

# Writing Center Philosophy and the End of Basic Writing: Motivation at the Site of Remediation and Discovery

Heather M. Robinson

*ABSTRACT:* At York College, many of the students fit the linguistic and educational profile of basic writers, and yet there is no remediation built into the curriculum. It falls to the writing center, then, to provide our students with the academic support that they need in order to move beyond being classified as developmental writers. In this article, I examine how our students are using the York College Writing Center, with a view to determining how a lower level of academic preparedness influences the kind of services that students seek and the kind of academic trajectory they follow. I suggest that the progress that we see these students making over the course of the semester can be best understood as a move from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation, rather than from lower- to higher-order concerns that is the professed goal of writing center philosophy. This article has implications for how writing centers can best serve less prepared students, especially in light of the national movement to end remediation, as well as for the ways in which we measure student success.

*KEYWORDS:* basic writing; writing centers; motivation; remediation; standards; measuring student success

Discussions of writing center philosophy and practice often focus on how writing centers are best positioned in a college community, on finding a balance between serving students and faculty effectively while maintaining an independent pedagogical mission, and on tutoring pedagogy and tutor roles. Additionally, the field includes discussions of how tutors and writing centers may best serve non-traditional student populations on campus: for example, effective strategies for working with graduate students (Shamoon and Burns); the needs of students in disciplinary courses (Kiedaisch and Dinitz); and tutoring for students who speak English as a second language (Bruce and Rafter). But there are still few discussions of how basic writers use writing centers, and how writing centers may best serve basic writers, despite

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the continuing visibility of this group since the days of Open Admissions (Shaughnessy, *Errors*; Lu; Soliday). Therefore, my central questions are the following: How do basic writers, and by extension, ESL and international students, use writing centers? What can a writing center do to initiate these students into, and prepare them for, the culture of college level writing? The core tension I identify resides in the potential conflict between having writing centers be the one place on campus where we do remediation head-on, and current writing center philosophy, which encourages us to focus primarily on “higher-order” concerns (North; Lunsford).

The challenge for any writing center—as for any classroom teacher—is to help students move beyond surface concerns, and beyond satisfying the instructor’s explicitly stated demands, to an understanding of the content and the student’s own relationship to it. Writing centers are also charged with helping students to see writing as a process, and to see themselves as members of discourse communities (North; Pemberton). There is a general resistance, on the other hand, to working with students at the sentence-level: such issues are classified as “lower-order concerns,” and they are understood to contravene what has become the writing center manifesto, which says that we work with the writer, not the writing, and that non-directive tutoring is essential for a successful tutoring session (North; Brooks; but see Carino, “Power,” and Shamoon and Burns for critiques of this position). I propose that the bifurcation that prevails in writing instruction between sentence-level work and knowledge-making, or lower-order and higher-order concerns, limits the ways in which we engage with basic writers, because it separates out language and content. Rather, our goal in writing centers instead could be to move students towards being more intrinsically motivated (Deci and Ryan; Ryan and Deci); to have them write and make knowledge through their writing however they can, in order to achieve this intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation, as defined by Ryan and Deci, concerns the reasons why an individual chooses to engage in a particular behavior. The more associated with the individual’s sense of self the behavior is, or the higher the level of inherent pleasure an individual takes in the behavior, the higher the level of intrinsic motivation. Focusing on increasing intrinsic motivation in the writing center, then, helps students across the board, whether they are labeled remedial or not, and does not inherently require us to focus on any one type of writing activity over any other. I suggest that looking at students’ development along an extrinsic-to-intrinsic motivation continuum is a better way to measure achievement in the work of basic writers because it allows us to keep working on language issues throughout a semester, rather than

trying to steer students away from them in our quest to drive them towards higher-order writing activities.

The students at York College, one of the senior colleges of the City University of New York, and where I serve as faculty director of the writing center, have many of the characteristics of basic writers, despite the fact that there are no remedial or developmental classes in the curriculum since the end of remediation at CUNY in 1999. At York, then, it falls to agencies outside the curriculum to provide support for these students. The findings that I present suggest that our writing center does real work as a site of remediation. This in itself is unsurprising, given that many writing centers were founded specifically to provide support for the students who were admitted to college under Open Admissions programs in the 1960s (Carino, “Open Admissions”; Grimm; Soliday). However, if remediation *only* occurs in the writing center, the center’s usefulness is limited to those students who seek out assistance there. The good news, as my data will show, is that our writing center’s biggest attraction—help with grammar, spelling, and punctuation—seems to be getting the students not only to come to the writing center in the first place, but it also entices them back, at which point they begin to move from a simple focus on these elements into a more holistic approach to the writing process, thus moving them from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation. While these students are as much at risk as any other student of becoming dependent on their tutors, my data suggest that, rather than fostering dependency, these students’ work at the writing center helps them move towards independence as writers within the scope of the semester.<sup>1</sup> We see that while there is definitely a tension in the status of the writing center as a site of both discovery and remediation, we can sometimes use the latter to get to the former. The writing center thus provides us with important insights into the effects of the end of remediation on basic writers.

