

# Critical Inquiry and Writing Centers: A Methodology of Assessment

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## Abstract

*By examining one writing center's role in student success, this project offers two examples of the way writing centers impact student engagement. This analysis models a methodology that writing and learning center directors can utilize in order to foster effective communication with stakeholders. By conducting data-driven assessment, directors can begin to gather materials with which to negotiate with administrators and situate their centers at the core of student engagement. This work offers a methodology and sample data that produces critical inquiry and the requisite assessment that articulates writing center value.*

Postsecondary institutions increasingly call upon writing center directors to engage in the institutional language of quantitative and outcomes assessment. Despite an awareness of the limited resources most centers are allocated, institution administrators often require directors to provide assessment data to justify—usually in quantitative terms—the existence of the writing center for reasons of funding, space, and allocation of intellectual capital resources. These requests can be particularly challenging for writing centers because of a) directors' lack of resources necessary for program assessment; b) writing centers' dependence on qualitative data (Lerner, 2001; Carino & Enders, 2001; Griffin, Keller, Pandey, Pedersen, & Skinner, 2006; Thompson, 2006); c) a historical disconnect between the academic work of the writing center and the service work of institutional administration (Griswold, 2003); and d) the sheer complexity of isolating factors which potentially connect writing center work to the broad university mission (Lerner, 2001; Carino & Enders, 2001). But, in terms of concern for student success, writing center administration can utilize data that are regularly collected to fulfill our roles as “ticket tearers at the writing center turnstile” (Lerner, 2001, p 1). This article offers two models of outcomes based assessment conducted at a mid-size southeastern Research I institution; the goal of this project is to summon writing center practitioners to reexamine programmatic goals in light of institutional and administrative concerns, not the least of which includes demonstrating our contribution to the university with empirical data that is easily situated in a larger measurement of student outcomes.

## Writing Centers and Critical Inquiry

In 1998, Faigley wrote a cautionary article published in *The Writing Center Journal* urging writing center directors to insert themselves into the political and administrative power structures that shape policy decisions in their institutions. Universities are in the midst of great change in the face of a postindustrial economy, he warns, and “writing centers should and must take a leadership role—should for the good of the institution and must for their own continuing development”(p.16). Echoing Faigley’s call for writing center administrators to be agents of change, scholars like Simpson and Mullin argue for disciplinary professionalization. Mullin (2000) explains that professionalization is a “necessary step towards being recognized as part of an academic institution, one that speaks to particular sets of audiences and recognizes that we need to adopt the language—the genre—of our context” (p.2).

Yet, historically, the writing center community tends to narrowly define that context; we communicate among ourselves, and lament our place on the margins of the institution. Gardner and Ramsey (2005) directly address the ubiquitous and crippling nature of writing center narratives which describe a marginalized status. They argue that writing center identity that is bound to margins necessarily limits, indeed binds, our work. Touching on 20 years of writing center scholarship, Gardner and Ramsey recognize common identity markers used by scholars to locate writing centers’ as “anti-curriculum.” Necessarily, these markers situate writing center identity against opposing educational goals: writing centers are “liberatory” as opposed to “regulatory,” or sites of “empowerment” as opposed to those of “coercion.” But, problematically, Gardner and Ramsey argue, the forces opposing writing centers’ liberatory goals—the regulatory, coercive forces—emerge within the institutions in which we operate.

This implicit critique of the institution makes nearly impossible clear articulations of the multiple ways the writing centers contribute to the academy and, therefore, leaves us with “no effective language for sitting down with deans, vice-presidents, or boards of trustees and describing in a discourse they can understand our contributions to the mission of the university”(Gardner & Ramsey, 2005, p.26). Gardner and Ramsey’s important assertion reminds writing center directors to productively engage in institutional assessment by articulating the implicit connection of critical inquiry.

Indeed, it is a focus on the relationship between critical inquiry and institutional privileged language—recognition that writing center directors must utilize data to articulate a position within the academy and to its administration—that increasingly finds its way into writing center scholarship. As Griffin et al. (2006) remind us, The Writing Center Research Project was designed in order to gather “quantitative data about writing center operations” for directors [...] and the academic administrators to whom they report” (p.3). Thompson (2006) entreats writing center administrators to conduct routine assessment that not only speaks to externally mandated assessment but also fosters a professional responsibility, requiring us to perform within the same framework of our fellow academic units and to “show that our services are effective through data collection and analysis” (p.37-38).

