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Defining Higher Education Writing Centers from the Perspectives of Writing Center Directors

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Defining Higher Education Writing Centers from the Perspectives of Writing Center Directors

A dissertation

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership Policy Analysis

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership,

with a concentration in Higher Education Leadership

by

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May 2021

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Keywords: writing centers, writing tutors, tutors, tutor centers, remedial writing

ABSTRACT

Defining Higher Education Writing Centers from the Perspectives of Writing Center Directors

by

Paul D. Ludwig

The purpose of this study was to discover what defines a writing center by interviewing directors of writing centers in the Southern Appalachian area. This qualitative study was based on a single round of recorded telephone interviews with 13 writing center directors who meet the criteria for inclusion in the study. Many researchers have written about writing centers, their efficacy, and what defines them; yet, no clear consensus exists. Without a clear definition there is no means of determining the efficacy of writing centers.

As a result of the interviews with the writing center directors three critical components of writing centers emerged. They were tutors, space, and leadership; these are the three major elements that define and shape a writing center. A writing center must have well-trained and knowledgeable tutors; a space, either physical, virtual or both, as a base of operation; and a director that provides leadership.

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DEDICATION

From kindergarten till now, teachers and professors have positively influenced my life. I could fill pages that might match the length of this dissertation with anecdotal evidence of the support I have received over the years, yet I will instead share only one that perhaps has more relevance here. Dr. Don Johnson, a professor of English at ETSU, now retired, has been a great positive influence on my education. His attitude toward education is something I think I tried to emulate as well. Once, while I was working on my masters, he shared with me that his doctorate came not because he felt better prepared, more educated, more intelligent, or more capable than those who did not get their doctorates in his program, but because, in his words, “I was too damn stubborn to quit.” Though I feel you are perhaps more intelligent than you give yourself credit for, I thank you for that lesson, Dr. Johnson. I also am too stubborn to quit.

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I would not have attempted this without the support of family. My mother's encouragement, financial support at times, her proofreading, and her willingness to allow me to vent frustrations to a sympathetic ear were instrumental in this work. Thanks Mom.

The Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis program's professors, such as Dr. Lampley, Dr. Flora, Dr. Renner, Dr. Knight, and more have reached out to me and been helpful in completing this dissertation. Dr. Lampley in particular was instrumental in making me realize what I needed to do to accomplish this work and quite the motivator. I appreciate your help.

One does not learn in a vacuum. As a graduate student, I have learned about the importance of depending on, and being there to help, my fellow students. The other members of my cohort, Sidney Hill, Cheryl Highland, William Sproat, and many others are responsible for me getting this far. I cannot thank them enough . . . especially for help in the statistics class. You will notice, reader, that this is a qualitative dissertation.

I have worked in education for 15 years and in that time have made many wonderful friends, and worked with some dedicated educators. Thank you to Dr. Marc McClure (you are missed my friend) Joel Wilson, Audrey Shoemaker, Jennifer Mayes, Carla Todaro, and others too numerous to name. Thank you!

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Chapter 1. Introduction

The educational attainment of most Americans prior to World War II was significantly different to the same educational attainment post World War II. (Lundell & Higbee 2002; Thonus 2003). In response to the greater number of students attending college after World War II, many institutes of higher education began creating tutoring services, and thus the modern writing center began. With those beginnings in part because of the large number of GIs returning to college after World War II, writing centers have become increasingly important to the mission of many higher education institutions. At their core, writing centers are areas where students who need remedial instruction can go to get that assistance. These developmental students in need of remediation are the reason writing centers are prolific in higher education and will likely become more prominent. As indicated by Uehling (2002), these students in need of remediation “are also vulnerable because they are diverse in many ways: many are first-generation college students; some are people of color or speakers of more than one language or dialect; some are refugees or immigrants, reentry students such as displaced homemakers . . .” (p. 47). Uehling made clear that there are many students who are remedial for traditional reasons, such as ESL or first-generation college students, but also illuminated some of the non-traditional ways students are sometimes in need of remedial instruction. They are “older learners who are retraining, and ex-military students; some experienced erratic or interrupted high school educations or dropped out of high school and later earned general equivalency diplomas (GEDs); some have learning or other disabilities; some are very young parents” (p. 47). These types of students are growing in number, are working many hours (p. 47) and as Uehling pointed out, quite often have some combination of these factors, such as young parents and ex-military, or first-generation, ESL people of color. Educators continue to identify student sub-populations such as the ones

described by Uehling, and these types of students are growing in number and are often in need of specific remedial education that writing centers can provide (de Kleine & Lawton, 2015; Harklau et al., 1999; Sturman, 2018). Such remedial instruction is frequently presented in multiple forms, from online to on the ground, by telephone and email, in person and by teleconference, and even through the use of artificial intelligence. Perhaps it is not surprising then that writing centers are involved in remedial education in a variety of ways.

Background

Regardless of how writing centers are delivering instruction, a greater number of students than ever before need the remedial services that writing centers and other remedial services provide. Many students entering college face a steep learning curve when it comes to communication skills, especially skills that involve reading and writing in a clear and concise manner. The source of this difficulty is a topic of discussion among many people in higher education, with many saying that the public education system is failing to prepare students for college (Pontes & Pontes, 2011; Thonus, 2003). Others have argued that with the increased number of students attending college (Complete College Tennessee Act Summary, 2011), the number of students with deficiencies in writing, reading, and critical thinking also increased (Callahan & Chummy, 2009; LaClare & Franz, 2013). Whether the problem is a failing system or student deficiencies in writing, many institutes of higher education, and certainly most community colleges, increasingly deal with students who cannot read and write at a high enough level to begin taking college level classes (Hoover & Lipka, 2013). In response to this increase in the number of students entering higher education needing academic assistance, and the changing perspective about teaching writing, many colleges and universities have developmental classes, or similar approaches in programs that help students obtain the skills needed to continue in

higher education (North, 1994; Pizzolato, 2005; Spielgman & Grobman, 2005). However, such programs are under constant budget constraints along with political and social pressures (Avinger et al., 1998; Gardner & Ramsey, 2005; Griswold, 2003; Washburn, 2005).

One instance of social and political pressure changing the landscape of education occurred in the state of Tennessee. Recent legislation required developmental courses and first year writing courses to be taught in tandem with existing courses or as co-requisites. Students who previously may have taken a developmental class for one or two semesters are currently required to take the developmental class at the same time they are taking the first-year freshman composition class (Tennessee Office of the Governor, 2013). In light of these types of social and political pressures, the importance of a writing center, sometimes called a writing lab or a language lab, that functions to improve student writing, especially those students in their first year of college, becomes increasingly apparent. Consequently, any attempt to define or create parameters around tutoring, remedial services, or areas at higher education institutes such as writing centers becomes increasingly more important (Sturman, 2018).