## **BASIC WRITERS AT THE WRITING CENTER**

Since the term “basic writer” was introduced into the composition literature in the 1970s, there has been a real difficulty in defining which students fit into the category. Paul Kei Matsuda cites Lynn Quitman Troyka’s, and Linda Adler-Kassner and Gregory Glau’s work on articulating the issues behind these difficulties, showing that the very diversity of the population to whom the label has been applied has made settling on a definition problematic (67). Authors such as Mina Shaughnessy (*Errors*) and David Bartholomae treat basic writing as being at heart a language issue: basic

writers write in a language that is *an* English, but is not the English of the academy. Remediation for basic writing thus often focuses on the sentence level, shaping the sentences that the students use to express their ideas into something that looks more like the language that the students' instructors expect. Of course, basic writing is not only a language issue: as Min-Zhan Lu and others after her have shown, being a basic writer is also about identity, and feeling marginal in the academic culture. Basic writers have to struggle with the consequences of working to adopt a new language, which, as Lu suggests, forces them into a position where they run the risk of becoming disconnected from their home cultures.

One key point of agreement seems to be that as well as referring to students who are native speakers of non-standard varieties of English, the term should include students with different language backgrounds, whom I will refer to as ESL and international students. Patricia Friedrich has discussed extensively the relationships and disconnects between monolingual basic writers and two groups that she calls resident ESL and international ESL writers, providing an overview of the work of several other authors in her article "Assessing the Needs of Linguistically-Diverse First-Year Students." In particular, she shows that while both of these groups of writers are comfortable using spoken English in everyday contexts, they have difficulties with knowing when to shift from an oral to a written register, and are unfamiliar with the discourse about grammar and language which students in non-remedial courses might know. Additionally, these students often have weaker study skills, or are less familiar with heuristics and strategies that contribute to successful writing, and may have struggled to progress through the educational system (Friedrich 119). What emerges, then, as the unifying characteristic of students who might fit the "basic writer" description is that all of these students have had a non-traditional preparation for college, either through a high school education in the U.S. that was not sufficient for college-level work, through a pre-college education in a different language and educational system, or through a hiatus between the time that the students finished their secondary education and when they started college. A functional definition of basic writer, especially for this article, is one that says that at the core of being a basic writer lies a difference in the student's cultural, linguistic and/or educational background (Matsuda 68) which makes it difficult for that student to enter into the mainstream academic discourse.

From a writing center perspective, both the language and identity facets of being classified as a basic writer are important. Writing centers have long been spaces of negotiating identities, of tutors helping students to shape

the voice they want to adopt in a paper, and reconciling that voice with their “real” or “authentic” voice (Shafer; Boquet). But I suggest this is not only an issue for basic writers: even the strongest writers coming to the writing center have to do some negotiating of the boundaries between their academic voice and their “authentic” voice. Furthermore, ESL and international student writers are well known to struggle with reconciling the stylistic demands of American academic prose with cultural values belonging to their home countries (Ramanathan and Atkinson). These struggles belong, to some extent, to all student populations: being a student means participating in such negotiations. Writing centers provide a venue to see these negotiations in action, more so than the classroom because of the one-on-one interactions that they afford. In their writing center sessions, students can express their reservations about their assignments, and express doubts and frustrations as well as enthusiasm about what they are asked to do, to someone who, while still employed by the college and part of the formal educational loop, can give sympathy and one-on-one attention. What students express in this environment, where they can be comparatively candid about their own skill levels and their attitudes to the work that they have been assigned, can tell us a lot about where they see themselves on the academic totem pole.

However, the possibility of the writing center is often at odds with the reality. Students are often directed to the writing center by their instructor to attend to their writing problems. As Nancy Grimm shows, a tendency to rely on the writing center for help with language issues is complicated in terms of writing center philosophy: writing centers over the past forty years have struggled to get beyond being identified on campus—by students and faculty—as places where students should go to be cured of their linguistic deficiencies. From this perspective, being sent to the writing center can seem like punishment for not yet knowing how to “do college.” Such an environment is not often one where students who are already academically vulnerable will move from remediation to knowledge-making easily. At its best, a writing center “provides an academic setting that equalizes opportunity and eliminates the stigma of labeling students” (Mohr 1). However, often the reality is that the only reason that students come to writing centers is because of a label that they have been assigned by a teacher. What the York College Writing Center shows us is how students use the writing center to respond to this labeling, even when the institution itself does not recognize its students as needing remedial support. It is to an examination of this dichotomy that we turn now.