It is important to note that such work finds its way into our journals consistently but sporadically. Scholars, like Thompson and Bell (2006; 2000), argue that writing center administrators fear the definitive nature of summative evaluation. Griswold (2003) attaches the dearth of quantitative attention to broader institutional assessment within historical institutional divisions. Academic affairs (in which Griswold locates writing centers) and student affairs traditionally operate as separate units with compatible goals and therefore differing evaluative tools; Griswold specifically argues, therefore, that writing centers have not had the same access to or interest in the retention data that student affairs units regularly utilize as part of their program assessment.

Perhaps, indeed, academic support units' discomfort with quantitative assessment, and the complexity of a comprehensive isolation of the factors that make writing centers work, contribute to the disconnect between writing center and institutional assessment. Kinkhead and Harris (1993) explain that "there is little agreement about specific political issues, administrative procedures and policies, pedagogical approaches or even practical matters" (p.xv). These differences are a necessary part of the diverse institutions in which we function, but the writing center community can produce scholarship that provides some point of departure from internally driven communication, infusing the rich history of qualitative research studies with quantitative projects that would be of interest to educational policy makers. In so doing, practitioners need not be concerned about rejecting our history as a non-traditional space within the institution; instead, we can combine important and significant data, both qualitative and quantitative, in order to provide another perspective on what writing centers do. Emphasizing Thom Hawkins' assertion that "if writing centers are to continue making substantial contributions [. . .] if they are to reach a productive and long-lasting maturity, they must do more than patch together fragments of successive theory," Hobson (1994, p.15) contends that the issue is more about how we "think about knowledge production" in writing center work.

To that end, this project offers two examples of writing center impact by examining the center's role in student success. What this analysis models is a methodology writing center directors can utilize in order to foster those conversations with administration and other stakeholders. By conducting quantitative studies using data most directors have on hand, directors can begin to gather materials with which to negotiate with administrators and situate their centers within mutual writing center and administrative goals for student engagement. What our study does not offer is analysis of the complexity of factors that define student retention. Instead, this work offers a methodology and sample data that does the double duty of the critical inquiry that Gardner and Ramsey (2005) argue is essential to writing center identity and the requisite assessment that articulates writing center value.

## **Student Engagement and Success**

According to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS),<sup>1</sup> the Higher Education Act of 1965 mandates that all "institutions

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<sup>1</sup> IPEDS is found on The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) website (<http://nces.ed.gov/>) which "is the primary federal entity for collecting and analyzing data related to education"

that participate in federal student aid programs” collect and report data on a many factors related to students’ engagement with the institution (“Integrated”). “Student Persistence and Success” data is reported in order to “track postsecondary student progress and success” (“Integrated”). Thus, each institution’s Office of Institutional Research (OIR) collects data, annually, pertaining to “First-Year Retention Rates” and “Graduation Rates” (“Integrated”). In order to report their data, OIR defines a fall cohort each year; according to IPEDS, a fall cohort is defined as “all students who enter an institution as full-time, first-time degree or certificate-seeking undergraduate students during the fall term of a given year” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, “Glossary”). Subsequently, each fall, OIR in participating institutions must make publically available the percentage of students from any given cohort who continues on to their second and subsequent years until graduation. Further, as inter-cohort graduation rates vary (i.e. not all students finish concurrently), OIR tracks rates for a given cohort in four, five, and six-year increments (see fig. 1).