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to discover what defines writing centers by interviewing those working in writing centers in the Southern Appalachian area. I used this study to articulate some defining qualities of writing centers in higher education through interviews by telephone combined with recordings. I asked pointed, specific questions to those who are leaders in writing centers in order to articulate this researched-based definition. The need is evident for criteria that describe what constitutes a writing center. Simpson (2010) stated: “There is no solitary monolithic idea of writing centers in general or of any particular writing center” (p. 2). The literature on what defines a writing center is inconsistent, and thus that need for criteria exists

because future research should be based on a consensus driven definition, and not on suppositions that are not founded in research. For instance, future research into the efficacy of writing centers should first indicate that the writing center being examined meets the criteria for a writing center before researchers determine whether or not a writing center has a quantifiable effect on student writing. That is, researchers need to be able to say with confidence that a writing center meets certain criteria before they research whether or not a writing center is effective.

Many researchers have researched and written about writing centers and their efficacy, and what defines them; yet, no clear consensus exists. For instance, Diederich and Schroeder (2008) examined the effects of the writing center on students, yet without a description of whether or not the writing center in question meets a definition of what constitutes a writing center. Because they do not describe the writing center that indicates some definitive idea of what a writing center is their research is incomplete. I began this research under the assumption that some criteria need to exist, and thinking of criteria led to several questions and ideas. For example, it was not clear if the writing center in Diederich and Schroeder's research had a writing center director, if that center was staffed by trained tutors, or if that writing center had a physical or virtual place, or both. Also, knowing whether the tutoring was online, by telephone, or face-to-face or all of these seemed important as was knowing if the writing center had administration support, and if the writing center was aligned with overall college goals. Without clear criteria that these ideas express, there are few means of determining the efficacy of the writing centers. Perhaps meeting some definitive standard or at least some criteria from a list of standards is needed.

It is my desire to better redefine and explain the current, generally defined idea of writing

centers and to consider the many locales that currently are designated as writing centers. For example, some higher education writing centers may have computers with access to writing-help software, while other writing centers may consist largely of untrained student tutors in a tutoring room, and still other writing centers are computer labs located close to classrooms where composition is taught. Recently, and especially with Covid-19, many writing centers have moved into the virtual arena, with online writing centers that offer virtual tutoring or resources students can use to teach themselves aspects of academic writing. Indeed, the recent Covid-19 pandemic experience has forced many institutions to suspend operations of their brick and mortar locations, and transfer the entirety of their remedial instruction online. Other institutions already had in place online or virtual writing centers. Some higher education institutions, such as Ashford University, have writing centers that are entirely online all the time. All of these examples are considered writing centers by their host institutions. Potentially, a higher education institution with a web page with links to online sources such as the Purdue OWL may be what a particular institution defines as its writing center.

Research Questions

The following central question and the subsequent research questions will illuminate the need for criteria to define a writing center and provide a foundation for this study. Central

Research Question: Based on interviews with writing center directors in the Southern Appalachian region, what criteria define a Southern Appalachian writing center?

Research Question 1: What criteria or common practices, define a writing, center in Southern Appalachia, or what constitutes an effective writing center in this area?

Research Question 2: What constitutes an effective writing center?

Research Question 3: How are tutors part of the definition or criteria of a writing center?

Research Question 4: How do writing centers directors identify and help students with writing needs, and what barriers are there to a student's access to writing centers?

Research Question 5: What role does administration have in the operation of a writing center, and what is the future of writing centers in community colleges?

Significance of the Study

A definition for writing centers is not clearly established in current research and current research seems to examine a single writing center at a time with little comparison of writing centers across regions or nationally. This is because writing centers offer widely varying services, and that makes studying efficacy very difficult, which is why my research sought to first establish a "baseline" or set of criteria that could be used to later examine efficacy. To clarify, the research in this dissertation in no way seeks to determine the efficacy of any particular writing center, or of writing centers in general.

Future researchers can use the resulting definition from this research to measure whether or not a set of practices is effective in a writing center and to indicate if students would benefit from writing centers that meet best practices. The importance in filling this knowledge gap exists because the gap might have influence on how writing centers are funded and on how future research is conducted. As the need for writing centers seems likely to grow, this information about what defines a writing centers and later the efficacy of writing centers is important because having some clear criteria based on working professionals' opinions for a writing center will help new writing centers develop along professional recommended methods. If a consensus exists, then leaders at institutes of higher education can point to the definition and maintain they have met the requirements for having a clearly defined writing center. Faculty wishing to inform administration that their writing center is lacking some particular elements can also point to this

research. Furthermore, researchers can use the criteria to show whether or not practices are effective in a writing center, and most importantly, students would benefit from writing centers that meet proven standards in writing center practices.

Future research needs to more firmly establish a definition to advance the idea of what constitutes an effective writing center, and only after that clear definition is established can research move forward with the idea of testing the actual benefits, or the efficacy, of using such a center. This study's qualitative approach, specifically questioning working professionals in writing centers, will clarify a definition that helps other researchers in determining the efficacy of writing centers.

Definition of Terms

Definitions help readers understand some of the terms specific to a study, as well as uncommon terms that appear multiple times in a study.

Generation 1.5 Learner: As Thonus (2011) indicates, these are “writers who are long-term U.S. residents and English learners fluent in spoken English” (p. 1), but may have some difficulty with written language because of a background primarily in another language.

Southern Appalachia: As defined by the ARC, the area of Southern Appalachia is both regional and cultural; generally, the area stretches South to North from Northern Georgia and Northern South Carolina to Southern West Virginia, and east to west from Eastern Kentucky and Tennessee to Western North Carolina.

Tutors: In this study, the tutors are limited to writing tutors, who have a different set of skills than math or science tutors and who are students at the higher education institution where the writing center is located (Fullmer, 2012).

Writing Centers: In this study, any place in higher education where a student gets help with writing. A more specific definition emerges at the end of this research.

Limitations and Delimitations

Because this study is qualitative, the research is limited to some extent by the bias of the researcher, the limited number of participants, the bias of the participants, and the location of the study. This study is further limited by the assumption that criterion defining a writing center can be determined from interviewing writing center directors. It is assumed that the interview questions used for data collection are valid and reliable, and the participants responded to the questions honestly. It is also assumed that the methodology adequately addressed the research questions. In addition, it is assumed that the methodology used in examining the interview answers was appropriate and accurate in the representations of ideas, and accurate as well. This study is also limited by the usefulness of the results to the stakeholders.

This study is delimited to directors of writing centers in the Appalachian area and to those same directors who have worked in the writing centers for at least two years, possess at least post graduate degree, and are currently employed at public or private higher education institutions. Because previous experiences are worth investigating, writing center directors who have 10 or more years, and met all other qualifications, but are not currently employed directly in a writing center, are included in the study. This study is further delimited to directors who work in writing centers in the Southern Appalachian area. The writing center directors in this study are also delimited to participants that choose to participate. This research is further delimited by the recent outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic, which has necessitated that only telephone interviews were conducted. This research should not be generalized to other groups of people associated

with writing centers. The theoretical framework selected for the research further delimits this study.