## **BASIC WRITING AND THE YORK COLLEGE WRITING CENTER**

The York College Writing Center was established first as a Writing Lab intended specifically to serve those students in English department and composition courses. Open Admissions at the senior colleges of the City University ended in 1999, at which time it was decided that all students who needed remediation were to attend a community college until they reached the “freshman” level of skills (see Soliday for a detailed discussion of the end of remediation at the City University of New York). With the establishment of the University’s Writing Across the Curriculum program in 1999, which coincided—though not at all by coincidence—with the end of remediation, York’s Writing Lab was expanded into a full-service writing center, intended to serve students in writing-intensive courses across the disciplines as well as those in composition courses. However, it is almost just as well known that, while remediation formally ended at that time, students who would be considered basic writers in the old system did not disappear, even when the courses which had previously been offered to compensate for their lack of preparation did. Now, ten years after the end of remediation, only about half of the students who use the writing center come for help with work in their composition classes. In Spring 2009, about 20% of the students were in freshman composition and 26% in our junior-level research writing course; the rest were in courses across the disciplines. Indeed, the number of students who come to the writing center from classes in the disciplines has been steadily rising: data showing all academic sessions (including summer and winter sessions) indicate a modest increase in the number of WAC-focused tutoring sessions offered. In general, too, we see a gradual increase from year to year in the number of students seeking help at the writing center, which we might attribute to a growing recognition, among students, of the need for extra-curricular writing support. We can thus see that the writing center serves the population that it was expanded to serve: the students in writing-intensive classes who are not necessarily receiving any formalized writing instruction in those classrooms, remedial or otherwise.

The York College Writing Center, like writing centers across the country post-remediation, is therefore a busy place. We provide tutoring in almost two thousand sessions a semester, and between four- and five-hundred individual students visit the center over the course of a semester. Students can attend one scheduled fifty-minute session per week, as well one twenty-five-to thirty-minute drop-in session. The center is staffed by fifteen to eighteen tutors in any given year; these are mostly students or former students of the

college. The staff comes from a variety of linguistic and ethnic backgrounds: they are the children of immigrants from the English- and Spanish-speaking Caribbean, as well as native New Yorkers who have spoken English all their lives. In other words, the staff looks and sounds like York's students, whom I will describe more fully in the next paragraph. What differentiates the tutors is that they have all proven themselves to be successful students according to the metrics of language and academic culture. Elizabeth Boquet describes writing center tutors as often being exemplars of academic culture, students who have "internalized the ideology of the institution" (124). As problematic as this may be—and these problems have been discussed at length by Lu, Boquet, and Soliday—many of the students who come to the writing center are interested in becoming like their tutors, in that they want to internalize the discourse of this academic culture, to no longer be "other."

Many of York College's students are classic examples of students who would be classified as basic writers: they are linguistically diverse, and they are less academically well prepared than other college students. A few statistics about the students enrolled in Fall 2008 give an idea of their linguistic diversity. From the *York College Fact Book*, we see that just under 54% of students enrolled in Fall 2008 identify as native speakers of English, with over thirty-one other languages spoken at the college. Furthermore, almost 24.7% of students identify one of the former British colonies as their country of birth, and are thus likely to be native speakers of a non-American variety of English. So, almost half of the students who identify themselves as native speakers of English are not necessarily speaking the language of the American academic system. Add to these statistics the facts that 86.2% of our students are New York City residents (for purposes of tuition) and 71.6% of our students live in either Brooklyn or Queens, and we are looking at a population that largely speaks as their first language either a language other than English, or an English that would not be considered standard "school" English because it is an English dialect from one of the former British colonies of the Caribbean, Africa, or South Asia, or, indeed, from New York City's outer boroughs, whose dialects often carry a stigma. York's students also enter college with lower scores on standardized tests than their peers, even those at other CUNY senior colleges: York College's Admissions website gives the *mean* SAT score for entering freshmen as 904 out of 1600 in 2008, 947 in 2009. A brief web search shows, in comparison, a *minimum* SAT score range of 940 to 1200 is required at CUNY's other senior colleges. We know from the CCC's "Students' Right to Their Own Language" and subsequent texts that the language and economics of standardized testing favors students from white, middle-class

backgrounds; however, the figures strongly imply that our students fit into the category of basic writers based on their preparedness. These lower levels of academic preparedness have real implications for writing centers and the support that can be offered to these students there.

