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ARTICLE: Evaluation Procedures for Writing Centers: Defining Ourselves Through Accountability

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Evaluation Procedures for Writing Centers: Defining Ourselves Through Accountability

Mary Lamb

Since students across the country are suing their high schools for failure to teach them basic literacy, it is only a matter of time before universities are also made legally liable for their shortcomings. The problem of evaluation is already acute for many university programs, especially new, supplemental programs set up to help less prepared students, because competition for university and federal funding is fierce. To continue to exist at all, service programs, especially those designed to teach basic literacy, must provide convincing evidence of meeting their responsibilities, but a recent influential report on basic-skills programs states that few are able to provide hard evidence of their effectiveness (Grant and Hoeber, 1978).

This chapter presents evaluation strategies for one particularly valuable program, the writing center. As part of the research for this chapter, questionnaires on evaluation procedures were distributed to writing centers around the country. The responses provide insight into strategies now being used to demonstrate the centers' effectiveness. Replies indicate that most centers justify their budgets primarily on the basis of the numbers of students they serve. About half also point to student satisfaction with their services (as shown by questionnaires), and about one-third to students' increased knowl-
edge of grammar (as shown by pre- and posttests). A few use additional methods: follow-up on students' grades, evaluation by agencies external to the center, and reports on staff publications and professional activities. While these evaluation measures may now seem appropriate to many centers, they reveal a limited self-definition, which may endanger the centers' continued existence.

Since every writing center must respond to the needs of its own population, no one evaluation procedure will be universally appropriate, but current research in composition suggests alternative and more convincing forms of accountability. Options include demonstrating the quality as well as the quantity of instruction (as shown by new methods of assessing writing), showing the beneficial side-effects of writing centers on their students (perhaps best shown by case studies), and, taking advantage of their ideal situation as student-centered organizations, examining the process of students' writing and experimenting with intervention in the composing process. These options proceed from the writing center's broader self-definition, which in turn creates increased opportunities for the center within its institution.

**Goals of Evaluation**

Most centers need to combine the two main forms of evaluation—formative and summative. Formative evaluation provides continual feedback to a center as part of its ongoing self-assessment, while summative evaluation usually takes the form of a final report justifying a center's budget. Formative evaluation may be somewhat impressionistic; open-ended questions to students on how the center can better serve their needs, for example, provide ideas on directions the center might take. Easily tabulated multiple-choice responses are more appropriate for summative evaluation, that is, showing that a certain percent of the student population is satisfied with the center's services. In practice, these two forms of evaluation sometimes merge. Posttests, for example, can be used as formative evaluation to show that an exercise needs improvement, and they can also be used as summative evaluation, to show that a certain number of students mastered certain skills over the semester.

Usually a writing center can merely indicate rather than prove its efficacy. Evaluative research in education cannot be conducted in a laboratory, where one variable is carefully tested while the others remain constant. For example, a researcher interested in proving that a writing center improves students' writing may set up a control group composed of a randomly selected population comparable to those enrolled in the center; but in real life, a typical writing center finds it impossible to form a true control group. Since those enrolled in most centers are self-selected students motivated to do something about their writing problems, measuring their progress against that of persons who are not motivated to enroll would be unscientific: the predictably impressive improvement of the center's students could be attributed to their defining characteristics— their anxiety to do well, or their willingness to take responsibility for themselves. A true control group would consist of students wishing to
enroll in a writing center and denied its use, but this strategy would be morally and legally unacceptable.

One way around the problem of control groups is to use a comparison study of two or more programs that offer help to the same group of students. Marist College in Poughkeepsie, New York, for example, has divided its students with indexes of 1.7 or below into three equal groups. One receives tutoring, one receives another form of help, and one receives no form of help. This research design creates a tutoring situation different from that at typical writing centers serving self-selected students, but there may be a way for some centers to compare the results of their service to those achieved by other programs serving similar populations. Unfortunately, comparable programs are rare, and most centers must settle for strong indications rather than absolute proof that they are fulfilling their responsibilities.

Current Forms of Evaluation, with Suggestions for Improvement

In late 1977 and early 1978, a questionnaire on the ways they evaluated their activities was sent to 120 writing centers listed in Muriel Harris’s invaluable Writing Lab Newsletter. Of these 120 centers, fifty-six replied. Additional information came from questionnaires, whose results were presented at the National Association for Remedial and Developmental Studies in Post-Secondary Education (NARDSPE) meeting in Chicago and at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in Spring, 1978. Writing centers reported six methods of evaluation:

1. **Basic Statistics.** Virtually all of the centers responding use statistics to show accountability. All log the numbers of students served and the amount of time given to each student. Most also record the problem worked on.

