

Undergraduate Student Perceptions and the Writing Center¹

Joseph Cheadle and Margaret Bullerjahn

Case Western Reserve University
Cleveland, Ohio

Miami University
Oxford, Ohio

How students perceive the writing center and how the writing center perceives itself can often be at odds with each other. Staff, faculty, and students who work in the writing center may tend to consider it in its idealized form. After all, they are trained—according to Stephen North and Jeff Brooks—to “Improve the writer, not the writing” through consultations that focus on strategies and tactics writers can use on other papers and projects and in their career (Hawthorne 1). Writing center staff also often know their centers are intended for all students at the institution rather than, as stereotypes suggest, only first-year students, international students, and/or those lacking what are often thought of as “basic writing skills.” That informed vision, however, may not be held institution-wide. In other words, those who work in a writing center may perceive it much differently than others on campus who do not share the idealized view of writing center work, or of writing, that those trained to work there do. Our project focuses specifically on the issue of undergraduate student perceptions of the Howe Writing Center at Miami University. We focus on undergraduates because, in our writing center, like at many centers, undergraduates are major constituents and consumers of writing center resources, make up a large number of stakeholders, and serve as a major focus of a writing center mission. We believe understanding undergraduate student perceptions of a writing center can be critical to shaping a particular center, its mission, and its success. The goals of our project include: 1) Determining attitudes of students toward our writing center and writing in their major, 2) Understanding why they use or do not use our writing center, and 3) Providing recommendations to our writing center and other centers based on students’ perceptions.

In her article examining the ideal of the writing center versus the reality of the writing center, "Whose Idea of a Writing Center is This, Anyway?", Jeanne Simpson argues that, depending on the stakeholder, many different ways to view the center exist:

One professor imagines the writing center as an editing service. Another person perceives it as a place to "teach finishing." Students perceive the writing center as sanctuary, as dust bin, as fix-it shop, as all kinds of things. Administrators may see it as part of retention programs or as an element of their CYA strategies. Sometimes the perceptions are pieced together from the semantics of the phrase "writing center." Sometimes they represent analogous thinking, a belief that the writing center is like a car-wash with detailing service. (1)

As Simpson points out, perceptions of the writing center differ widely among students, faculty, and the administration. The perceptions of the writing center can be, and often are, so widely varied that no single coherent vision of the center functions at the institution. In his essay "Comparing the Idea with the Reality of a Writing Center," Jake Gaskins also suggests the idea of the writing center and the reality of the writing center can be widely divergent. But just because people perceive a writing center in widely divergent ways does not mean that one perception is "more correct" than another. Rather, different viewpoints highlight the importance of perceptions for how people think about, and interact with, the writing center at their institutions as well as the ultimate success of the center. As Simpson states:

We need to accept a simple principle: people's perceptions come from their legitimate experiences and reference points, even if they lead to conclusions we don't share. Just as we do in tutoring, we need to find out what people actually know, how they know it, and what they believe about their knowledge. (1-2)

Validating a spectrum of perceptions is the necessary first step in recognizing that these perceptions are grounded in "legitimate experiences and reference points." Viewed in this way, perceptions of the writing center are just as important as, and perhaps even more defining than, the ideal of the writing center. In regard to perceptions, writing center staff need to decide whether to shift the center to meet perceptions or, more likely, to shift the perceptions of the writing center to align it more with the ideal of the center.

Our project explores the perceptions of our writing center among students to determine if their perceptions correspond to the ideal of the writing center. At our writing center, the mission is "To assure that Miami University prepares all of its graduates to excel in the writing they will do after college in their careers, roles as community and civic leaders, and personal lives."² Our center operates in five locations on campus and completes nearly 4,000 student consultations annually, as well as writer's workshops, international writer's workshops, graduate student writing bootcamps, and faculty writing bootcamps and workshops. As is the case with most writing centers, we make numerous student outreach attempts, including summer orientations, calendars, workshops, class visits, t-shirts for consultants that promote the Center, Greek community outreach, and numerous workshops targeting specific demographics of students.

To begin our project, we sent electronic surveys to students.³ In an attempt to narrow the study and because of a desire to avoid delving into the numerous and complicated factors that can go into L2 writer research on perceptions, we only interviewed native English-speaking students. Eighty students completed the survey, and none had previously worked or were currently working as consultants in the writing center. Survey questions included basic demographic questions (academic year, major, etc.), frequency of writing center use, reason(s) for use, and a variety of questions about student perceptions of the writing center. To add qualitative insights to our quantitative data, we also interviewed 12 students; these students were chosen in order to constitute a representative sample of three subjects from each undergraduate academic year. During the interviews, students described their experiences with our writing center, whether the center is relevant to their major and undergraduate education, why they use or do not use the center, and how the center can be more relevant to them. Because this project focuses on the important issue of perceptions, we relied only on students self-reporting their answers rather than on the data and figures reported from our writing center.