Statement of Researcher's Perspective

I was not employed by any of the writing directors with whom I interviewed; however, several of the institutions were under the purview of the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR). TBR manages and guides some of the institutions where writing center directors who participated in this study were employed. I do work at a TBR institution, and the work done here is in affiliation with an institute formerly associated with TBR. This research began as I worked as an adjunct instructor at a community college in my home region of Southern Appalachia in East Tennessee. I had the opportunity to work with a writing center director who managed several tutors and worked diligently with students. I observed this writing center for 2 years, and as someone who worked with varying ability levels of students, I understood immediately that not every writing center was as advantageous to students as the one I observed over that period of time. The wide variety of writing centers I encountered as a student and as an instructor made me question what precisely constitutes a writing center. After some study, I discovered that there are no concrete, agreed upon criteria for a writing center. Certainly, there are some researchers who offer opinions on what constitutes a writing center (Boquet & Lerner, 2008; North, 1984). However, none of the researchers have attempted to formulate an empirical, research-based definition of writing centers

Overview of Study

Chapter 1 includes an introduction, an explanation of the problem, and why it is important to address the problem. Chapter 2 includes a review of literature, and the methodology for research is presented in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 contains the findings, and Chapter 5 is a

discussion of the results along with the researcher's conclusions and directions for further research.

Chapter 2. Review of Literature

The idea of the writing center as a place for supplemental education can be traced directly to the shift in educational philosophy that is partially due to the influence of John Dewey, who proclaimed, “The democracy which proclaims equality of opportunity as its ideal requires an education in which learning and social application, ideas and practice, work and recognition of the meaning of what is done, are united from the beginning and for all” (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, p. 316). The idea of a democracy that promoted education, and that education in turn promoted democracy was for Dewey a clear goal of society. Indeed, as Shaw (2002) clearly indicated in her summary of Dewey’s ideas, “the purpose of education was,” according to Dewey, “to promote the skills and attitudes in individual learners that equip them to be productive in sustaining and enhancing democracy, which is another word for the mutually penetrating global community in which each of us lives our life” (p. 32). Shaw suggested that Dewey believed education was key in fomenting positive social change. As Shaw pointed out, Dewey wrote that “all sectors and individuals in society need to have equal access to the fullest range of educational opportunities” (p. 30). This educational philosophy was in Dewey’s time not an idea that most educators shared. Most educators, even those who were fairly democratic in the approach to education, would have argued that education for everyone was not possible. However, “Dewey had a faith that, properly instructed and informed, individuals would choose to act in ways that are mutually beneficial, appreciating the importance of including all members of society for their gifts and potential contributions to the good of all” (Shaw, 2002, p. 32). Clearly, this “faith” better recognized as an educational philosophy of Dewey’s articulated in the early part of the 20th century, combined with the social and governmental changes in the United

States following the Great Depression, were the inception of the eventual writing center as it is today.

Writing Centers

Populations of college students began changing in higher education institutions as Dewey's philosophy of greater access permeated the culture. According to Thonus (2003), "Writing Centers in U.S. colleges and universities began as writing labs in the 1930s" in part because the students going to these labs were "racial, ethnic, or gender minorities judged by their teachers to need remediation" (p. 1). This opening up of colleges and universities to the greater overall American population created the need for writing labs.

In addition to the philosophy of Dewey and the eventual stratification student population, other macro factors were in part responsible for the reaction of higher education institutes that resulted in the creation of tutoring services and specifically modern writing centers. For instance after the United States involvement in World War II, many returning GIs were able through the newly legislated GI bill to go to college (Collins, 2002) These young men (along with a relatively few women) were not the traditional, upper class college students. Rather, these veterans were often older, from various economic and cultural backgrounds, and were differently educated than the more traditional college students of the time. This new population of college students created a need for greater supplemental instruction on campuses in the years following, and the following generation of baby boomers certainly meant an upswing and democratization of college level students and college level instruction.

Many college administrators recognized the urgent need to respond to the larger influx of students with tutoring services for the GIs and later baby boomers. Remedial education existed in higher education before but grew at a substantial rate in response to this historical population

increases and the Dewey inspired changes in philosophies of education.

The Need for Writing Centers

While clearly institutions of higher education had a shift in thinking about education in part because of educational leaders like Dewey, and while they also clearly reacted to the growing number of students after World War II, the need for writing centers has not waned in the years since. In one specific instance in 2013, the Governor of Tennessee proposed the Drive to 55 initiative (Haslam, 2013). The purpose of the initiative was to increase the percentages of Tennesseans earning some form of post-secondary degree or certificate. The governor's initiative was underway at the same time as new funding laws in the state of Tennessee have taken effect. This initiative ties funding for higher education institutions to graduation rates while abolishing remedial classes many colleges offer for unprepared students (Complete College Tennessee Act Summary, 2011). Abolishing remedial classes means that students with varying degrees of ability are entering the same classes together. A student who earns a 12 on the reading part of the ACT and a student who earns a 26 on the same part of the exam now sit next to one another in the same credit bearing college writing course. The impetus is on instructors and college administrators to raise the academic ability of students who are unprepared for college level classes or face loss of funding if those students fail.

In light of these relatively recent changes in law and policy, the concept of a writing center, where students can go to get remedial help with writing, a component intrinsic to success in most college classes, becomes even more important. McKinney (2013) indicated that writing centers should be "comfortable" places, effectively "respites away from the cold, faceless bureaucracy" where students could "get one-to-one help on their writing" (p. 85). Yet the common practices, typical physical spaces, standard online spaces, typical tutoring practices,

common leadership practices are not expressed in any research as standard or common to writing centers. Additionally, McKinney pointed out the qualities of writing centers, but not specific criteria—an important distinction because a definition requires those criteria as well. McKinney also indicated that the “grand narrative” surrounding writing centers “is a representation—and not how it is” (p. 86). This representation of an idea and not a clear definition is the essential problem, especially with the continuing influx of students who will need the assistance of writing centers. The importance of understanding what constitutes and defines a writing center, discovering “how it is” and avoiding reliance on some partially fictional narrative not based in research suddenly becomes of paramount importance (McKinney, 2013).

It is equally important to gain a clear, concise definition in order to argue effectively for continuing funding needed to make writing centers effective and viable areas for learning. Gardner and Ramsey (2005) wrote that there is “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” (p. 26). This lack of language to deal with others outside the writing center begins in not being able to articulate precisely what a writing center is or does. Bell and Frost (2012) argued that the language to articulate why or how writing centers are effective is simply not there. Researchers have examined writing labs or writing centers in several ways, but current available research suggests that researchers have not carried out holistic case studies, Delphi research panels, or similar studies over a specific geographical location to examine writing centers *in situ*, and few researchers gathered data using interviews of experts in writing centers. (Carino & Enders, 2001; Morrison & Nadeau, 2003). This is an area under-explored by research, and part of the direction new research needs to explore.

The Next Beginning: 1984

While there were many studies about writing labs or writing centers before, North's 1984 essay "The Idea of a Writing Center" changed the perception and the conversation about writing centers in the United States. His essay was a virtual call to arms for writing center instructors, administrators, and even individual tutors to more readily recognize their work as valuable. Many of the ideas that North proposed are the basis for practices in writing centers developed in the years since, and much of the research into writing centers has been, partially at least, in reaction to what North wrote in his seminal essay.