**Graduated/Still Enrolled - University Summary**

Cohort	Students	Graduated in			Continued to						
		4 Years	5 Years	6 Years	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	
1991	383	6% (22)	22% (85)	34% (129)	68% (261)	56% (215)	45% (189)	39% (150)	23% (87)	10% (40)	
1992	402	8% (31)	26% (99)	36% (139)	70% (282)	67% (231)	51% (206)	38% (153)	20% (82)	11% (46)	
1993	440	10% (45)	26% (115)	35% (156)	70% (307)	55% (244)	51% (223)	38% (168)	18% (79)	9% (40)	
1994	379	10% (38)	30% (112)	39% (149)	77% (290)	60% (229)	56% (219)	43% (163)	20% (74)	9% (36)	
1995	354	11% (38)	31% (111)	42% (147)	73% (259)	64% (227)	56% (200)	42% (148)	18% (63)	8% (27)	
1996	409	10% (39)	26% (108)	36% (149)	70% (286)	54% (222)	50% (206)	37% (150)	19% (77)	9% (36)	
1997	396	9% (36)	32% (125)	44% (173)	73% (288)	61% (240)	53% (210)	43% (171)	20% (79)	6% (25)	
1998	486	14% (67)	36% (173)	45% (217)	75% (366)	62% (299)	55% (269)	41% (201)	20% (96)	11% (55)	
1999	537	13% (72)	36% (191)	44% (235)	72% (388)	62% (334)	56% (309)	40% (216)	16% (85)	8% (41)	
2000	383	15% (60)	37% (213)	44% (256)	70% (411)	59% (345)	55% (319)	36% (219)	15% (80)	7% (39)	
2001	592	14% (83)	33% (196)	44% (261)	74% (436)	61% (362)	57% (335)	40% (236)	19% (115)	8% (45)	
2002	510	17% (102)	39% (236)	48% (290)	76% (462)	65% (394)	60% (364)	40% (246)	15% (94)	7% (40)	
2003	774	17% (132)	39% (299)	48% (368)	76% (590)	65% (504)	60% (465)	41% (317)	17% (131)	9% (72)	
2004	653	13% (84)	34% (221)		75% (492)	62% (408)	56% (365)	40% (262)	16% (116)		
2005	626	14% (87)			77% (480)	62% (386)	56% (352)	41% (259)			
2006	801				77% (616)	60% (530)	61% (436)				
2007	759				77% (588)	66% (502)					
2008	765				76% (576)						

Fig. 1. “Retention.” UAHuntsville Office of Institutional Research. U. Alabama Huntsville, 1 July 2010. Web. 15 November 2010.

Student retention figures have, thus, increasingly become part of institutional culture in higher education. During the 1990’s, dropout rates rose to an all-time high and graduation rates dropped significantly enough to draw national attention. In 1996, the first year the Writing Center in this study began collecting retention and persistence data, the Chronicle of Higher Education reported that 26.4% of college freshmen who enrolled in four-year colleges in fall 1996 did not return to school for the fall 1997 academic year (Reisburg, 1999). Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates (2005) *Student Success in College* offers the comprehensive results of national studies which consistently indicate that “the college graduation rate hovers around 50%” and that “nearly one out of five four-year institutions graduates fewer than one-third of its [...] students within six years.” Based on such startling statistics, in the fall of 1999 Rep. Chaka Fattah, a congressman from Pennsylvania, introduced a plan to address student retention and successfully earmarked \$35 million to be spent on retention

programs (Dervarics & Roach, 2000), such as academic support services and freshman preparatory programs.

In order to block the growing exodus of students, universities began implementing social and academic programs to increase students' overall level of preparedness and satisfaction with the institution. Administrators like Betsy Barefoot, from the University of South Carolina's National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience, recognized that "there's more of a consumer mentality among students now, and less of a sense of institutional loyalty" (Reisberg, 1999, p.A54). In order to increase students' level of commitment, schools have increased resources, underscoring the assertion that "a degree of social and academic integration is necessary if students are to settle satisfactorily into the life of an institution and feel a sense of belonging" (McGivney, 1996, p.136).

Simpson's 1991 work "The Role of Writing Centers in Student Retention Programs" encourages the writing center community to investigate the larger issue of retention, carving a space for research into the ways in which writing centers provide important academic services. Thompson (2006) asserted that writing centers "determine how [their] activities contribute to the accomplishment of the mission of [the university]" and further suggested that her specific concern, like her institution's administration, focused on "increasing retention" (p.41). But her important delineation of several assessment methodologies did not include a direct measure of global student retention, which may be impossible due to the myriad of academic resources that offer opportunities for student engagement. However, since writing centers often compete for funds with other student services, the ability to demonstrate effectiveness becomes paramount to their survival within the institution.