2. **Questionnaires.** Twenty-five of the fifty-six distribute questionnaires on their services to students attending the center and fourteen distribute questionnaires to faculty instructing these students, but only four ask for formal feedback from tutors.

3. **Pre- and Posttests.** Twenty of the fifty-six centers use pre- and posttests of skills. Only four centers collect pre- and postsamples of writing.

4. **Follow-up on Students’ Grades.** Ten of the fifty-six centers have established a procedure for reporting on students’ grades, although most centers describe excellent informal feedback on grades from students and faculty.

5. **Evaluation External to the Center.** Eight centers use this form of evaluation; four use organizations external to the university, three use organizations within the university, and one did not specify.

6. **Publications and Professional Activities of Staff.** Only four centers regularly report on these.

**Basic Statistics**

In general, the amount of time spent and the numbers of students served in writing centers add up to impressive figures. Some centers, however,
are much more successful than others in using this information to advantage. Many of the centers present the basic data as evidence of the growth of their services over previous years. To show their ability to hold students, a few centers tabulate the numbers of students returning after one visit and the numbers of students returning after two visits. Very few centers use their statistics to appeal to the special interests of their administration, although the center at Georgia Tech records the sex and race of students served, the center at Western New Mexico University includes the ethnic background of students, and the center at Northern Virginia Community College records the wide range of departments taking advantage of its services. All of these centers are responding to concerns of the administrators who will be making decisions affecting their continued existence.

With declining enrollments, many universities worry about retaining students. The center at East Texas State University has compiled data on how many of its students enrolled in the university the following semester, and the center at West Virginia State College has examined a random sample of its students from one term to see how many remained in college one year later. Information on retention, especially over long time periods, undoubtedly impresses most administrators. There is another use for this data: Retention rates can be correlated with other types of information (major, level of writing course, cognitive style, or other aspects of student learning) to provide almost endless possibilities for research into factors behind student dropout rates.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires are administered by mail, at the center, or through writing instructors. Return rates average about 35-40 percent for questionnaires administered by mail or through the writing instructors, and approximately 90 percent for questionnaires administered at the center itself. Many of the twenty-five centers distributing questionnaires include both multiple-choice items and open-ended questions to elicit unexpected information.

The multiple-choice questions used by most centers need refinement. Here, for example, are two of the better questionnaires. The first is too vague

To improve the Tutorial Program, we are asking that you submit a paragraph evaluation of your tutor. We would like for you to express your honest opinion.

(long space left)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Please circle one:</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Fair</th>
<th>Poor</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitude:</td>
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<td>Ability to explain materials:</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>Poor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Patience:</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>Poor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Availability:</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>Poor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dependability:</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Fair</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recommendation:</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. *Quality of Instruction:* Do you feel that the materials and instruction you received in the lab were appropriate, clear, and effectively presented?

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<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>not clear &amp; effective</td>
<td>adequate</td>
<td>very clear &amp; effective</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

2. *Writing Progress:* Do you feel that you made genuine progress in your writing as a result of your lab work?

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<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>no progress</td>
<td>some progress</td>
<td>great deal of progress</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. *Grade Improvement:* Do you feel that what you learned in the writing lab enabled you to write better papers in your composition class and therefore receive better grades?

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<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>grades dropped or did not change</td>
<td>rose one letter grade</td>
<td>rose at least two letter grades</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

4. *Quality of Instructor:* Do you feel that the instructor you worked with in the Writing Lab was genuinely helpful and competent?

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<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>incompetent</td>
<td>adequate</td>
<td>very helpful and competent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other comments and suggestions:
(long space left)

to be of much use, and the second is written in a style probably meaningless to many of the respondents. Both of these include space for open-ended responses.

What does attitude refer to? To the student? To school? To life? A more specific question might ask the student to agree or disagree with the statement “My tutor always seemed interested in helping me improve my writing.” The patience item might be rephrased as “My tutor never seemed bored or irritated with my work during the tutoring sessions” (agree or disagree). The term availability is ambiguous: Some students appear at unscheduled times for extra help and are surprised when a tutor is absent. The question might be more accurately phrased as “My tutor always met with me at the times we agreed on” (agree or disagree). Dependability sounds so much like availability to me that I am not sure what behavior the director is attempting to measure.

Question 1 of the second sample questionnaire is actually two questions; many students will not understand that appropriate means useful to their particular writing needs. A better question would be “Were the materials you used helpful in improving your editing skills?” (This question assumes that editing skills is a term used in the school’s composition classes.) Most students also cannot judge whether materials were effectively presented, but they can
state whether they understood them or not. "Did you understand the materials you used in the lab?" is a question that would probably provide more accurate and useful information.