We encountered some problems with data collection, such as a small sample size, that could have affected the results of the surveys and interviews. We were also working under time constraints; the nature of the research project paired a doctoral student and undergraduate student in a collaborative project, which limited the research and analysis time to one semester.

Despite potential drawbacks of the data collection, we believe our work begins the important process of cataloging undergraduate perceptions of writing centers as well as suggests ways that writing centers can work to change student perceptions.

ANALYSIS

In this section we explore the survey results and use the interviews to supplement our survey questions, which focused on student perceptions of the Howe Writing Center. Students were initially asked for their academic years (Figure 1).

Fig. 1. Students (N=80)

First Year	Sophomore	Junior	Senior
8	24	33	15

We were able to gather responses from students in each academic year. Sixty-six students (86%) indicated that the Writing Center was an important resource on campus, one student (<1%) indicated it was not, and eleven students (14%) were unsure whether it was an important resource or not. Clearly, most students perceived the center as an important resource on campus—the question is for whom this resource is meant. We then asked if, and when, those surveyed visited our center for a consultation. Out of 80 students, 28 indicated that they had been to our center for a consultation, while 52 students indicated that they had not. Of the 28 who had experienced individual consultations in our center, 22 indicated they did so during their first year, 11 during their second year, 5 during their third year, and none during their senior year. Students self-reported that if they used our center, it was primarily during their first year.

We next needed to determine which groups of students the survey respondents believed use the center and which groups students believe use it most frequently. Together, the next two figures highlight the predominant perceptions of the Howe Writing Center among Miami University undergraduate native English speaking students, including whom the center is primarily geared toward. The results in Figure 2 were in response to the question: “In your opinion, which demographic uses the Writing Center?” Students were able to indicate as many categories as they wanted. The results in Figure 3 were in response to the question: “Who uses the Writing Center the most?” Students were able to indicate only one category.

Fig. 2. In your opinion, which demographic uses the Center? (Students N=76)

First Year	Sophomore	Junior	Senior	5th Year	International	Graduate
73 (96%)	39 (51%)	17 (22%)	21 (28%)	10 (13%)	47 (62%)	11 (14%)

Fig. 3. Who uses the Writing Center the most? (Students N=76)

First Year	Sophomore	Junior	Senior	5th Year	International	Graduate
46 (61%)	3 (4%)	4 (5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	22 (29%)	1 (1%)

In Figure 2, students overwhelmingly indicated that they believe the Writing Center was meant for, and used by, first year students and international students. Meanwhile, as the percentages indicate in Figure 3, students believe that 90% of students who use the Writing Center are either in their first year or are international students. Only 10% of those surveyed believe that sophomores, juniors, seniors, 5th year, or graduate students use the Writing Center the most. Interviews with students suggest the same results as the survey.⁴ According to a junior biology major, “[t]he writing center is for developing a base, so they [students] feel like they don’t need it anymore.” And, according to a first-year student with a double major in anthropology and biology, the Writing Center’s role is “to prepare students for how to write a college essay.” The takeaway from the surveys is that many native English-speaking students in our study perceived our Writing Center as a place for first-year students and international students, not for native English-speaking students who are in upper-level classes. Regardless of how students form this perception (personal experience, anecdotes, faculty members, staff, or previous assumptions), it appears as the prevailing opinion among students at our universities, as both figures indicate.

The survey data confirms many of the assumptions that Howe Writing Center staff had made about student perceptions, including that students may view the center as a place for first-year students, international students, and basic writers. It also supports previous student data from our center that suggests students believe writing centers, including ours, are directed toward first-year and international students. To determine why students do not use the Writing Center, we asked students, as Figure 4 reports, “Why do students not use the Writing Center?” Students were allowed to choose one of five common reasons people do not use the center, drawing from their own beliefs as well as their observations.

Fig. 4. Why do students not use the Writing Center? (Students N=76)

	Number	Percentage
Too lazy	5	6%
Other	6	8%
Have few writing classes/assignments	9	12%
Sought help from other services/people	17	23%
Don't feel the need to attend	39	51%

This data correlates with Wendy Bishop's observations in "Bringing Writers to the Center: Some Survey Results, Surmises, and Suggestions." Bishop argues that "the higher the class level, the less likely the student was to have attended the writing center" (36). Bishop also notes some of the most prevalent reasons students do not use the writing center: "[Students believe] [t]hey don't need tutoring or don't have time to be to be tutored" (36). As Bishop points out, upper-level students are less likely to use the writing center than first year students, and students often need an incentive to attend. However, this phenomenon does not explain why some students use the writing center, why some students return often, why some students only use the writing center once, and why some students never use it. As Figure 4 suggests, the idea that students don't feel a need to take advantage of the Howe Writing Center runs through the perceptions of our institution's students in many academic years and majors. A senior accounting major, for example, states "[I] don't use it [the Writing Center] because I have a level of confidence in my writing." Meanwhile, a senior zoology major states "People are becoming more confident/know what professors are looking for [as they get older]." That such a large percentage of students feel no need to use the services provided by the Writing Center remains problematic because writing centers often position themselves as a resource for all students and not simply high traffic students.