### **Assessment Methodologies for Writing Center Administrators**

Thus, we present two specific models for gathering and analyzing writing center data that directors have on hand to offer university administrators quantitative information regarding the way the writing center connects to university goals for student engagement. For the remainder of this paper, we present the methodologies and sample results from our own writing center assessment of a) the retention of a population of writing center participants compared to the retention statistics of the school's overall population; b) the graduation rates of a population of writing center participants compared to the graduation rates of the overall student population. We do not assert here that either of these studies demonstrates a direct correlation between retention, graduation and writing center participation; instead, these studies serve to illustrate methodologies through which writing center work can become part of meaningful dialogue concerning student success.

#### **Study 1: Retention Data and Writing Center Participation**

In Lerner's 2001 revision ("Choosing Beans") to his own quantitative study ("Counting Beans") he stresses the importance of "link[ing] writing center outcomes to [...] college/university-wide goals"(p.1). Indeed, Lerner suggests turning to campus support in order to "share resources" and to "investigate the presence of the writing center as a factor in retention" (p 4). In our own research, the relationship between writing center

administrators and the OIR has been invaluable. It has been specifically useful to pay attention to our own OIR annual reports of cohort retention and graduation rates. Knowledge of these data offer an important addition to writing center administrators' understanding of the student population they serve, particularly for those directors who wish to broaden institutional connections to university administrators concerned with retention. As well, specifically useful for writing center data-gathering is the fact that the OIR has the capability of isolating particular segments of a given population. Thus, in regards to writing centers and retention, the most gross retention rate calculation possible would be to identify, from appointment records, all students who visited the WC for one fall period, request that the OIR isolate those writing center students as a separate and unique cohort from the institution's cohort with its own retention rate, and then compare the retention rates of the two groups. Although, obviously, not a measure of the multiple and complex factors implicated in student perseverance, comparative statistics of retention rates for writing center participants and non-participants offer a starting point for writing center assessment.

In this study, we conducted a data-driven retention project involving our population of "basic writers." For much of our writing center's history, one of our most consistent populations of students have been those conditionally-enrolled students who register in the English department's basic writing course. At our institution, students were placed in basic writing based on ACT or SAT scores. For better or worse, the mandatory attendance policy of the basic writing instructors has historically meant that these students were our most consistent writing center participants. Until very recently, as part of course instruction, students enrolled in the basic writing course have been expected to attend weekly 30-minute appointments with writing center consultants. As such, calculating the retention rates for this population helped to a) more comprehensively assess this particular center and the department's decision to require writing center attendance of the basic writing student population, and b) eliminate the self-motivation factor from our assessment; in other words, in this specific case, the study would not have to factor in the concern that the students who visit the writing center and were retained were self-motivated and would have been retained regardless.

This project is divided into three stages. First, the study identified and categorized the level of participation of the experimental group of students enrolled in basic writing courses. Next, within this particular group, retention rates of students in each of four attendance categories were compared to determine whether or not regular writing center participation impacted the retention rates of these historically at-risk students. Although the basic writing course description "required" writing center attendance, students themselves were responsible for making and keeping their appointments. Therefore, this study additionally factors student attendance as a variable that potentially impacted their success and persistence at this institution. By using attendance as a variable, the study evaluates fall-to-fall retention rates based on an additional factor: student commitment to the services of the writing center. Finally, using data generated by the OIR, results of the writing center study were compared with institutionally generated university retention figures, from which OIR removed data pertaining to the experimental group.

In order to evaluate the commitment of students enrolled in basic writing, their attendance records in the writing center were examined and then categorized into four distinct levels of participation (see Table 1). Since the number of weeks the center remained opened each semester varied based on the academic calendar, researchers calculated student attendance based on the number of appointments each student made and attended divided by the number of weeks available during the semester, arriving at an attendance percentage for each student in the experimental group. For example, students categorized as full participants made and kept 80% or more of the possible weekly visits during the semester in which they were enrolled in basic writing. Additionally, these attendance categories offer insight into the level of student engagement with the Writing Center environment and provided a basis for comparison within the identified experimental group.

