There is a choice to be made:

We determine whether our centers will be inclusive or exclusive and whether they’ll exist as spaces in which we can find ways to talk about the range of uncomfortable realities and public controversies that too often remain “out there” and not in our centers—the controversies that give shape to twenty-first-century life and create potential for a future that offers more socially just possibilities. (Denny et al. 245)

This study contends that articulating the writing center value of using correct personal pronouns is a step towards creating just such a space, inclusive and ready to engage with issues of great cultural and personal significance.

Methodology

This study combines practical assessment with RAD (replicable, aggregable, data-supported) research methodology. Ellen Schendel and William Macauley have exhorted writing center administrators to conduct and share careful and rigorous assessment: “when we make decisions about what information to gather and how to gather it—we engage in larger conversations about what writing centers value” (xvii). Beyond self-improvement, assessment can serve as a contribution to a broader discourse about issues that matter, to us and to others. According to Dana Lynn Driscoll and Sherry Wynn Perdue, RAD research offers writing centers the means to participate in that discourse: “If writing center researchers are to better represent the efficacy of our practices, and if we are to influence the way that we teach and talk about writing across the disciplines, we must speak a common research language” (35). By adopting that language, hopefully, this work can contribute to a growing cultural conversation about an important issue: the use of correct personal pronouns.

This study builds on an IRB-approved pilot study conducted by myself and previously reported in *Praxis*. The context of both studies is the writing center of a small, residential, liberal arts college: Franklin & Marshall College. The pilot study consisted of a survey and interviews of visitors to the writing center during the first half-semester of the pronoun policy (spring 2016). Guidelines were followed for qualitative research provided by Floyd Fowler and Herbert and Irene Rubin. The initial survey was short—just six

questions—and the interview questions were mostly opportunities to elaborate on survey answers. Only 59 out of 336 tutees completed the pilot survey, yielding a less than ideal response rate of 17.5%. Five respondents volunteered to be interviewed.

Following the pilot study, the director of the campus research center was consulted in an effort to improve the response rate. Adjustments and expansions to the original survey questions were made, reducing the open-ended questions and including more closed-ended questions, to avoid respondents growing bored or frustrated and abandoning the survey before completion. An incentive was added: entry in a drawing to win a \$50 Amazon gift card to all who completed the survey.

Again, with IRB approval, the new survey was sent to all visitors of the writing center during the 2016-2017 academic year. (See Appendix A for survey questions.) Again, respondents were invited to participate further in an interview (earning another entry into the gift card drawing). The response rate this time was substantially higher: 30.9%. Of the 223 respondents, 14 volunteered to be interviewed.

Still, sample size is one limitation of this study. Another is the possibility of self-selecting sample bias, since tutees who approved of the policy might be more likely to respond. Another limitation is the wording of questions, especially given the complexity and subtlety of the topic. For example, the questions both in surveys and interviews about whether respondents understood the reason for the policy could have been more precise and clearer. Was the focus on understanding of the ideological reason for the policy (i.e., making students more comfortable) or for the practical implications (i.e., the mechanics of correct pronoun usage), and did “understanding” imply approval of either or both? Further research should take these kinds of nuances into consideration.

Results

Answers to survey and interview questions show tutees’ response to the policy. This data is of interest in itself, and it is also instructive when compared with results from the pilot study.

Surveys

The survey began with several questions that have no relevance to this study. Then respondents were asked if they had always or ever been asked for their pronouns. Most (75.7%) had always been asked. Some (17.2%) had never been asked, and for those, the survey was over.

The next survey question was about how the policy had affected the respondents’ visits. Most (86.4%) indicated that the policy had no effect on their tutoring sessions. Very few (2.1%) indicated it had a negative effect, and of those, almost all indicated their objections were practical rather than ideological—only one person indicated feeling offended, and no-one indicated feeling pressured. Of the minority (11.4%) who indicated the policy had a positive effect on their tutoring sessions, most indicated either that they personally felt welcome at the center, or pleased that the center welcomed all visitors. Few indicated that the question had any positive practical effect.