Meanwhile, the perceptions of students who used the Writing Center confirm the overall perceptions of our center among students. We collected the data in Figure 5 from students who self-indicated they had gone to the Writing Center for a consultation when we asked: "How many times have you used the Writing Center?"

Fig. 5. How many times have you used the Writing Center? (Students N=28)

One time	Two times	Three times	Four times	Five or more
7	8	6	3	4

Students who used the Writing Center once were 75% more likely to use it at least one additional time. However, these same students were most likely to use the Writing Center in their first and second years, rarely in their third year, and not at all during their senior year. In interviews, students indicated that either instructors were not assigning writing or that they had already “mastered” all of the necessary writing skills for their major.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the data from our surveys and interviews, we were able to draw a few conclusions as well as suggest possible recommendations and research avenues for changing the perceptions of the Writing Center. First, quantitative data from our survey reinforces long-held assumptions about student perceptions of our center. Despite rigorous outreach and attempts to change student perceptions of our center, undergraduate native English-speaking students at Miami University continue to view its primary clients as first-year students and international students. This perception may negatively affect the way students in their sophomore, junior, and senior years relate to the Writing Center. Another potential factor in student perceptions, continually raised by students during interviews, is that most instructors don’t recommend the Writing Center to them outside of composition classes. Next, our data indicates that it is difficult to change undergraduate student perceptions by marketing directly to them. We do not endorse ending direct marketing to our students, but we speculate that other types of outreach are needed if undergraduate student perceptions are going to align with the ideal of the center held by our staff.

We also have a few recommendations we are implementing at the Howe Writing Center to help change the perspective of the center as a place primarily for international and first-year students to a perspective of the center as a place that improves writing for all majors, academic years, and skill levels. Since student outreach appears not to be effective in changing undergraduate student perceptions, we see undergraduate non-composition faculty outreach as the next avenue for changing student perceptions of our center. At our center, faculty outreach will be a key aspect of future development, including adding more faculty workshops and implementing a writing fellowship for faculty members.⁵ But, perhaps most importantly, the Howe Writing Center is continuing and aggressively expanding one-to-one outreach to faculty members to educate them

about our services. We believe faculty outreach will be effective because if faculty members understand the services we offer, they can better suggest our services to their students. As part of our outreach, we let faculty members know our center can address writing in all disciplines and majors and can help students in their major-specific classes. While not all faculty members will be on board with our message, one-to-one outreach is the best opportunity to get our faculty to support our center.

This project has provided us with valuable insights into Miami University undergraduate student perceptions. It also sought to validate undergraduate perceptions as grounded in student experiences and understanding. Furthermore, the methods and procedures included in the study can be duplicated and expanded in other programs. Future research planned in the Howe Writing Center includes surveys and discussions with faculty members to determine their perceptions of our center. By pursuing additional avenues of research, we hope to align perceptions with the goals of our Writing Center while strengthening the center for the future.

1. This project was supported by the Doctoral-Undergraduate Opportunities for Scholarship. As part of the program, undergraduate and graduate students collaborate on a project that links scholarship and teaching at Miami University as well as contributes in an important way to issues that have implications beyond Miami University.
2. "About Howe Writing Center." *Miami University*.
3. <www.surveymonkey.com/s/HoweWritingCenter>.
4. Student comments do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the authors or all students.
5. The fellowships are being designed as we complete this article. Currently, our plan is for faculty fellows to receive a course reduction in exchange for work within our center. The fellowships should encourage positive relationships between the Writing Center and faculty throughout the university as faculty fellows experience and learn about what we do in our center and how we accomplish our goals.



Bishop, Wendy. "Bringing Writers to the Center: Some Survey Results, Surmises, and Suggestions." *Writing Center Journal* 10.2 (1990): 31-45. Print.

Gaskins, Jake. "Comparing the Idea with the Reality of a Writing Center." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 30.10 (2006): 13-16. Print.

Hawthorne, Joan. "'We Don't Proofread Here': Re-Visioning the Writing Center to Better Meet Student Needs." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 23.8 (Apr. 1999): 1-7. Print.

Simpson, Jeanne. "Whose Idea of a Writing Center is This, Anyway?" *Writing Lab Newsletter* 35.1 (Sept. 2010): 1-4. Print.