### **INTRINSIC MOTIVATION, LOCUS OF CONTROL, AND BASIC WRITERS IN THE WRITING CENTER**

One of the questions with which this article began concerns how writing centers might best help basic writers enter into the discourse community of college. I suggested in the introductory section that, rather than separating sentence-level concerns and knowledge-making, tutors and teachers of basic writers might serve their students better in reaching this goal by helping them navigate a trajectory from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation. These ideas can help us understand the kinds of assistance that York's students seek from the tutors at the writing center. I will use Rotter's locus of control (LOC) metric and the concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Deci and Ryan; Ryan and Deci) in this analysis. Locus of control, as Ed Jones expresses it in "Predicting Performance in First Semester College Basic Writers," is "where the individual attributes control for outcomes of her or his efforts" (211). Intrinsic motivation is part of Ryan and Deci's *self-determination theory*, which looks at the reasons why an individual chooses to undertake various tasks; that is, whether an individual undertakes a task for the inherent satisfaction it accords (intrinsic motivation), or in order to attain an external reward (extrinsic motivation). Ryan and Deci show that the source of motivation for a behavior can lie on a scale between fully intrinsic and fully extrinsic motivation, depending on how integrated with the individual's sense of self completing the task is, how much satisfaction the individual will derive from completing the task, or how much they value it personally (72). The concepts of locus of control and extrinsic/intrinsic motivation are relevant to college work, because college assignments contain the possibility of both an external and an internal locus of control for students. Moreover, an assignment such as a writing task involves the student satisfying explicit goals set up by the instructor, such as answering an assignment question; presenting the assignment appropriately through the use of standard academic language and discipline-specific terminology and formatting; and organizing essays according to instructions provided by the professor, all of which would be located on the extrinsic-intrinsic motivation spectrum. But it also involves—at least in the American educa-

tional system—taking a position with respect to the assignment question, and negotiating that position in response to texts written by other authors: aspects of writing that connect more with students' completing tasks for their own satisfaction, and thus relate more to intrinsic motivation.

The metrics of locus of control and intrinsic motivation are also helpful for our understanding of how students with different levels of academic preparedness respond to what they are asked to do at college. Jones shows that students with weaker skills tend to experience a more external locus of control and low intrinsic motivation, whereas students whose skills are stronger experience a more internal locus of control (226-28). I suggest that less well-prepared students' motivation for completing tasks comes from a desire to satisfy the instructor's requirements—extrinsic motivation—versus a desire to express themselves and their own ideas through writing—intrinsic motivation. Although the strongest students may come to their college writing center explicitly for help getting an A in their courses, such students have internalized the reasons behind *wanting* the A, and thus, Ryan and Deci explain, their motivations would be considered to be closer to the intrinsic end of the spectrum. That is, they want the A for themselves, rather than to satisfy their instructors.

Writing centers will be more effective, then, if we can help students integrate their desire to undertake a task with their own self-conceptions. Encouraging this shift is particularly important in helping students move from a focus on surface concerns to one on invention and textual engagement, which is what instructors generally reward in writing classes. Writing centers, therefore, are useful spaces for students in general and basic writers in particular, if they can provide a venue where students can ask for help with those areas of the writing process that might be more identified with the self—finding something to write about, engaging with and developing upon someone else's ideas, and, importantly, seeing grammar and language as something more integrated with a student's sense of identity as a writer, an academic, rather than as an arbitrary system imposed from above. Above all, writing centers are places where students can continually negotiate their identity with respect to who they are, as writers, in a particular course. This latter is a primary point of engagement, because it allows us to help students see the connection between language and knowledge-making, and with representing themselves as writers of important ideas.

Returning to the relationship between external and internal locus of control and basic writing, the areas that students focus on in their tutoring sessions show us where they are locating control for success in their current

tasks, and thus, where they might fit on the college preparedness spectrum. Over the course of several tutoring sessions, students expand their focus from seeking assistance only with those elements of the writing process that I connect with extrinsic motivation and an external LOC, to those that I connect with intrinsic motivation and an internal LOC. This shift of focus is significant because it suggests that, through a series of tutoring sessions, students whom we might consider to be basic writers show movement towards seeking assistance with those types of writing skills that we would associate with student writers who have stronger skills, and who thus do not fit the basic writer profile so readily.

### **THE WRITING CENTER AT YORK COLLEGE: THE STUDY**

The data that I present in this study are taken from online student satisfaction surveys completed during the Spring semester of 2009. The surveys were entirely voluntary and anonymous, and I relied on the tutors to encourage their students to participate. We received forty-nine usable responses out of about one thousand seven hundred tutoring sessions over the semester. Although the number of responses is small, they do, however, appear to be consistent; we can take them to thus be suggestive, if not conclusive.

The small number of responses, I believe, stems from the online nature of the survey, and the fact that it was not integrated into the tutoring sessions in any formal way. That is, while tutors were encouraged and reminded to direct their students to complete the survey on the computers that the York College Writing Center houses, the tutors did not build completing the survey into their tutoring sessions. In order to have a larger number of respondents for a follow-up study in Fall 2009, the survey was also distributed on paper to every student who attended a tutoring session in the second-to-last week and last week of classes, as well as being available to students in its online form throughout the semester. This method yielded 190 responses.