Table 1

## Participation Categories

<b>Participation Categories</b>	<b>Attendance Rates (based on weekly visits available)</b>
Full Participants	80% to 100%
Frequent Participants	60% to 80%
Partial Participants	40%-60%
Marginal Participants	Below 40%
Non Participants	No visits

The hypothesis was that students classified as full and frequent participants would have a higher fall-to-fall retention rate than those students identified as partial or marginal participants. In order to study retention rates within the experimental group, retention rates within each of the identified categories for each year of the study were compared by calculating the percentage of students returning to the institution one year after enrolling in basic writing.<sup>2</sup> For example, the study compared the fall-to-fall retention rate for students categorized as full participants with students in each of the other attendance categories. The comparison isolated writing center attendance as a component of student retention for students enrolled in the basic writing course. Table 2 displays participant retention rates for 2006 and 2007.

Table 2

## Participant Retention Data by Category

<b>Student Categories</b>	<b>2006-2007 Retention</b>	<b>2007-2008 Retention</b>
Full Participants	22 of 26	34 of 43
Frequent Participants	8 of 10	1 of 1
Partial Participants	1 of 5	3 of 6
Marginal Participants	1 of 3	3 of 3

<sup>2</sup> We have gathered retention data for the years 1996-2000 and 2005-2008.

Next, retention data for basic writing students in each of the participation categories were compared with the overall retention figures generated by the OIR for first time, full time, degree seeking students, excluding those in our experimental group (see Table 3). Comparing retention percentages across each category of participation to the student population studied by the OIR identified the convergence of retention statistics between the basic writing cohort and the institutional cohort. In other words, researchers now knew the retention rates of the basic writing students based on attendance levels as well as the overall cohort retention rates, allowing for comparison across categories and through multiple years to identify and compare retention and persistence trends, which also provided a baseline for future strategic planning. For example, based on research from two years of the project, students who completed the basic writing course in Fall 2006 and were categorized as full participants in writing center instruction based on attendance information were retained as students in Fall 2007 at a rate higher than the overall first-year cohort during the same time. Similarly, the same statistics demonstrated continued success for students the following year.

Table 3

	Student Categories				
	Institutional	Full Participants	Frequent Participants	Partial Participants	Marginal Participants
<b>2006-2007 Retention</b>	77%	85%	80%	20%	33%
<b>2007-2008 Retention</b>	77%	79%	100%	50%	100%

In the writing center studied here, retention data successfully identified ways in which we could communicate effectively within the larger academic community. As the above chart demonstrates, our “Full Participants” far exceeded institutional expectations for retention. Productively, this research allowed our administrators to better assess the relationship between writing center attendance and university perseverance. Significantly, students who regularly participated in writing center instruction persisted at a much higher rate than those who did not within the same population of students, providing justification for encouraging writing center attendance as one means of institutional engagement. Further, analyzing the preceding charts allowed for investigation into retention trends of the basic writing students compared to the overall cohort. First, by analyzing yearly statistics, the study provided a means through which administrators could understand more fully which students persisted. Also, comparing participation rates by attendance category helped to identify how many students utilized the writing center during each semester. By comparing the student usage for each of the ten years in which data was kept, administrators better understood how usage and retention trends shifted over time, which enabled those administrators, along with other stakeholders, to consider particular pedagogical strategies and innovations may have impacted those changes. Finally, identifying overall cohort retention figures for the entire period helped broaden the scope of our inquiry to try to understand the long-range implications of writing center attendance for groups of students.

## Study 2: Graduation Rate Data and Writing Center Participation

The second productive measure of writing centers contribution to student engagement and success can be mined by analyzing graduation statistics. Again, for this study, researchers simply requested information from the OIR; specifically, researchers requested graduation information (for example, “did or did not” graduate for the group of basic writers who visited our writing center in fall of their 2005 freshmen year. The study then compared the graduation rates of the experimental students to the institutional graduation rates of their broader cohort by using methodologies similar to the retention study discussed previously.

A good example of this study is demonstrated by looking at the 2005 cohort of basic writing participants. For this particular cohort the study utilized published graduation rates of four and five years from OIR. Again, the study relied on OIR for the necessary data needed. Researchers sent them a list of the 2005 basic writing/writing center participants and asked that they report the graduation data on those particular students. The study then compared that data to published university graduation rates (see Table 4).