The next three questions were almost the same as in the pilot study survey, with just minor wording adjustments. Respondents indicated how comfortable they were being asked for their pronouns, how well they understood the reason for the question, and whether they thought the overall effect of the policy was more positive or negative. Responses to these questions can be usefully compared with the responses to the pilot survey (see table 1).

The majority of respondents felt either somewhat comfortable (8.7%) or extremely comfortable (45.7%) being asked for their pronouns. Few felt somewhat (9.8%) or extremely (3.8%) uncomfortable. Compared with the previous year, there was a shift to more neutral responses: many more respondents felt neither comfortable nor uncomfortable (32.1%, up from 11.9%).

Similarly, more respondents than the previous year understood the reasons for the policy moderately well (9.8%, up from 1.7%). Fewer respondents understood the reasons slightly well or not well at all (4.4%, down from 5.1%). Fewer respondents understood the reasons extremely well (52.7%, down from 67.8%), but more understood the reasons well (28.8%, up from 20.3%).

Fewer respondents indicated a neutral overall response (18.5%, down from 27.1%). Many more respondents indicated a somewhat positive response (33.2%, up from 6.8%), while fewer respondents indicated either extremely positive (44%, down from 54.2%) or extremely negative (1.1%, down from 8.5%) responses.

Overall, a slight shift to more neutral and moderate responses was evident, but still with much more weight on the positive than the negative side.

The following questions asked the importance of the issue of pronouns, whether the respondents had participated in the study the previous year, and if so, how their response had changed. On the first question, respondents were almost evenly split between not at all or slightly important (31.5%), very or extremely

important (34.8%), and moderately important (33.7%). On the second question, most of the respondents (85.9%) had not completed the survey the year before. Of the few who had, most (73.1%) thought the same of the policy. Others (26.9%) thought better. None thought worse.

The final question on the survey asked for suggestions for improvements to the policy. Of those who answered, some (29.3%) indicated they had no suggestions, and others (26.8%) explicitly indicated that they believed the policy was already being well implemented. Some (23.2%) suggested moving the question online only, and a minority (14.6%) suggested stopping the policy altogether. These answers were consistent with responses to the question on the pilot survey, in which 22% had indicated they had no suggestions, 25% had suggested moving the question online (which had already been done, though not eliminating the in-person asking), and 12% had suggested stopping the policy. Some of the specific suggestions will be shared in the discussion section.

Interviews

As in the pilot study, interview questions were mostly opportunities for respondents to elaborate on their answers to the survey. The specific questions follow, accompanied by a summary and select examples of the responses.

What was your initial reaction to being asked for your preferred pronouns? What did you think/feel? Why? Mild surprise (“a little startled”) was a recurring response. For some it was the first time they had been asked. Others had encountered the question before, on campus or elsewhere. Most had positive reactions (“nowadays, it’s kind of an important thing to know about a person”), but a minority considered the question unnecessary, inconvenient, or even impertinent.

Did your thoughts or feelings about being asked for your preferred pronouns change at all? If so, how and why? If not, why not? Most opinions had not changed. Most reemphasized the potential positives, including the normalizing of such questions (“it’s on its way to make it more accepted”), possible learning (“opportunity for great cultural learning experience”), and creating a welcoming space (“It’s a good thing to establish when you’re meeting someone new and you want to be respectful of who they are and what they want to be called.”)

Were you comfortable being asked for your preferred pronouns? Why or why not? Although some were slightly surprised (“caught off guard”), most were comfortable, or at least not uncomfortable (“I’m not upset about it”). However, several did indicate concern that some

other students might feel uncomfortable (“I understand that not all students feel that way”). One pointed out that it is already difficult for some to share their writing, and the double vulnerability of then sharing this aspect of their identity might be too much.

Did you understand the reason that you were being asked for your preferred pronouns? Why or why not? Although for some there was a bit of initial confusion (“not sure what to answer”), most respondents indicated they either immediately or quickly understood the reasons for the policy: an attempt to make students feel more comfortable, to show respect, and to identify individuals correctly. Several said that the reasons were obvious (“intuitive”), but several others said they needed the tutors to explain. One did not understand, indicating that because tutors only use “you” in conversation during session, there seemed no need at all for third-person pronouns.