My hypothesis was that our students whom, as I have suggested above, we identify as basic writers based on metrics of academic preparedness and linguistic background, would first come to the writing center for help with such areas as organization, interpreting assignments, and, of course, sentence-level work: all things that have to do with fulfilling the requirements of an assignment, or with satisfying what an instructor wants an assignment to look like. We know, anecdotally at least, that many students at community colleges and four-year institutions alike attend the writing center because they have been sent there by their instructors, either via a formal referral,

because of comments on a draft of a paper, or in order to have a grade raised (see Mohr for a discussion). These students are therefore coming to their writing centers not because they want help in fulfilling a writing task for their own personal satisfaction, but because they have been told to come. I hypothesized further that students whom we would *not* identify as basic writers, on the other hand, would predominantly ask for help with things like generating ideas and using texts to support these ideas (which skill includes strong reading comprehension): all tasks that have to do with the students representing their own ideas as well as possible. These students would be visiting their writing centers because they believed that their tutoring sessions could help them achieve their own purposes in expressing their ideas, or doing creative and original work.

On the student survey, respondents were asked what they had worked on at York’s Writing Center, and were given six possible answers to choose from (shown in the first column of Table 1). They could select more than one area. I did not ask them to limit their responses to what they had worked on in one particular session, so I assumed, for coding purposes, that the responses from students who had attended more than one session encompassed all of those sessions. In my analysis of the responses, I divided these six aspects of the writing process into categories, based on whether I considered success in these areas to satisfy some external assessment, or internal satisfaction—in other words, where would the student locate the locus of control for each of the tasks, and the motivation for doing them? The question I asked was: are students asking to work on these areas in order to satisfy their instructors’ demands, or to achieve their own aims in writing? I arrived at the divisions shown in the right-hand column of the table below.

**Table 1.** Aspects of the Writing Process Categorized in Terms of Locus of Control

<b>Aspect of writing process</b>	<b>Locus of control</b>
Spelling, grammar, punctuation	external
Organization	external
Answering the assignment question	external
Responding to / interpreting instructor	external
Reading comprehension	internal
Invention (finding something to write about)	internal

I analyzed these various aspects of the writing process in terms of whether they were associated with an external or internal LOC based on my

own experiences as a tutor of students at various levels, as well as discussions by Friedrich, Matsuda, and Grimm. I consider the first four elements on the list above to be extrinsically motivated: they help students to complete a particular assignment by meeting their instructors' explicitly stated demands. Ryan and Deci suggest that, in order to succeed, students should at least identify with the reasons for completing a task; therefore, we ideally want to guide students away from behaviors from which they do not gain personal satisfaction, and that they do not identify with their sense of self. This means, of course, moving them to a stage where they have a higher level of intrinsic motivation for doing the work. I suggest that the last two elements on the list—reading comprehension and invention—do this: they help students go beyond bare requirements, to using the prompt and the texts with which they might be working to find new ideas, rather than to produce what they think the instructor wants to hear. Thus, the reasons for the behaviors are more easily identified with self-expression, and are more likely to be intrinsically motivated, because students will feel that they are the ones with control in the task.

The links between internal and external LOC and the different aspects of the writing process that I draw in Table 1 can also be thought of as lying on Ryan and Deci's intrinsic motivation scale, which I mentioned in the previous section, rather than being divided simply into external and internal LOC tasks. Applying them to the scale suggests a trajectory from low to high intrinsic motivation that we might want our students to follow. We would place spelling, grammar, and punctuation at the end of the scale associated with low intrinsic motivation, and an external LOC: these elements of the writing process could easily be seen by students as being entirely associated with satisfying the instructor's demands. Towards the middle of the scale, because satisfying instructor demands and larger discourse requirements require a deeper cognitive investment, would be organization, answering the assignment question, and responding to instructor comments. Next on the scale, still moving towards intrinsic motivation and an internal LOC, would be reading comprehension, because it requires students to respond to others' ideas in a way that they can invest in. And at the point closest to intrinsic motivation and the highest internal LOC would be invention—finding something to write about—because this is the part of the writing process that can be most closely related to a student's sense of self. Invention still requires responding to others' ideas, but it also focuses on students developing their own perspectives. This is where we would like students to be by the end of the semester.

Looking at what students ask for in their tutoring sessions shows the identity and language facets of basic writing coming together, because a

higher level of intrinsic motivation and internal LOC results from students identifying a task as being more important to their own development, rather than being work that satisfies external requirements. In the writing center, too, there is always the danger that students will shift responsibility for determining if their work is satisfactory to the tutor, thus perpetuating the external LOC/extrinsic motivation problem. However, as Boquet points out, tutoring sessions largely “thrive on asymmetry” (127), whereby the tutor gives advice, and the student takes it. While the ostensible aim of writing center philosophy is to break down this asymmetry, the reality is that the tutor is also perceived in a role of authority, and students come to the writing center to partake in the tutor’s knowledge of the institution and of academic writing, and, ideally, to internalize these (Carino, “Power”). One of the possible results of this is the student becoming dependent on the tutor, which is why it is important to help students find an internal locus of control in their writing. Otherwise, the writing center simply replicates the power dynamic between instructor and student, and leaves students’ perception of LOC thoroughly outside themselves.