Question 2 is not as confusing as question 1. Some centers might break the question down to find out which aspects of student writing had progressed. Question 3, like question 1, confuses two questions. The first, "Do you feel that what you learned in the writing lab enabled you to write better papers?" is a restatement of question 2. The second question, on improvement in grades, is probably better answered by a follow-up on students' grades. Question 4 again uses language unfamiliar to some students. In fact, when this questionnaire was presented to a NARDSPE meeting, one center director told of asking a student if a tutor was competent. The student replied, "No, no, my tutor isn't competent—he's a good tutor!"

Here are some guidelines for questionnaires: Ask only one question at a time, use the student's own language, and be as specific as possible. Decide what specific behavior you want your tutors to exhibit, and then ask questions applicable to that behavior. For example, if you want to encourage your tutors to listen rather than to teach students whenever possible, ask a student to agree or disagree with the statement "My tutor is a good listener." To be sure that your questionnaire is effective, try giving it to a few students orally to see if they are puzzled by any of the questions.

Questionnaires are probably of limited use for formative evaluation. Many students hesitate to write damaging comments, and most responding students are already showing their positive opinion of the center by returning to work there. Centers truly interested in upgrading services would do well to follow the example of the center at Winthrop College and distribute evaluations to students who do not return. (A better technique is to send interviewers to these students personally.)

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Dear Writing Clinic Visitor,

To help us evaluate the writing center so that we can improve our service to students, please explain below why you did not return to the Writing Clinic. If you wish, remove your name by cutting off the portion below the dotted line. Please put this sheet in the campus mail by (date).

(long space left for reply)

Most student questionnaires combine open-ended and multiple-choice questions and include questions on tutoring and materials. Like basic statistics, questionnaires can also be used to gather data significant to the administration. For example, an overburdened center might ask students if they would benefit from more time with a tutor. The responses to this question can strengthen the center's request for additional personnel.

Questionnaires can serve a public relations function, too. Only fourteen centers distribute questionnaires to faculty, which means that many cen-
FACULTY EVALUATION OF WRITING LAB

1. Do you feel the Writing Center serves a valuable function? ____ yes ____ no
2. Do you see the Writing Center's role as
   a. a supplement to classroom work
   b. a place where students come to learn basic grammatical skills that they did not receive in high school
   c. a place that students may receive help on assignments
   d. other ___________
3. Do you encourage students to visit the Writing Center? ____ yes ____ no
4. Do they come when you urge them? ____ yes ____ no
5. If your students do not attend, why do you feel that they do not?
   a. lack of motivation
   b. the hours when the Writing Center is open do not coincide with times the student can attend
   c. other ___________
6. Have you ever visited the Writing Center to see how we work with students?
   ____ yes ____ no
7. Approximately what percentage of your students have worked in the Center?
8. Of these students, how many have benefited from their work with us?
   a. a few
   b. (approx.) one-half
   c. most of them
9. Would you please list any suggestions that you might have for ways that we can
   a. get more students involved in our program
   (space left)
   b. strengthen our program
   (space left)
   c. serve you and your students better
   (space left)

ters may be overlooking their prime ally. The center at East Texas State University administers an excellent faculty questionnaire, which functions in several ways. Questions 2, 5, and 9 elicit information valuable to centers that want to improve services to students. Questions 1 and 8 provide accountability to administrators, and questions 3 and 6 encourage the faculty to take advantage of the center and observe it at first hand.

The importance of involving the faculty in the writing center cannot be overestimated, since a center can prosper or die, depending on faculty support. When a center is new, the faculty may be suspicious of it. Some instructors may think that centers write students' papers for them; others may think that tutors take sides with students against teachers. Probably the best way to counteract these suspicions is to get the faculty involved in the center. Once a faculty member actually voices objections or gives advice, the center director can set up a dialogue to decrease opposition.

It is likely that many centers do not involve tutors in evaluation because day-to-day contact makes formal feedback seem unnecessary, but no one knows the center better than the tutors, and few can present better suggestions for improving services. Here is an evaluation questionnaire distributed to
TUTORS' EVALUATION OF THE WRITING LAB

1. Did you feel adequately prepared to tutor students? 
   If not, how should tutors be better prepared? (Please be specific—we need suggestions.)

   (space left)

2. Do you feel qualified now to tutor students and to student-teach more effectively? 
   Why?

   (space left)

3. Do you think your student profited from your instructions? How might he have profited more?

   (space left)

4. Do you think that there was too much paper work? If yes, what should have been eliminated or done less often?

   (space left)

5. Comments: (Please feel free to condemn and/or praise the Lab, its procedures, etc. so we can make it a more efficient teaching device for all concerned.)