Overall, what effect do you think the Center’s policy has had? Most respondents indicated positive effects, either on individuals (“I feel like it might actually have created more safe space...just knowing that people here are aware of preferred pronouns can establish a better relationship with the tutor”) or on the community (“the more we do it on campus, the more normal it becomes...the less it becomes weird or taboo”). Again, a minority demurred, emphasizing the policy’s nobility (“I think it’s definitely well-intentioned”) but also its inefficacy (“more of a gesture than a significant action”).

How might you suggest improving the policy? Most of the suggestions were to improve efficiency. For example, several suggested tutors refer to the preferred pronouns already indicated in previous sessions to avoid asking any individual multiple times. One noted, however, that if being asked again is “the largest inconvenience in my day, that’s a good day for me.” Other suggestions included making it the tutee’s responsibility to self-identify or not using pronouns at all, but rather referring in reports to “We” and “the tutee” or the tutee’s name.

Discussion

Several recurring themes emerge from the responses to survey and interview questions. These themes can be represented by imperatives articulated explicitly in the qualitative data and reinforced by quantitative results:

1. Stop asking for pronouns.
2. Ask for pronouns online.
3. Explain the policy better.

Each theme will be discussed below, with reflection on the practical and ideological implications and how they

show the similarities and differences between what the writing center values, and what its visitors value.

Stop Asking for Pronouns

The least common theme, it is nonetheless an important one to address. It is also important to note that quantitative responses were less negative than the pilot study, and negative qualitative responses did not reach the intensity of some of the comments in the pilot. There were no prophecies of the destruction of the English language, nor any explicitly hateful rhetoric, as there had been in the pilot. However, there were some strong statements of disapproval, and these opinions should be acknowledged as contrasting with writing center values.

For example, it is not consistent with writing center values to place the responsibility on an individual to self-identify without prompting. One respondent insisted:

Don't ask, it's annoying and unimportant. If someone has an unassumed gender pronoun they would like to be called they should be confident enough to say so without everyone having to be asked.

Expecting someone to self-identify puts pressure on the individual and reinforces the perception of the abnormality of anything other than the traditional gender binary. Denny et al. acknowledge that “not everyone who walks in the door of a writing center wants a liberatory education” (244), and for those who are not interested in issues of identity, questions about pronouns may be obnoxious, or even offensive. However, Denny et al. also assert,

everyone deserves support that both empowers them and mitigates their experiences in relation to societal, cultural, and political systems that render the institutional conditions of learning and teaching as always fraught (244-45).

To balk at offering that support just because it is, to some, “annoying and unimportant” does not reflect writing center values.

It is also far from ideal, as one respondent suggested, simply to write about sessions without using pronouns at all. Technically, a report could be constructed referring only to “the tutee,” or to the tutee’s first name. Additionally, the report could be framed using only the collaborative “we.” For example, one could write: “Sam brought in a rough draft, and we worked on improving its organization. The tutee also wanted some help with punctuation, which we addressed.” This kind of gender-neutral reporting is viable and an available option in the F&M Writing Center; tutors are prepared to write this way if tutees prefer not to be referred to by pronoun. Such an

approach might satisfy those who wish to avoid asking for a tutee’s pronouns, but there are several problems. First, this style flies in the face of the long-established convention of pronoun usage in English language writing. Furthermore, this impersonal style would be challenging for many tutors to adopt, and beyond a sentence or two, it would probably be awkward to read. Finally, and most importantly, while referring to the tutee only by their first name seems reasonable, it is also reasonable to consider a person’s pronouns part of their identity; to ignore or actively reject that part of their identity is to deny what the IWCA calls “the full humanity of all who work with and in writing centers.” Again, such a denial is inconsistent with writing center values.

On the other hand, it is a valid concern that asking for pronouns could counterproductively create pressure and anxiety for some individuals. One respondent indicated:

I'd honestly suggest doing away with the system altogether... if the goal is to make everyone feel welcome, it might be better not to raise a question that makes people feel different.