Examining what students ask to work on in their tutoring sessions at the York College Writing Center, we will see how these predictions played out among our respondents. I expected to see that our students would focus predominantly on those aspects of the writing process that I associate with an external LOC, and with extrinsic motivation: characteristics that tend to be associated with students who have not been particularly academically successful (Ryan and Deci; Jones). While this is certainly true for students beginning at York’s Writing Center, this is not what seems to happen over a sequence of sessions, as we will see in the next section.

## **The Results**

In their responses, students could choose more than one item that they worked on in their sessions. Therefore, whereas we had only forty-nine respondents to the survey, we have eighty-eight responses to the questions in this part. Again, we see that students indicated that they sought help with grammar, punctuation, and spelling most often, followed by organization, interpreting and responding to instructor comments, and interpreting the assignment question.

**Table 2.** Overview of Student Requests

<b>Area requested</b>	<b>Responses</b>
Grammar, punctuation, spelling	31 (35%)
Organization	25 (28%)
Interpreting / responding to instructor comments	11 (12%)
Interpreting the assignment question	9 (10%)
Reading comprehension	8 (9%)
Finding something to write about	4 (4%)

The overall data confirm the hypothesis that York's students are coming to the Writing Center primarily to work on the areas that I have identified as being connected with an external locus of control. We see that the majority of students are asking to work on grammar, punctuation, and spelling, and organization, with a big jump to the next-most popular requests, help with responding to instructor comments, to the assignment question, and reading comprehension. These data suggest that our students are, first and foremost, concerned with the presentation of their papers, and rank responding appropriately to other texts, whether they originate with the instructor or elsewhere, as a distinct second. This strong tendency is probably due either to the students' instructors' explicit directions, or because the students equate messy work with bad writing, as Shaughnessy suggests they sometimes do ("New Approaches" 4).

However, before we despair at the level to which students just want grammar work in their tutoring sessions, examining the whole spectrum of use, from students who attend just one session, to students who attend five or more, gives us a different picture. Over the course of several sessions, the focus of students' tutoring sessions shifted: while presentation remained a concern throughout, our students gradually started to request help with interpreting the various texts and feedback they were working with, and to request help with developing their own ideas in their papers.

The number of tutoring sessions that students attended seems to be a significant indicator of how far beyond the extrinsically motivated aspects of writing students will go. This is important because, ideally, we want to see students finding their own reasons to work on their writing, in the writing center and elsewhere, rather than only seeking to satisfy their instructor's requirements. But this is not what we see for students who attend just one session; as we see in the first row of Table 3, these students are very much focused on grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

**Table 3.** Student Requests by Number of Sessions: Raw Numbers and Percentages

Number of sessions	Total number of students		Requested help with grammar		Requested help with organization		Requested help with instructor's comments		Requested help with interpreting assignment		Requested help with reading comprehension		Requested help with invention	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
1	12	10	83.3	7	58.3	4	33.3	1	8.3	0	0	0	0	0
2	5	3	60	1	20	0	0	2	40	0	0	0	0	0
3	6	3	50	4	66.7	1	16.7	1	16.7	3	50	1	16.7	0
4	6	3	50	4	66.7	0	0	0	0	1	16.7	0	0	0
5	5	3	60	4	80	0	0	1	20	1	20	0	0	0
5+	15	9	60	4	26.7	5	33.3	3	20	2	13.3	2	13.3	0
Total	49	31	63.3	24	49	10	20.4	8	16.3	7	14.3	3	6.1	0

Single-session students made a total of twenty-two requests for the various elements of writing on the survey. Help with grammar, punctuation, and spelling was by far the most frequently requested area of the writing process, followed by organization: the data indicate that all but two of these students asked for help with their grammar, and seven out of the twelve students coming to the York College Writing Center for a single session asked for help with organization. Significantly, too, none of the students who attended only one tutoring session asked for help with those elements of writing that I associate with an internal LOC; even asking for help with interpreting the assignment question was something only one of these students did.