Despite North's 1984 seminal essay, of course the conversation surrounding writing centers in the 21st century is once again moving forward. For example, Boquet and Lerner (2008) deconstructed North's essay on college writing centers and made a differing stand on what and how college writing centers are and should be. Boquet and Lerner articulated a gap in the research. Boquet and Lerner begin by disseminating the information from the original North essay clearly and concisely, using the most often quoted ideas from the essay to illustrate how North's essay created a paradigm shift in the world of writing centers and how his essay helped mobilize and unite instructors in writing centers. Boquet and Lerner attempt to move the discussion and the research beyond the bounds that North so strongly established, Boquet and Lerner argued that North's essay partially stalled further research into writing centers, and that is clearly problematic. Despite the criticism of North and writing center research, Boquet and Lerner did not suggest a definitive answer for what defines a writing center, but rather seemed intent on deconstructing North's ideas to gain a better understanding of writing centers and North's thought process.

North's (1984), and later Boquet and Lerner's 2008 work, is important for several

reasons. North's original essay provided vocabulary and expectations that researchers of writing centers should include in writing about writing centers, but also because Boquet and Lerner, and even North (1994), pointed out the lack of new directional research. For example, Boquet and Lerner explicitly highlighted the lack of research based writing, stated that while some "authors take up a variety of theoretical frameworks and topics that are germane to teaching writing as a whole, the perspective is largely anemic one, an application of ideas or theory developed outside writing center work to one-on-one tutoring" (p. 162). Boquet and Lerner indicated that the research into writing centers is not actually centered on writing centers, but rather writing, tutors, or writing centers supporting classrooms. They further note that it is "Much harder to find is anemic theory or model, one developed by research that is conducted in writing center settings that could act as a lens to examine other teaching-learning contexts" (p.162). What Boquet and Lerner asserted here is a challenge to future researchers to attempt the genesis of some "model" that might be used later by other researchers for what in concrete terms or concepts that define a writing center, while also advancing the research and changing the perception of writing centers, perhaps not precisely as the authors describe as "a lens to examine other teaching-learning contexts" (p. 162), but further in depth into what pedagogical practices and what environments create an effective writing center—that is, what criteria defines a writing center.

Moving Beyond North's Milestone

Many scholars who write about writing centers indicate an understanding that the lack of a definition for a writing center exists, but there seems to be an acceptance, indeed almost an argument, for a broad non-specific idea of the writing center instead of a research based definition of one (Boquet & Lerner, 2008; North, 1984; Simpson, 2010). Simpson (2010) articulated this idea when she wrote that "clinging to a fixed idea of a writing center, whatever

each of us thinks that idea is, shuts off opportunities. This inflexibility causes writing center folks to be unnecessarily defensive about our work and to be offensive to others when we tell them their ideas are wrong” (p.4). Simpson’s specific language indicating that writing center thoughts are limited by “whatever each of us thinks that is” (p. 4). Indeed, Simpson indicated that

We need to understand that we can only influence, not control, the way others see our missions, goals, and methods. We need to be open to having our own visions adjusted in surprising ways. The boundaries between what "should" happen in a writing center and what does happen and what might happen are porous to say the least. "We don't" is a dangerous phrase. Maybe we do. Maybe we could. (p. 4)

Simpson clearly does not desire a narrow definition of what a writing center should or should not do; yet, the idea of attempting to define a writing center in broad terms and through the use of expert opinion is a worthy one. The lack of definition is as dangerous as is one too narrow. There are some basic practices that all writing centers have in common, and perhaps if enough of those basic practices arise from research, a definition that broadly defines writing centers will emerge as well (Simpson, 2010). There are other scholars such as Schendel and McCauley (2012), who suggested the non-fixed idea of a writing center is actually worthwhile. For instance, Schendel and McCauley noted that while writing centers are certainly ubiquitous, centers are also not defined by a set criteria. Schendel and McCauley indicated the many variations that writing centers inhabit in different institutions: “They are in two- and four-year institutions and exist entirely online or as brick-and-mortar locations. They are funded within for-profit and nonprofit entities, housed in high schools, set up in libraries, and operating in community literacy contexts” (p. xvii). These many different incarnations of writing centers speaks to the various

needs of writing center patrons, as the authors (2012) further noted: “Writing centers might offer credit bearing courses. They might include classroom-based fellows programs. They may be administered by faculty or staff who come from very different backgrounds of study” (p. xvii). Schendel and McCauley clearly indicated that writing about writing centers can be difficult “when writing centers themselves are so many different things” (p. xvii), and ultimately the authors did not propose a definition, but rather suggested that what the reader does with or in a writing center is “based on your own needs and institutional context” (p. xvii). The idea of limited institutional context to writing centers in higher education is an important delimitation for researchers to consider, especially where an attempt at defining writing centers will be made that might help future scholars with understanding, researching, and writing about the writing center.

Writing Center Patrons

Research outside the purview of writing centers helps shed light on the patrons of writing centers—student who might need help with writing. For instance, Payne (1996) underscored the issue that many colleges are facing with regards remedial education and entering freshman. Her theories on teaching to the individual person with that person’s background in mind created a paradigm shift in educational practices, especially when dealing with students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Additionally, her research noted that many of the students who are entering higher education need individual attention that instructors of English are likely unable to give, but that writing centers may provide, primarily in the form of tutors who can work one-on-one with the student, thereby establishing a tutor to student relationship. *Indeed*, Payne stated, “The most important part of learning seems to be related to relationship” (p. 110). Her research into the need for students to form relationships in order to achieve greater gains, regardless of

background, is partially used to support the need for research into what constitutes a writing center.

Researchers who focus on writing centers also understand the importance of knowing the patrons of writing centers. After all, understanding why writing centers have developed and their importance to institutions of higher education is paramount to understanding the need for further research. Hoover and Lipka (2013) expanded and clarified the subject of writing centers in that it showed how many institutes of higher education, specifically community colleges, are dealing with students who cannot read and write at a high enough level to begin taking college level classes, even when they are forced to by many institutions. Many of those students are slotted into remedial classes where they learn the essential basics of writing. Hoover and Lipka began by examining one instructor and his class as they finish a semester's work with a final exam writing exercise and the consequences of that exercise before flashing back to the beginning of the semester for that instructor as he begins his class. The flashback illustrated how far the students have come in the short time available. In one instance, the instructor asks if the students are familiar with a syllabus because his experience has shown that many are not. The authors also examined the struggles of the students and examined remedial classes from their point of view. Students in such remedial classes are often the target population of writing centers, and this examination of student progress demonstrated the need for research into defining what writing centers are. Hoover and Lipka discussed the problem of students entering college under-prepared for higher-level writing, and their research demonstrated the growing and substantial need for writing centers or some form of remedial writing instruction.