This was the concern that was voiced most often in the survey and interviews. This is also the concern voiced by Jan Manion, addressed earlier. It cannot be denied that there is a fundamental power imbalance in any tutor-tutee interaction, and for the tutor to ask such a personal question of the tutee can make the tutee even more vulnerable than they already are, potentially diminishing their agency.

Yet another reason suggested for stopping the policy altogether was the time it takes and its lack of impact on the quality of the actual tutoring taking place. Over 86% indicated the questions had no impact on the session, and one respondent pointed out: “the entire (tutoring) conversation uses ‘you,’ so why waste the time asking for pronouns?” Those are compelling numbers and a valid question. However, while not wholly irrelevant, whether or not asking for pronouns explicitly and directly improves the tutoring session—and some (11.4%) said it does—is beside both the practical and ideological points, and in tension with writing center values as articulated by Denny et al.:

Often, the writing center serves as a space for individuals to come out, to reveal or uncover their identities to relative strangers—consultants or writers who might be working with them to develop ideas for compositions but who in doing so travel down conversational rabbit holes to explore key facets of identity and the tensions that accompany them. (6)

Here Denny et al. confirm the possibility of inefficient “conversational rabbit holes,” but for them those

apparent digressions are not wasted time or effort, but valuable opportunities.

Ask for Pronouns Online

Many respondents suggested moving the question about pronouns online, either additionally (that is, before asking in person) or exclusively (that is, instead of asking in person). Reasons split between improved efficiency and a desire to avoid making anyone feel uncomfortable—familiar concerns from the small contingent of suggestions to stop asking altogether. For example, one respondent suggested: “When students sign up for a writing center appointment online, have a button to insert their preferred pronouns but make it optional.” These concerns and suggestions require careful consideration because they are not incompatible with the writing center values that the policy represents.

First, as mentioned above, avoiding making people uncomfortable is a good goal. It would be a shame to unintentionally create anxiety for anyone who is not prepared to identify pronouns—a potentially private matter—in what is, essentially, a public space. Again, this was a frequently voiced concern, and it is a valid and serious one. It would be a sad irony if trying to show sensitivity and support instead only pushed an agenda at the expense of individuals’ feelings, reinforcing inequitable power dynamics. But the bulk of the data does not indicate that is the case. The majority indicated they felt comfortable (54.4%), or at least not uncomfortable (32.1%), being asked for their pronouns. Only a small minority (13.6%) indicated they felt some degree of discomfort. Also, it is important to remember that visitors do in fact have the option not to provide their pronouns. Tutors are ready to write reports without referring to pronouns at all, a necessary, if rarely applied aspect of the policy. Writing centers should make every effort, within reason, to ensure the safety of visitors to what is, after all, a public space. It may be less public a space than the classrooms discussed in Manion and Spade’s debate, but even a one-on-one peer tutorial deserves consideration of an individual’s comfort level and agency in revealing such personal information.

The second concern, that of efficiency, may not be sufficient to warrant ending the policy, but it merits consideration of adjusting how the policy is applied. For example, one suggestion emphasized the inconvenience of repeated questions for return visitors: “I don’t think it’s necessary to ask EVERY time, especially when the tutor has met with the person multiple times before.” Wasting time is certainly to be avoided. However, first, the time taken can and should be minimal. The F&M Center’s current instructions for

asking might take only a few seconds, depending on any follow-up questions tutees might have. Furthermore, pronouns actually are solicited online, both when students register for WOnline and each time they use the scheduling system to make an appointment. Tutees are given the following choices (in the following order) on a drop-down menu:

- zi/zir
- they/their
- she/her
- he/his
- prefer not to say
- other

Given these (minimum) two required encounters with the question, it is a bit odd to find suggestions like this: “Maybe students should put in their pronoun online when they make the appointment.” Unless they select “prefer not to say,” they do. At least one respondent knew so, and factored the online component into their suggestive question:

You ask for pronouns when we register for a session and then again when we arrive, if you don’t go off the forms response then why ask when we register?