The single-session students confirm the impression that when students first come to York's Writing Center, they are seeking help with fulfilling the demands that we would associate with an external LOC: those that have to do with satisfying someone else's requirements, rather than finding a way to express the students' own ideas more successfully. The data from the other end of the spectrum, however, show that when students return to the Writing Center for multiple sessions, they shift from the left- to the right-hand side of the intrinsic motivation spectrum, from low to high. The last two rows of Table 3 above show the responses from students who attended five or more tutoring sessions. There were twenty respondents in this category, and respondents indicated thirty-two separate requested areas. Among

this group of students we see that the majority still report having asked for help with grammar and organization in their tutoring sessions, but there is also a definite move towards the factors that I link with an internal locus of control and intrinsic motivation. These data show that, while a majority of the students still report having asked for help with their sentence-level work, the repeat visits to the writing center allow them to move on to the areas that I associate with higher levels of intrinsic motivation and internal LOC. Looking at this breakdown of the data, my analysis is that after repeated sessions at the writing center, students expand their definition of what successful writing means, and, moreover, they have the skills to take advantage of their tutor's help with the types of writing task that this expanded view entails.

The final variable to consider is the point at which these changes start to occur: how many tutoring sessions do students need to attend to experience this shift or expansion in the focus of their sessions? Table 3 also shows the trajectory of student requests over the course of several tutoring sessions, and so we see that the threshold for students to start asking to work on those areas of their writing that we have identified as being intrinsically motivated, with an internal LOC, is three sessions. Further, even when students just attend more than one session, interpreting the assignment question becomes much more important to the students than direct instructions from the instructor (in the form of comments on the paper), but it is at the three-session mark that we see a consistent pattern of students reporting that they have asked for help with reading comprehension and invention. From this preliminary data, we get a strong impression that students who attend the Writing Center at York do move from an external to internal locus of control in their writing over the course of a semester. But the data also show that one session at the Writing Center will not be enough to help them make this change.

### **How Students See Grammar**

It is also worth noting in the data above that the way students approach their sentence-level work may change over a series of tutoring sessions, which means we may not be comparing like things here; instead, students may be moving to a conception of academic writing which is more integrated with their sense of self. The tendency to prioritize surface concerns over developing their own ideas may arise because students have an impression that the surface serves as a gatekeeper for satisfying their instructors (which may, in

fact, be true); it furthermore fits with the profile of basic writers, given by Jones, that suggests that these students have a more external LOC than students whom we would not classify as basic writers. But there is more to the psychology of asking to work on sentence-level concerns, I believe. Coming to the writing center to get one's grammar "fixed" is a way to be much less vulnerable when asking for help: it is a request for help with conforming to external requirements, rather than a request for help in changing how one does something. It is much easier to articulate a request for help with grammar and organization: for one, it means starting with something, rather than nothing, and so it does not require the students to ask for help with a true deficiency—something that they altogether cannot do. Better to ask for help with something that they know, from an external source, needs to be fixed.

The data that I have presented here show that writing center staff can use those surface concerns, and helping students address them, to move students into a deeper understanding of how writing works. Our data suggest that if students are involved in working at the sentence-level of their own writing (rather than having a tutor proofread or edit), they and their tutors can work towards a more holistic engagement with this work. We might take the following attitude: even a "fix-it shop" image of a writing center is helpful to the students, in that it may get them to come for tutoring in the first place. As we see, if students find their first tutoring session useful and come back, they start moving into a relationship with their writing which is based more on intrinsic motivation than on their instructor's explicitly stated requirements (although it does not necessarily mean that the students got what they expected when they made the original decision to come to the writing center). But this is only the case if that first visit parlays into a return visit: only then can writing centers help students move towards intrinsic motivation, which is, as I suggest, our goal.

## **WRITING CENTERS AND THE END OF REMEDIATION**

As I mentioned before, the relationship between writing centers and remediation has been a complicated one. Showing the connections between writing centers and institutional demands, Peter Carino ("Open Admissions") discusses how the services that writing centers offer changed depending on the skill levels of incoming students. Focusing on the relationship between the Open Admissions movement and the kinds of services offered by writing centers operating during that time, Carino shows that the

centers at the forefront of the “alternative pedagogy” movement were those at colleges where students were relatively academically well-prepared, as at Brooklyn College under Kenneth Bruffee (38-39), whereas writing centers at schools whose students’ preparation was weaker functioned more as service modules, working on language and grammar skills rather than higher-order concerns, as at Nassau Community College under Paula Beck (42). As Nancy Grimm puts it, “writing centers were expected to solve the problems students weren’t supposed to have when they came to college” (531); they were—and are—where students “whose written work is marked by difference are ‘sent’ ” (525). Clearly, these perceptions have the potential to limit a writing center’s role on campus to being a location where students come to get their writing “fixed,” so as to satisfy the expectations of instructors, without seeking help about any of the knowledge-making that their instructors might be asking them to do in their writing.