But more than simply helping remedial writers, recent research indicated that writing centers seem to help students who actively engage and participate in them. Bell and Frost (2012)

examined one writing center and discover that students who “engaged most often with the writing center, did fare better” than other students who did not “participate regularly in writing center support” (p. 23). Bell and Frost’s findings indicated that students who actively engage in writing centers using the resources and abilities of the writing center employees and the writing center itself do better overall than those who do not.

The growing need for writing centers is not only because of students being ill prepared for college that Bell and Frost (2012) indicated and that Hoover and Lipka (2013) addressed. Another population that can benefit from time in the writing center is the Generation 1.5 learners. Generation 1.5 learners are “writers who are long-term U.S. residents and English learners fluent in spoken English” (Thonus, 2011, p. 1), but may have some difficulty with written language because of a background primarily in another language, either as a resident where another language was paramount, or in a U.S. household where another language besides English was spoken. Thonus provided a microanalysis of one way a writing center can help a particular student population. Thonus argued that writing centers are uniquely equipped and already pre-dispositioned to be helpful to Generation 1.5 learners. Thonus also noted that this predisposition exists because “writing center pedagogy assumes that students can (a) verbalize what they want to write, (b) express themselves clearly and correctly in English, (c) reply to questions about writing, (d) perceive what sounds right on paper, and (e) focus on and value organization and development more than sentence-level correctness” (p. 17). These pedagogical assumptions delineated by Thonus indicated a direction for research in that addressing this assumption might help clarify what defines a writing center. She suggested that part of what creates a writing center may have parts that are ESL ready. Also, Thonus’s demarcation of the pedagogical practices of writing centers with regards to ESL meshes with North’s (1984) view

that writing centers should be places of grammar and places where organization and development are essential in pedagogy. In addition to meshing with North's view, Thonus' ideas align with Griswold's (2006) view that writing centers might also be places where students learn reading in addition to writing. These opinions of experts such as North, Griswold, and Thonus indicated that experts writing center directors might agree on some aspects or criteria that define the writing center that current research has yet to be clarify.

How, or specifically from whom, students learn the use of grammar, organization, development, and reading, for better writing is important, and technology has an impact on writing centers than may go beyond the simple use of the computer as a writing tool. Burstein et al. (2004) examined automated essay evaluation, and evaluated the Criterion Online Writing Service. These researchers explored what possibly could be the future of writing labs, that is, the use of computer programs that would evaluate student writing using a "web-based system that provides automated scoring and evaluation of student essays" (p. 27). The authors began with the reasonable premise that the "best way to improve one's writing skills is to write, receive feedback from an instructor, revise based on the feedback, and then repeat the whole process as often as possible" (p. 27), and then argued that premise is an incredible weight on writing instructors, and such a weight on instructors can be alleviated by an automated essay scoring system. Burstein et al. (2004) stated that an automated system could replace actual interaction with a tutor, at least for the purpose of learning writing. The authors also evaluated the efficacy of Criterion, in part stating that the program only "identified 40% of the subject-verb agreement errors" (p. 33), comparing automated tutor efficacy to human tutor efficacy. Yet any type of feedback for students of writing is better than none, especially if it catches at least some of the errors students are making. However, the examination of artificial intelligence programs that

attempt to supplement the real tutor/student relationship is certainly worth examination, especially with Payne's (1996) ideas about relationships being paramount in student success. Whether or not such programs that replace the tutor or writing center workers in interactions with a student are viable and part of the future is an important question. The more important question may be, is such a system viable at the moment or is an online system a part of what defines the writing center?

The Physical Space, Staff, and Funding

Writing centers, in addition to being places where students learn grammar, organization and development are also physical spaces, even if the space is existent only by the student's access to a computer program. Accordingly, research into physical spaces on college campuses is needed to understand what constitutes a learning place on a college campus. Harper (2008) summarized the research and writing from people all across the United States who have devoted time to the subject of inclusivity. His contributors helped to shape the single ideas of what it means to be an inclusive campus across all aspects of higher education. Additionally, Kinzie and Mulholland (2008) described the importance physical spaces can have on students. Kinzie and Mulholland's chapter illustrated how higher education institutions can change their physical space so that it is "more conducive to cross cultural-engagement and learning" (p.105). Making a space more conducive to learners of all types should be a criterion of a writing center, and the idea of Inclusivity as a good practice of a writing center is supported by research (Nelson et al., 2004). This idea of physical space that promotes inclusivity suggests that a good writing lab or writing center ought to promote culture and diversity, and at least try to be inclusive.

If a writing center is to promote culture and diversity, the people in charge of the writing center have to be aware of those issues. It is important to understand the needs of the students

who are coming to the writing center for help and understanding what the faculty's expectations are for those students. Avinger et al. (1998) addressed what type faculty should be in writing centers by arguing that faculty input into writing center practices helps improve the writing center. The authors indicated that "a writing center staffed and administrated by English or writing faculty offers advantages over other types of writing centers" (Avinger et al., p. 26). The authors' premise that English or writing faculty ought to be in charge of writing centers along with the authors' idea of leadership in the writing center as fundamental aspect of a writing center seems to define a criterion of a writing center. Indeed, Avinger et al suggested that experts already working in writing centers can best demonstrate leadership in writing centers.

Leaders in writing centers will likely face various tribulations as they work. As Bell and Frost (2012) pointed out, "Since writing centers often compete for funds with other student services, the ability to demonstrate effectiveness becomes paramount to their survival within the institution" (p. 19). Community colleges are different from four-year universities, and understanding the particular goals and challenges of community colleges may help researchers to better understand how the writing center can work in the community college setting. Vaughan (2006) outlined what community colleges are and what they accomplish. Vaughan suggested that having a working definition of a community college would aid in understanding what a writing center does in that setting. Additionally, Vaughan (2006) gave his readers some historical background to illustrate how community colleges have grown in importance and influence. Vaughan also helps the readers understand that a community colleges mission is different and why that mission is different, and what factors play into making that mission a reality for community colleges. Vaughan demonstrated an understanding of where community colleges began, what community colleges are, and why they are still growing and needed.

In addition to Vaughn's (2006) broad approach to community colleges, understanding budget concerns at community colleges is best articulated by Washburn (2005). Washburn wrote that market forces and commercial values are playing a growing role in academia. Washburn (2005) indicated that the pressures on budget managers are increasing and growing, stating that "during the period 2001-2005, state and local funding per college student dropped to a twenty five year low" (p. xiv). Interestingly, Vaughn and Washburn's financial outlook on writing centers indicated that colleges are going to struggle for state funding, and that some respect to the earlier modes of funding ought to be revisited. Writing centers, despite their long history in colleges are neither classrooms nor overtly popular programs and the challenges for funding writing centers is noted by Lerner (2001) and Thonus (2008) For that reason, the question of how funding impacts writing centers means funding may be a part of criterion for the definition of writing centers.