The answer to this valid question, and to the more direct suggestions to keep the policy online only, is that asking online only is simply not sufficient, for several reasons. First, individuals may express their identities differently in different circumstances. They may use one set of pronouns for filling out an online form, and another for interacting with their peers in person, and yet another for being written about in a report sent to their professors. Also, use of pronouns may change over time. What one used at the beginning of the first semester may not be the same by fall break, or by the next day, or by senior year. Trusting that tutees would proactively note any changes in their usage may seem a challenge to an individual’s agency, but it is an unsafe assumption, given the high stakes (i.e., risking “outing” someone). Always asking in person, confirming the current correct usage, is crucial to demonstrating the practical and ideological value of correctness and care. Anything less is just not enough, and while perfect adherence to this ideal may be practically challenging—or even impossible, as I will discuss further below—it is worth the attempt.

Explain the Policy Better

Some respondents suggested tutors explain the policy better. How, better? Suggestions ranged from adding information to the website to having the tutors explain more, or less, or more formally, or less formally. Balancing these competing suggestions would be challenging, but again, worth the consideration.

First, a brief description of the policy was already available on the writing center website, including the ideological and practical reasons. The description is on the page that tutees must access to make an appointment at the center. However, it is not surprising that some tutees made appointments without noticing the description. It's hard to imagine how to make tutees read the description, without belaboring the point and frustrating visitors. It could be a requirement when one signs up for the appointment that one signs off on having read the description, like a software update user agreement, but it is common knowledge how rarely those kinds of agreements are actually read.

It is intriguing that there was conflict between preferences for more or less explanation, and more or less formal explanation. Some thought it was best just to move briskly through the question, not drawing attention to it and maybe not explaining at all unless the tutee had questions. For example, one respondent said,

I think the current policy is the most practical method of carrying out the current policies. It's not perfect, but it can't really be improved without adding too much fluff to the process.

Another concurred: "straight up asking for tutees for their preferred pronouns is great. There is no beating around the bush and making things awkward for no reason." The reasons for this perspective appeared to be efficiency and a desire to further normalize the question—that is, business as usual. On the other hand, those who thought it was best to take a little time setting up the question in a more conversational way wanted more opportunity for discussion. One suggested, "Giving a short statement about the policy beforehand," and another, "Require an explanation or require [tutors] to ask the tutee if they understand why they're being asked." As with offering alternative ways of answering the question, these seem valid suggestions, but once again, consistency is preferable, and simplicity seems more likely than complexity to lead to consistency. Currently, the F&M tutor handbook does not give exact instructions on the manner or extent to which explanation is offered, though it does suggest that if the tutee has questions about the policy, the tutor should either explain or suggest the tutee contact an administrator (see Appendix C).

One potentially beneficial change to the handbook language would be to add even more emphasis to the distinction between asking a tutee bluntly "what are your pronouns?" and some variation on "When you scheduled your appointment [or registered for WCOonline] you indicated you use the pronouns

they/their—shall I use those pronouns in the report I write about this session?" This distinction was made following feedback on the pilot study, with the intention of decreasing any potential pressure and clarifying and emphasizing the practical purpose of the policy: to use the correct pronouns in reports written. Given the number of comments in the second study evidencing confusion on this purpose (e.g., "It seemed unnecessary to me. The tutor usually says 'your' paper/'your' draft anyway"), it seems this language is inadequate, or that it is being inadequately applied. More and better explanation may be necessary to fully convey the value of asking for pronouns.

Another potentially beneficial addition to the script might be for tutors to share their own pronouns with tutees. Although he is not referring explicitly or exclusively to pronouns, Denny suggests that the inherent vulnerability in discussing sensitive aspects of identity "can be mitigated if tutors themselves engage in a sort of coming out, thereby fostering a transactional dialogue in which knowledge is shared...not one sided" ("Queering" 58). The website MyPronouns.org also advises mutuality: "First make sure that you have shared your own pronouns. Doing so is the best way to encourage other people to share their pronouns, to help make them more comfortable to share their pronouns with you." Such a practice might serve to soften the fundamental power imbalance inherent in this policy.