   (space left)

tutors at the center of Northeast Missouri State University. (Since the director is likely to recognize a tutor's handwriting or comments, a session where an uninvolved outsider relays the answers may elicit more and franker information.)

Questions 2 and 3, perhaps, overlap; question 1 might more clearly refer to the tutor's first sessions.

Beck, Hawkins, and Silver (1978) point out an aspect of writing centers neglected by all the centers we surveyed—the personal and professional growth of the tutors themselves. A questionnaire could be prepared to focus attention on the important service a center performs for the people who work there:

---

1. My own writing improved as a result of tutoring other students.
   Disagree
   1  2  3  4  Agree
   5

2. I improved my ability to interact with other people as a result of my tutoring.
   Disagree
   1  2  3  4  Agree
   5

3. I improved my ability to teach as a result of tutoring students.
   Disagree
   1  2  3  4  Agree
   5

4. Are there any other advantages you experienced as a result of your work in this Laboratory?
   (space left)

5. Are there any aspects of the lab that can be improved to increase your own personal or professional growth?
   (space left)
The benefits to tutors may in the end be even more striking than the benefits to the students tutored (Bruffee, 1978). For research as well as for accountability purposes, the center may also discover if tutors’ grades, especially in writing courses, rise during or after their tutoring. Centers can also look at tutors’ retention rates in the university. For centers staffed primarily by instructors, a questionnaire can focus on growth in teaching, and the center can work at developing its full-time staff until it acquires a reputation of training first-rate composition teachers.

Pre- and Posttests

Pre- and posttesting must be used with care. The experience of centers that have abandoned pre- and posttesting as too time-consuming points to an important issue in evaluation: A center must be careful that devoting time to fostering a measurable behavior, such as accuracy in answering grammatical questions, does not divert time from fostering a behavior not as easily measured, such as students’ increased ability to think on an abstract level because of increased confidence. A center judged by scores on pre- and posttests will tend to spend more time teaching the skills tested than on activities such as listening to students talk about their ideas. In the end, a center is only as good as the service delivered, and evaluation activities must not be allowed to interfere with that goal.

When used with care, pre- and posttesting can be valuable. Centers report using the following instruments, among others: McGraw-Hill Reading and Writing Tests; pre- and posttests drawn from grammar workbooks; the California Achievement Test; the College English Placement Test (CEPT) from Houghton Mifflin; Joseph Hill’s Cognitive Mapping; and Lacque and Sherwood’s Attitude Survey. The last two items measure skills beyond traditional writing and invite correlations with improvement in writing.

While twenty centers used primarily grammatical pre- and posttests, only four centers collected pre- and posttest samples of writing. Such samples are, perhaps, the most convincing evidence of all that students tutored in a center become better writers. Here is a form for showing student improvement from the writing center at Seattle Central Community College.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1—poor</th>
<th>2—average</th>
<th>3—good</th>
<th>First</th>
<th>Final</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sentence structure (fragments, run-ons)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Paragraph development (organization, unity, coherence)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Grammar/Usage (subject-verb agreement, verb tense, pronoun ref., word use)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Punctuation</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
If _poor, average, and good_ are well enough defined, this form can serve centers that primarily help students correct mechanical errors. Current and future research will enable centers to devise measures that go beyond errors to other aspects of student writing.

**Follow-up on Students' Grades**

It is surprising that only ten of the fifty-six centers did any formal follow-up on their students' grades in writing courses, especially since so many centers reported excellent informal feedback. The procedure need not be complicated. The center at Southern Illinois University, for example, sends a progress report to each instructor, with the request that the instructor fill in the blank marked "Grade" and return it to the director. Notices posted in the mailroom at the end of the term will usually prod instructors to place the forms in a convenient mailbox, and soon the procedure becomes so routine that instructors do not need to be reminded. The returned forms are then divided according to writing course; within each writing course, according to grade; within each grade for each writing course; and according to times each student attended the center. Here is the graph for students in one course. Comparing results with the previous year's graph and with the results of tutoring students from the general freshman writing course provides additional information, as described below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Times Attended</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>10</td>
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CBS 120 (Center for Basic Skills) students did much better than GSD 101 (General Freshman Writing Course) students who attended the center this fall, and CBS 120 students did much better than CBS 120 students last fall. 90.8 percent passed CBS 120, which is a marked improvement over the 75 percent who passed in fall 1977. 40 percent made A's or B's, which is better than the 13 percent who made A's or B's last fall. We have also succeeded in raising the number of CBS students attending the Center from thirty in fall 1977.
Evaluation External to the Center