Writing Centers and Fostering Relationships

Fullmer (2012) addressed assessment of tutoring laboratories in a learning assistance center as it "examines the incorporation of online tutoring into required tutoring laboratories for developmental courses in reading, writing, and mathematics, including the evaluation of the effectiveness of the laboratories" (p. 68). Her language and practice indicated the direction more in-depth research into only one subject area might take, and her essay provided a basis for the creation of a research model that researchers can follow. Fullmer provided evidence that suggested developmental students who were required to attend writing centers actually performed better in post-tests designed to assess student improvement, suggesting that further research will help support the ever-growing consensus of writing centers as places that positively influence novice writers. Fullmer provided insight into how researchers might show the practical

application of allocation of funds by institutes of higher education based on the idea that funds should to be allocated for effect. Fullmer wrote, “Effective programs increase student skills, which are linked to students’ increased persistence and retention rates that are correlated to the graduation rates of colleges and universities” (p. 88). Fullmer’s call for allocation of funds and the imperative of the current research, and her example and language help provide a basis for new research in that she identifies the correlation between graduation rates and effective programs.

As important as the need for a solid basis in language is, the need for information and data about writing centers and their roles are as important. Diederich and Schroeder (2008) indicated a need for quantitative data on the effect that writing centers can have on students, especially in their justification for their research. Additionally, Diederich and Schroeder’s research provided quantitative data showing that students benefit from writing centers, especially when students can develop a relationship with a particular peer tutor in the lab. Thompson (2009) micro-analyzed the relationship an experienced tutor can create with a student, and indicated the importance lies in the relationship between a student and a tutor, and that relationship especially when an experienced tutor is involved, is paramount to the student’s development as a writer. The idea of the relationship between the tutor and the student might be an essential part of creating criteria for what defines a writing center. Diederich and Schroeder’s notion of developing relationships through effective peer reviewing serves as both support and evidence. For example, Diederich and Schroeder determined that “the variables targeted pairing with a writing center tutor and pass rate are related or dependent” (p. 22). Diederich and Schroeder showed that a relationship does exist between how well a student does and whether he or she developed a relationship with his or her tutor. The researchers found that the students who paired with a tutor

did better than those who took advantage of the writing center but did not pair with a tutor. This result indicated that writing centers can play a key role in the development of writing in incoming freshman, especially when paired with pedagogical practices that depend on relationship building to impart information to the student. The researchers did not address the effect of the writing center itself versus a control group of students without the writing center, something future research might explore. Diederich and Schroeder (2008) researched only the relationship between the tutor and student. The researchers did not conduct quantifiable research into other aspects of what makes a writing center a writing center, nor a writing center's overall effect on a specific demographic of students. The medium that tutor's meet with students may have some influence on the efficacy of the relationship, whether that medium is phone, text, video conference or in person. The article is still relevant in that it does show that a positive relationship between tutor and student, and that relationship ought to be a criterion of examining what defines a writing center.

Provocative Moments

Pizzolato (2005) noted that relationship between the tutor and the student is defined by small moments when the student gains understanding about the subject being discussed or illustrated, and those moments depend on face-to-face meetings between students and tutors. Yet many institutions of higher education may be tempted to look at online writing centers as a less expensive alternative to a brick and mortar site. Although online writing labs can be useful, Inman-Anderson (1997) indicated that time spent between the tutor and those tutored are difficult to reproduce by the practices online writing labs use. Despite modern advancements in face-to-face virtual meetings, those moments are, as Diederich and Schroeder (2008) indicated, vital. These moments are defined by Pizzolato (2005), who described how the safe place and

holding environment fostered by writing centers assist students to move to the next level of their writing through what are termed “provocative moments,” the “aha!” or “light bulb” moments where the student suddenly has a realization and comprehends how to improve the quality of writing (p. 629). In many ways, the theories Pizzolato advanced are similar to the ideas that writing centers are founded on, and the idea of the provocative moment is a crucial component to the definition of writing centers and the goals they foster. Pizzolato’s argument that students ought to have “the ability to assess competing ideas and to generate new ideas” resonates in the research explored because of the dichotomy represented by two instructors (a writing lab instructor and a teacher) is, one might be led to believe, conducive to the creation of new ideas that Pizzolato argued defined what is a provocative moment. More, the idea of the provocative moment certainly indicates what some of the criteria for a writing center might be as these moments seemed to regularly be induced by tutors.

The concept of the provocative moment is recognized in Sturman’s 2018 and Griswold’s 2006 writings, as well as the aforementioned Thonus (2003). Griswold focused on what it is tutors do when tutoring students as well as how they might be more effective by learning about teaching reading. Griswold interviewed tutors at several urban university writing centers to discover what ideas tutors had about reading as it relates to writing centers. He found that while many of the tutors “indicated a lack of specific knowledge of how reading can be taught, all viewed teaching reading important to their work in writing centers, and all exhibited a predisposition to an approach that would integrate writing and reading” (Griswold, 2006, p. 67). Griswold argued that tutors, while perhaps confident when teaching strategies to address writing assignments, recognize the need for greater reading instruction as part of the writing process. The idea of a tutor being able to see learning needs becomes especially important in Sturman’s

argument that generation 1.5 learners (a term Sturman echoes from Thonus) need of “one-on-one writing tutorials [that] can help socialize students into the institutional norms of oral academic discourse and academic writing” (Sturman, 2018, p. 73).

Indeed, as Fitzgerald (1994) asserted, “In a truly collaborative tutoring session, the tutor helps the student develop listening, reading, speaking, and writing skills simultaneously” (p. 12). However, the idea of the tutor as the initiator of Pizzolato’s (2005) provocative moment is important. The idea of conferencing as essential to the concept of a typical writing center is an idea much of the research articulated in this chapter establishes, especially given that “there exists no one profile of a ‘typical’ writing center program” (Griswold, 2006, p. 63). Lerner’s ideas are similar to Inman-Andersons (1997) in that he provided ways to define what a writing lab or writing center might have as one of the criteria, and the article is similar to Diederich and Schroeder’s (2008) work in that Lerner’s article demonstrated the idea with examples and data.

Lerner (2005) also showed the evolution of the concept of a writing laboratory where students would, much like they do in science, practice the concepts and ideas they were learning in class. Looking at the origin of the writing center, or writing lab, in this light may help to understand why academics seems to accept as given the idea that writing centers are necessary despite the lack of specific research that indicates writing laboratories are helpful to students in addition to those in need of remediation. In that light, Lerner (2005) provided direction for further research. Lerner’s work with Boquet (2008) who also noted that more research needs to be done into writing centers, but nonetheless support and uphold the idea of the tutor student relationship as important criteria for what defines a writing center.