Conclusion

The study presented in this article assessed response to the Franklin & Marshall College Writing Center policy of asking tutees for their personal pronouns. According to Schendel and Macauley, assessment can and should prompt change, both locally and beyond: "Think of assessment not only as an opportunity to learn about your work but as a means of generating interest and energy around that work" (54). Particularly when blended with RAD research practices, assessment allows for interesting and energetic contributions to cultural conversations beyond a single campus context. This approach, as Denny puts it, "places a premium on viewing writing centers as sites for activism and change" (*Facing* 26). Here is a chance for a writing center to share what it values.

In the case of this study, it appears that what the F&M Writing Center values and what the Center's visitors value are not far apart. While there were those who objected, and there were suggestions for adjustments, and those objections and suggestions were the dominant themes addressed in the discussion

here, it is important to remember that most responses to the pronoun policy were positive. Many respondents enthusiastically praised the policy, explicitly endorsing both the practical and ideological reasons that motivated it. However, I hope and believe that even if the response had not been so predominantly positive, the policy would not have been discontinued. After all, Denny et al. point out the potential value of writing centers challenging controversial perceptions and practices:

[Centers] can and should be spaces in which the tensions of communities can and do manifest. And these tensions become most legible when the tidy operation of tutoring genre, argument, development, sentence clarity, and grammar gets upended by perceptions, preconceived notions, and power dynamics—by compelled disclosure of identity formations such as those that accents or belief systems represent. (5)

Discomfort and disagreement are not necessarily bad, and as gratifying as the affirmation may be, the purpose of the policy was not to be popular, but to be and to do right. The purpose of the study was not to decide whether or not to continue the policy, but to gauge how better to continue, as well as to contribute to the cultural conversation surrounding this important issue.

Hopefully, other writing centers will consider adopting similar policies, as appropriate to their specific contexts. Both from the literature reviewed and the results received in this study, it seems that using correct pronouns can have the kind of meaningful impact on individuals called for by Denny, Denny et al., Sharp and Rosenberg, Suhr-Sytsma and Brown, and others. This is a matter of great urgency, according to Denny:

The automatic functioning of mainstream gender and sexuality identity politics, the seemingly effortlessness of expressions that appear normal, even natural, of course begs their very question. As we mark who we are, we signify the operation of social and cultural forces upon us. (“Queering” 88)

The world around us—from our local campuses to the global communities we all occupy—is changing in how the experience and expression of identity are recognized. Writing centers can, and should contribute to that change by enacting policies that show what we value.

I will close by sharing one last response. The final survey answer recorded, to the request for suggestions of how better to implement the policy, was “Keep asking”—without a period. Although I suspect the lack of punctuation was an oversight, in this case I must put aside the writing center value of grammatical

correctness and embrace the error. I like the open-endedness of the imperative, and I hope it presages, albeit unconsciously, the lack of an end to our policy, and to the value of change it represents. Because it is the right thing to do, I hope we will indeed keep asking.

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Appendix A

Table 1: Compared Quantitative Results

	1 Extremely uncomfortable/ unwell/negative	2 Somewhat uncomfortable/ unwell/negative	3 Neither/nor	4 Somewhat comfortable/ well/positive	5 Extremely comfortable/ well/positive
Question 1: How comfortable were you with being asked about your preferred pronouns?	2016 8.5%	2016 8.5%	2016 11.9%	2016 22%	2016 49.1%
	2017 3.8%	2017 9.8%	2017 32.1%	2017 8.7%	2017 45.7%
Question 2: How well did you understand why you were being asked about your preferred pronouns?	2016 5.1%	2016 5.1%	2016 1.7%	2016 20.3%	2016 67.8%
	2017 4.3%	2017 4.3%	2017 9.7%	2017 28.8%	2017 52.7%
Question 3: How positively or negatively do you perceive the Center's policy to ask tutees about their preferred pronouns?	2016 8.5%	2016 3.4%	2016 27.1%	2016 6.8%	2016 54.2%
	2017 1%	2017 3.3%	2017 18.5%	2017 33.2%	2017 44%