Table 4

<b>Graduated In</b>	<b>Institutional Cohort Totals</b>	<b>Total Basic Writers and Center Participants</b>	<b>Full/Frequent Writing Center Participation</b>
<b>4 years</b>	14%	5%	6%
<b>5 years</b>	36%	20%	25%

That only 20% of basic writing participants persisted to graduation compared to 36% of their peers was certainly a disappointing result. Indeed, our findings demonstrated that, overall basic writing participants persisted at a lower rate than their institutional peers. But, as directors of the writing center, a service whose mission (in part) is to support underprepared writers, we found it immensely instructive to learn about writing center participants’ academic progress post-writing center experience. Indeed, it can be argued that vital graduation data helps directors utilize results to shape a dynamic writing center’s pedagogy.

When analyzing the data even further, by looking, as had been done earlier in our retention study, at the Writing Center cohort’s rates of participation, more heartening information was found. Of the Fall 2005 basic writing students labeled as “full” or “frequent” participants, a total of 9 of 44 students, 6% had earned degrees from the institution within four years, compared to the 5% of graduation rate of basic writing participants. Furthermore, 25% of those participants had earned degrees within five years compared to the 20% rate of total basic writing participants. Although only marginally higher than their fellow basic writers, what was most interesting was that all of the nine total participants who graduated were either full or frequent participants. This means these participants, who engaged most often with the writing center, did fare better than the rest of their basic writing cohort who did not participate regularly in writing center support.

These data reported here are limited in scope. It is obviously impossible, using simple participation rates and persistence, to argue a definitive correlation. But, these findings comport with a US Congressional report, which found that “at-risk students who receive targeted academic support services persist to degree completion at higher rates than at-risk students who do not receive such services” (Devarics & Roach, 2000, p. 24). Likewise, a study on institutional environment determined that those schools with a strong emphasis in active student involvement, including writing activities and peer interaction, have a higher rate of student satisfaction (Ethington, 2000). Underprepared students, such as those in this study, seem most likely to benefit from these institutional support systems. McGivney (1996) explains that “the progress and well-being of [ . . . ] ‘non-traditional’ groups of students largely depend on the amount of support they receive in an institution” (p.136). She asserted an important issue to keep in mind is that a commitment to student retention includes “personal and academic support for learners, especially those who differ from the majority of the student body by virtue of age, race, qualification, disability or learning mode” (p.136).

The significant link between regular and ongoing involvement of students over time proves to be an important factor in student persistence. Students must be encouraged to be consistent, active participants in support services such as writing center work in order to benefit from them. Through regular engagement in writing center instruction, students not only see academic improvement and satisfaction, they begin to develop a social bond with the institution. Writing center practitioners have an experiential understanding of the importance of developing and sustaining such academic and social connections, but finding ways to identify and evaluate that contribution remains an important task, both within the writing center community and the larger institution. This project serves as a stepping off point for others who may wish to investigate ways to quantitatively document writing and learning center work. Failing to develop and implement programmatic assessment inevitably insures that outside sources will impose their own, leaving us little voice in the matter.

### **A Final Note**

This study began with a simple but perhaps impossible question from well-meaning practitioners: Does the writing center help students remain at the university? That question proved to be a crucial first step in a series of inquiries that, rather than providing a definitive answer, instead and perhaps more importantly, reshaped the way this particular center collected and analyzed data. Complex questions began driving the need for further analysis. For example, does the data collected in the writing center provide the information necessary to support our research agenda? What ways can data be viewed that will provide insight into the center’s success within the institution? Finally, and perhaps most importantly, how do reporting strategies communicate results that demonstrate a comprehensive view of the center’s role within the institution from a variety of perspectives? One of the most important contributions this project makes to the discipline is that it provides a potential methodology and context for self-evaluation, which can significantly shift the way the writing center community thinks about what they do and how work is documented.

By learning to think more quantitatively, we have experienced inevitable revision to our perspective as directors. By strengthening the empirical evaluation of the Writing Center's administrative systems, our staff has learned to think within a quantitative system and thus recognize important trends that otherwise might have been overlooked.

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