What are the broader implications of this move to extra-curricular remediation, for the students, the writing center, and the institution? Mary Soliday, in *The Politics of Remediation*, notes that moving support for developmental writers out of the curriculum places more of a burden on them in terms of time: these students often have full-time work or family responsibilities. While writing centers usually offer their services free of charge (and this is certainly the case at York), even the extra time required to attend just one session per week at the writing center takes away earning time (Soliday 141-42). Furthermore, students who already feel marginal may not want to add to their marginality by seeking out help that carries with it the stigma of remediation. And the impact is institutional, too: moving remediation out of the curriculum means that providing financial support for this time-intensive work often becomes the province of managers of the “soft money” of the institution; therefore, the writing center is more vulnerable to budget cuts and institutional rearrangements that result in a lack of autonomy for the work of the center (Soliday; Grimm). The overall effect of these changes is that students who have not had traditional college preparation find themselves in situations where they are less able to take advantage of the support that is available, and they are in more jeopardy of being marginalized by their institutions. Furthermore, locating remedial writing support in an extra-curricular agency creates two more problems: attending tutoring is voluntary for students, and budgetary constraints often mean there are not enough tutors or tutoring hours to work with every student who fits into the basic writer category. Many of the students who receive assistance at writing centers are therefore those who have either sought it out independently, or have fol-

lowed through on an instructor's directions to seek help from the writing center. Students who seek extra-curricular support are likely to have a higher level of intrinsic motivation anyway (Jones), and so while it is quite possible that the students who are not using the writing center do have stronger skills, but do not think of going to the writing center, or do not have time, or do not think it will do anything for them, they may also have lower intrinsic motivation to complete their tasks. So the students who participated in the survey at York may have started from a better place academically, in terms of motivation, and thus may be skewing the data, though I believe that the trajectory that the data show suggests that the writing center is genuinely useful in increasing levels of intrinsic motivation in all students who come to multiple sessions.

The bigger challenge is to reach the students who do not see the writing center as having an important enough role in helping them to succeed in college. Several authors have addressed the challenges of marketing the writing center to the campus community without promising to be all things to all people (Mohr; Grimm; Pemberton). One way that we might market the writing center effectively at York is to show links between improved grades, retention, and writing center attendance, though we are only now starting to collect reliable data to make these links. Tutors already visit a number of writing and writing-intensive classes every semester, so as to give students and faculty a fuller picture of what kind of work students can expect to do at the center, and the director and coordinator visit departmental, academic, and student-support events to promote the writing center, and to talk about the services it offers. We hope that these strategies will not only bring more students to the center, but also that students, faculty, and staff alike will have a clearer picture of what the writing center can do for the students of the college.

The data that I have presented here suggest that the work students do at the York College Writing Center allows them to move beyond those skills and concerns usually associated with basic writers—if they attend three or more tutoring sessions. The success of writing centers lies in working with students on language and organizational issues, and using these as ways to encourage an internal LOC in their writing. As long as students and teachers see writing—and, in particular, the sentence-level aspects of writing—as external to the deeper cognitive processes involved in understanding disciplinary content, then there will be an attitude that writing can be “fixed.” The students who come to the writing center, whether they attend just one session or several consecutive sessions, apparently do see the language in

which they present their ideas as having a gatekeeping function in all of their courses. But keeping students coming back is crucial: it is only the repeat visitors who see their work with language as part of the whole paper writing process, indicated by the fact that they report asking for help with their grammar in the context of other parts of the writing process, including those that we associate with an internal LOC. Helping students to move towards intrinsic motivation brings them closer to admission to the mainstream academic culture, but to make that kind of progress, they must come to the writing center multiple times.

Given the academic and linguistic profile of students at York College, it is not surprising that they identify language issues as their most pressing concern. We have a responsibility to help these students see that the campus's Writing Center can do more for them than help them to fix their grammar at the end of the writing process, and thus to broaden their perspective on what language can do for them in a college context. The data presented here suggest that this is what is happening. Students are getting somewhere: their own reports on what they are working on in their tutoring sessions, when taken together, show students moving through the skill trajectory of basic writers, from external LOC and extrinsic motivation to a LOC and motivation that is much more closely related to a sense of themselves as writers with agency.

The question with which I began this article asks whether writing centers could take on the challenge of remediation on campus and still maintain a philosophy and pedagogy that is not a skills-based one. I have demonstrated that current writing center philosophy may not be adequate to deal with the challenges of supporting students from non-traditional college backgrounds. By focusing primarily on higher-order concerns, this philosophy does not recognize how sentence-level work can provide students with a safe place to start on their educational trajectory. In this age of post-curricular remediation, adapting our philosophy to help students move towards intrinsic motivation, rather than from lower- to higher-order concerns, is a more pressing responsibility than ever before.

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## Note

1. This semester-by-semester “improvement” is important. Many students return to their college writing centers semester after semester, and while we assume their skill level increases every semester, my data suggest that, for each semester, they start at the same place—what the instructor wants—and make progress towards being intrinsically motivated within the particular discourse required in their course. This makes sense if we think that students, as they progress through the curriculum, are having to come to terms with a new or more complex disciplinary discourse each consecutive semester; it is not that they are going backwards, but rather, they are consistent in extending their knowledge in the same way from semester to semester.

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