Appendix B

Survey Questions

- How often, approximately, have you visited the Writing Center this year?
 - Once or twice
 - Three or four times
 - Five or more times

- What did you work on during your Writing Center visit(s)? (Check all that apply.)
 - Brainstorming
 - Rough draft
 - Close to final draft
 - Oral presentation
 - Understanding the prompt
 - Organization
 - Argumentation/analysis
 - Grammar
 - Style
 - Citations
 - Other _____

- Who referred you to the Center? (Check all that apply.)
 - Professor
 - Friend
 - Tutor
 - Academic Advisor
 - Residential Advisor
 - Other _____

- How satisfied were you, overall, with your Writing Center experience(s)? (Likert Scale 1-5)

- Did the Writing Center tutor(s) *always* ask you for your preferred pronouns at the beginning of *each* of your visits? (Y/N)
- If no, did the Writing Center tutor(s) *ever* ask you for your preferred pronouns at the beginning of *any* of your visits? (Y/N)
- If no, thanks very much, end of survey!
- If yes, how did the question affect your subsequent session(s)?
 - Negatively
 - Not at all
 - Positively
- If negatively, why? (Check all that apply.)
 - It was a waste of time.
 - I thought my preferred pronouns should be obvious.
 - I was offended.
 - I felt pressured to reveal personal information that should be private.
 - I believe using pronouns different from traditional norms has a negative effect on the English language.
 - Other _____
- If positively, why? (Check all that apply.)
 - It made me feel personally welcome in the Center.
 - It made me feel like the Center welcomes all students, regardless of how they identify.
 - It contributed to a more effective tutoring session.
 - Other _____
- Overall, how comfortable were you with being asked for your preferred pronouns? (Likert Scale 1-5)
- Overall, how well did you understand why you were being asked for your preferred pronouns? (Likert Scale 1-5)

- Overall, do you think the Center’s policy to ask tutees for their preferred pronouns is more positive or negative? (Likert Scale 1-5)
- Overall, how important is the issue of identifying preferred pronouns to you? (Likert Scale 1-5)
- Did you complete the similar survey about this policy that we sent last year? (Y/N)
- If yes, how has your perception of the policy changed since then?
 - I think better of the policy.
 - I think worse of the policy.
 - I think the same of the policy.
- What suggestions do you have for how better to implement the policy of asking tutees about their preferred pronouns? _____

Appendix C

Tutor Handbook Excerpt

In an effort to recognize and show support for individuals who identify in ways different from traditional gender binaries, the Writing Center will continue the policy of asking tutees for the pronouns they prefer we use in writing about them in our Client Report Forms.

Tutees will indicate their preferred pronouns (e.g., they/their, ze/zir, she/hers, he/his) when registering with WOnline and when booking any appointments. However, because choices may change, it is also important to confirm with tutees that the pronouns they indicated online should be used in Client Report Forms for each individual session.

It is also important to emphasize that the question is not meant to be invasive, but just as a matter of everyday record-keeping. To avoid potentially putting pressure on individuals to identify themselves in what they may feel is too personal and/or abrupt a manner, rather than asking “what are your preferred pronouns?” ask some version of the following example:

“When you scheduled your appointment [or registered for WOnline] you indicated a preference for the pronouns they/their—shall I use those pronouns in the report I write about this session?” [It would probably be good to follow this question up with the question about sending the report to the professor. We must be careful not to “out” students who may identify one way with you and another with their professors.]

You need not use these exact words, but do make sure to connect the question to our record-keeping practice as well as the pronoun preference tutees indicated online. You can show tutees the relevant lines on the Blue Sheet to illustrate that the questions are a part of our official record keeping.

If the tutees seem confused, or ask questions, do your best to explain our policy, but also feel free to suggest that the tutee contact the director or assistant director for further clarification. If you have any questions or concerns about the policy, please contact the director or assistant director.