Four centers using outside evaluators use organizations external to the university, three use organizations within the university, and one did not specify. Several of the centers have external evaluation written into their government-grant funding. Of the centers using internal evaluation, the one at Kansas State University is evaluated by the Arts and Sciences Student Council; the center at Oakes College in Santa Cruz, California, is evaluated by a student and faculty group; and the center at University of Wisconsin at Waukesha is evaluated by a student-faculty learning lab committee. Internal evaluation is undoubtedly the cheapest, and any office responsible for instructional improvement will probably work with a director to set up an appropriate committee. Another possibility is to call in colleagues from centers at other universities, so that you are dealing with professionals who are aware of issues and problems common to many writing centers. To be evaluated fairly by any agency, internal or external, you must first define who you are and what you are trying to accomplish.

Staff Publications and Professional Activities

Four of the fifty-six centers list these on a regular basis. A format used by the center at East Texas State University for each staff member’s report is shown below. This form of evaluation defines this writing center as more than a student service. The center at East Texas State University presents itself as an organization of working professionals involved with the university on a variety of levels.

Additional Activities and Services:
Class Visitations and Presentations:
2 Air Force R.O.T.C. classes—25 students—visitation
     English 102—25 students—presentation
Meetings:
     College-wide faculty meeting, October 25
     English 100 Teachers’ meeting, October 20
     Bill Ogden, External Grants Coordinator
     Staff meeting
     History Department faculty meeting
Professional Meetings:
     Attended SCMLA in Hot Springs, Arkansas, October 27–29
     Poetry reading for The Dial, professional women’s club, Sulphur Springs,
     Texas, October 13
     Presented a paper entitled “Alternatives to Automated Instruction: Material
     Development in the Writing Center” to the Southwest Regional
     Conference on English in the Two-Year College, Fort Worth, Texas,
     October 7–8
     Poetry Workshop for the New Center for Learning, October 4–5
Future Forms of Evaluation

It is odd that so few writing center evaluations include student writing, although doing so would of course present various difficulties. Most students come to writing centers with distinct problems and writing abilities, and so it is impossible to design an evaluative instrument appropriate for all of them. If such an instrument could be designed, it probably would not correspond to the ones by which the students are judged in their separate writing classes. Also contributing to the problem is the difficulty of assessing writing at all. Here is a crude method that evades these problems. Given pairs of pre- and postwriting samples, and without knowing which sample in each pair was written first, an unbiased observer judges which of the two essays is better. This judgment is then compared with the center's records to determine the observer's accuracy. If the observer is usually correct, then the center can claim its work with students results in perceptible improvement. But this is a stop-gap strategy and contributes little to our understanding of what centers do. Perhaps the new tools for evaluating writing—syntactic maturity as measured by T-units, primary-trait scoring, holistic evaluation—will eventually come to our aid. For now, we need more research to understand our intuitive judgments of good and bad writing. Determining which aspects of our students' writing change and which do not is at least a start in our own self-evaluation and, eventually, in our accountability to others.

Opportunities also exist for describing other features of students when they come into the center and when they leave. Linn (1978), for example, points to psychological factors determining a student's success in an academic setting. (While centers cannot become counseling units in any sophisticated sense, helping a failing student to succeed in a limited task often has broader implications.) Centers are also well set up to analyze the blocks students create to prevent their academic success. Too time-consuming to become a standard procedure, this work might be best carried out in case studies of a few continuing students and could analyze what can be accomplished within a tutor-student relationship. The place to start is with detailed descriptions of selected students as they attend tutoring sessions. When we have more information, we can draw up more elaborate profiles of factors such as self-esteem, feelings of competence, and degree of internal as opposed to external control, to see how these factors change during the student's experience in the center. As with the writing itself, accountability will first be formative evaluation (what works and what does not) and then summative evaluation (positive changes in students).

Finally, any writing centers can put themselves at the forefront of one of the most fruitful developments in composition theory—investigating the composing process. By actually watching students write and discussing their experience with them as they write, tutors can explore the composing process and experiment with ways of intervening to change ineffective processes to effective ones (see North, 1979).

But we are still at the question stage, and much remains to be done.
Eventually, our descriptions of how students compose when they arrive at the writing center and how they compose at the end of their experience there can become an effective basis of accountability. How a center evaluates itself depends on how it defines itself, which in turn depends in part on the center's role within its institution. No one form of evaluation will be effective for every writing center. Every writing center should, however, be able to describe what it does, show that it is good at what it does, and, when appropriate, be ambitious and even adventurous in its self-definition. Success in these accountability tasks will foster the continued health of writing centers over the next decade.

References


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