The teacher-to-tutor relationship is also examined in other academic publications; LaClare and Franz (2013) examined the perception of administrators, instructors, students, and

tutors within the writing center compared to the mission of the writing center. The stakeholders in a writing center often have expectations that vary depending on the person and the position, but as LaClare and Franz noted,

The perception of writing centers as offering a service has been nurtured by tutors and directors alike from the earliest incarnations right up to the present. However, it is a service that has always sought to impose limits and restrictions upon the types of assistance on offer. While in the majority of cases these limitations have a sound rationale, perhaps to maintain the boundary of what constitutes a student's own work, or to prevent faculty members from dropping off papers to be collected at a later date . . . (p. 6)

What LaClare and Franz argued is that the expectations for and the definition of writing centers is not strictly in the hands of the people who work there and that their definition and expectations are not even driven by what might or might not be effective in a writing center but rather are driven by other concerns, many of which come from outside the writing center itself. LaClare and Franz's idea of politics and personal ideas driving the perception, and therefore the definition of a writing center, is important to recognize research progresses because individual writing center directors are likely influenced by the same concepts. The need to continue to research and examine writing centers is further advocated by Salem (2016) who wrote:

I would argue that we have nothing to lose and everything to gain from reinventing writing center pedagogy. To be clear, I am not saying that we should look for ways to tinker with or expand our traditional practices. Rather, I am arguing for completely rethinking what we do and why we do it. (p. 164)

The need to revisit and rethink pedagogy in the writing center certainly must include examining where and who deliver that pedagogy.

Spigelman and Grobman (2005) indicated one such direction in delivering that pedagogy in their book about class-based writing tutoring, which is placing tutors into the classroom alongside instructors to deliver tutoring in writing. They note that:

if classroom-based writing tutoring is to be staged and executed effectively, it must be understood by all stakeholders as a distinct form of writing support. Classroom-based writing tutoring is no less than an amalgamated instructional method, operating in its own specific space and time rather than as an extension of a single strand of tutoring principles (p. 2)

Spigelman and Grobman indicated also that delivering tutoring into the classroom rather than waiting for the student to come to the writing center is a method worth examination. Later scholars building on Spigelman and Grobman's work (Carpenter, Whiddon, & Dvorak 2014) discovered that the writing center is in a unique position to offer course embedded tutoring in the classroom but that "Course-embedded peer-to-peer tutoring programs that are based in writing centers reveal complex issues related to identity for tutors, teachers, writers, and the programs themselves" (para 10). Those issues are especially important for writing centers as directors of writing centers work through virtual and physical spaces, staffing, writing pedagogy, budget concerns, and more.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 2 covered a brief history of writing centers creation and indicated the gap in the research for exploration this study examines. Chapter 2 noted the current state of scholarly research into writing centers, and indicates likely future research areas.

Chapter 3. Research Method

The purpose of this study was to discover what defines writing centers by interviewing those working in writing centers in the Southern Appalachian area. I used this study to articulate some defining qualities of writing centers in higher education through interviews by telephone combined with recordings. By asking pointed, specific, questions to those who are leaders in writing centers, a researched-based definition can be articulated. This qualitative study was based on a single round of telephone or virtual face-to-face interviews, with follow up transcription emails, with 13 educators who work or worked in writing centers, and with working professionals who meet criteria for being writing center directors. After the interviews were completed, the participants were given a transcription of the interview to verify any responses.

The study was focused on how those who work in writing centers defined what a writing center is and does, and because of Covid-19, all interviews were telephone interviews, or virtual meetings using Microsoft Teams. Phone interviews were recorded using Teams simply by starting a meeting in Teams and recording myself having the conversation over the speaker phone with the directors. For this study, interviews are a logical methodological approach because interviews are a method of data collection which garners “information from interview participants on a specific topic or set of topics” (Schmitz, 2012, Section 9.1, para 2), and because of the unique nature of auxiliary services designed to supplement instruction—specifically writing centers—the effectiveness of those service are difficult to gauge using quantitative methods. For research areas where the service or program is as important as tracking success, “the usual approach to academic research” might not “provide meaningful and useful answers about programs’ merit, worth, and significance” (Patton, 2017, p. 1). Therefore, for finding

meaningful answers for the purpose of defining the writing center, a qualitative approach using interviews with those directing writing centers was most suitable, logical research plan.

This research was designed to discover how directors in writing centers define a writing center. For data collection, I employed telephone and virtual interviews with the opportunity to change or add on to answers after the interview to gain an understanding of writing centers—this methodology seeks to establish from writing center directors in the field what constitutes a writing center in Southern Appalachia higher education institutions. Therefore, defining a writing center with clear, concise criteria is the primary purpose, but from the research process, an idea of what constitutes an effective writing center will take shape, as well as an idea of what are the most common practices of writing centers in this area. Currently there exists no definitive criteria for a writing center. Consequently, building a definition from writing center directors' answers to open-ended interview questions will help create definitive criteria from which a definition will emerge. That definition should result from a common, clear definition of consensus based on a general agreement (Diamond et al., 2014, p. 405). However, this research focused on a specific geographical location of writing centers and interviewing writing center directors, and finally limiting the definition to the region and level of expertise of those directors.

Research Questions

The research questions used in the interviews were created with the assumption that the writing center directors were working professionals and therefore unlikely to need additional information about esoteric aspects in questions about writing centers. This research is guided by the idea that people working in the writing center are some of best sources for explaining and ultimately defining the writing center.

Central Research Question: Based on interviews with writing center directors in the Southern Appalachian region, what criteria define a Southern Appalachian writing center?

Research Question 1: What criteria and common practices define a writing center in Southern Appalachia?

Research Question 2: What constitutes an effective writing center?

Research Question 3: How are tutors part of the definition or criteria of a writing center?

Research Question 4: How do writing centers identify and help students with writing needs, and what barriers are there to a student's access to writing centers?

Research Question 5: What role does administration have in the operation of a writing center, and what is the future of writing centers in community colleges?

Research questions and the interview questions are closely related (see Appendix A), but the differences are in perspective of the researcher versus the perspective in answers of the writing center director.

Theoretical Framework

Creswell (2018) stated that a case study is “a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information” (p. 97). Given the lack of definition with regards to writing centers, the logical approach is first establishing that definition. My research includes interviews, and the observations and ideas of writing center directors. Because the research took place over a period

of time and with directors in varying locations, it fits Creswell's definition of a multi-site case study, which helps solidify this project as valid research. Too, examining the responses from writing center directors—all of whom are working professionals with years of experience and education—is a different perspective than questioning 100 students who have used a writing center about their experiences.

In addition to Creswell and Creswell's 2018 research, Yin (2014) offered more specific insight into what case studies require. More importantly, for choosing a case study to approach this research, Yin argued that case studies are worthwhile despite what many researchers might think. He indicated that case studies are growing in importance. He stated that one clear indication of the importance of case studies "has been the sheer frequency with which the term *case study research* appears in publications," that "the frequency for 'case study research' shows a distinct upward trend," and that "as evidenced by the frequency trends, case study research may be having an increasingly prominent place in everyone's portfolio" (p. xix). Yin makes a strong argument for the case study as a prominent, often used, relevant, reliable form of qualitative study, and his argument, along with Creswell's definition of a case study, are basis for defining this dissertation as a case study.

Creswell and Creswell (2018), Yin (2014), and Maxwell (2013) provided insight for this research into "the relationship between your research design and your proposal argument" (Maxwell, p. 142). Maxwell indicated that the importance of understanding a research design is, in a sense, an argument for the necessity of the research proposed. With that in mind, the methodology of interviewing writing center directors is sensible, as I could argue that as working professionals in the field, they are at the very least the most knowledgeable about working in the field of writing centers.

Instrumentation

Interviews

Research should focus on improving the basic understanding of the world and people. Qualitative research is inherently open to varying forms of methodology and interpretation of data. Qualitative research is “characteristically exploratory, fluid and flexible, data-driven and context sensitive” (Mason, 2002, p. 24). Creswell and Creswell, (2018) noted that sampling a population through interviews allows researchers to gain generalized information from those interviewees (p. 15). Using interviews to explore a specific group’s attitudes and opinions on a particular subject, especially one with which that participant population is intimately familiar with, is clearly a traditional approach. The research here has a participant population that is writing center directors for their professional ideas on writing centers—this is a very specific, niche, and experienced with the phenomenon, group.

The first step in conducting interviews was selecting participants. To begin, I searched using Google and Appalachian Resource Commission maps for institutions of higher education in Southern Appalachia in an ever-widening circle in proximity to my home, and then further researched those institutions looking for writing centers and writing center directors. From this simple research, a list of 30 possible candidates was created. I cold-emailed or cold called the writing center directors to explain my intent and I asked for permission to interview that person. After the interviews were scheduled, I used the questions from Appendix A to interview the directors, and sent them a transcript of that interview for their review.

Data Analysis

The responses were examined using coding to identify in the qualitative data reoccurring themes or ideas, first by open coding the interview responses at least three times, and then

through focused coding to determine oft repeated ideas (Witte & Witte, 2010). After having narrowed the opening coding process for reoccurring ideas or themes, the focused coding allows numbers to be attached to those reoccurring themes and ideas. Finally, I examined the data and ranked these themes on occurrences in interviewees' responses.

Participant Selection

The writing center director participants have to meet specific criteria to engage in this study. Participants are selected for this study if they possess a master's or doctoral degree in writing, English, or education, have at least two years working in or directly with writing centers, have at least year of being a director, and are currently employed at a public or private two-or four-year higher education institution.

After the Institution Review Board at ETSU granted permission for my study, I used the criteria to develop a list of working professionals in higher education writing centers in Southern Appalachia and from that list I emailed or called and asked directors to be a part of this research. Many of writing center directors were also asked to suggest someone they knew and respected in Southern Appalachia who was a peer. When a director agreed to be a part of the research, the interview times were scheduled, and the consent form was emailed to the prospective interviewees. Because this research is only with writing center working professionals in higher education with at least two years' experience directly in a writing center, such as a writing lab director or writing center director, there was considerable shared experiences and knowledge about the culture of writing centers, and criteria that can be used to define the writing center emerged.

Data Collection

The data collection process consisted of structured, in-depth interviews over the telephone or virtually with the people who meet the criteria of for inclusion. After a participant had consented (Appendix B) to the interview and the time was scheduled, the interviewees could still opt to not participate if they so choose. Interviewees could also discontinue the interview at any point after the interview began and were under no obligation to participate. This freedom to disengage from the research was made known to the interviewees by the consent form, as well as in the first few minutes of the interview process. After the interview was over, the interviewee could still request that their answers not be used in the research. Of course, the interviewees retained anonymity throughout the process.

For the interviews with the writing center directors, I used the questions from Appendix A. The interviews used here are standardized, open-ended interviews. This approach is the most logical given the work-related experience of the experts that are being interviewed, as they are the ones with the most in-depth and direct view of a writing center, and as this research enables the different interviews to be compared and analyzed more easily. There were 13 interviewees. These interviews took place over the course of 12 weeks. I transcribed the entire interview as it was happening, and I emailed a copy of the transcript to the interviewee for review. All transcripts were available for the member check, which is an important process for establishing credibility in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). The questions and the answers are available in Chapter 4.

Transcribing the interviews allowed me to be prepared for the interviewees to change direction based on their answers, and I could adapt the questions to issues or ideas the participant proposed at each interview, and more could ask them to clarify their exact wording as I was

typing the words down as the interviewee spoke. When I did the transcriptions, I did change the incorrect verb or incorrect word in order to maintain the participant's intent. I also left off conversational phrasing and other similar phrases that were not answers to the questions.

I used a Microsoft Word and Teams as a tools, including the search on the actual question and answer transcripts, to obtain data. The search revealed the use of certain words and often repeated phrases in response to the interview questions. Those words and phrases indicated an area considered as possible criteria for how a writing center is defined. Further analysis simply through a careful reading of the answers indicated what themes emerged, much as the research itself indicated what words and phrases repeated most often in the answers (Witte & Witte, 2010).

Credibility and Transferability

The participant's personal and professional well-being were foremost on my mind in creating and conducting the interviews. Palaganas et al. (2017) indicated that:

The concept of reflexivity challenges the assumption that there can be a privileged position where the researcher can study social reality objectively, that is, independent from it through value-free inquiry. But it should be noted that objectivity, as the concept is used in this paper, pertains to adopting appropriate methodological tools and techniques in doing qualitative research. (pp. 432-433)

By using the correct methodological tools and not making assumptions, I attempted to make interviewees and myself as comfortable as possible, allowing for a forthcoming and productive interview—using transcriptions were essential in creating a non-threatening, comfortable environment, in part because of Covid-19, and in part because participants were able to see their answers and reflect on whether they had answered in a way they were comfortable with.

Additionally, participants were able to choose their own locations and times for interviews. In addition to avoiding bias on my part as much as possible, I avoided creating power imbalances first by being aware of the imbalances, and second that despite that I would be the one to do the analysis, keeping in mind the interviewees' contributions at all times. Anyan (2013) addressed the complex subject of power imbalances by writing:

To control for the power imbalances in data collection and analysis, an interviewer may systematically study the research process to uncover the maneuverings of power. During the analysis, the interviewer may look at the interview situation from several perspectives to reflect on his or her own dynamisms within the circumstances of the interview. (p .7)

Credibility was further established through theoretical triangulation, as the research was reviewed continuously by my dissertation chair and committee, and through colleagues who are not in my field.

Transferability is dependent on detail, and as I conducted and transcribed the interviews detail was foremost on my mind. As indicated by Anney (2014), when the researcher provides a detailed description of the inquiry and participants were selected purposively, it facilitates transferability of the inquiry (p. 278). I attempted to purposively and deliberately select participants, and after participants were selected and agreed to be interviewed, every interaction with interviewees was noted and participants were asked to examine what I transcribed as their response in order to approve the wording. This created a more accurate and detailed description of the inquiry.

Dependability and Confirmability

In maintaining explicit records and complete transcripts of interviews, as well as following similar procedures for each interview, the researcher in a qualitative study can add to

the credibility of the research. By acknowledging information both personal and professional that could influence bias in the interview, I demonstrated credibility in this study. Both credibility and transferability help bolster dependability and confirmability. I was the investigator and primary contact person for all interviews. More, I handled all appointment times, transcriptions, analysis, and storage, and all written documents that were produced as a result of the research. As both a student and an employee in higher education, I had access to secure areas for data storage, and took precautions to make access to data password and firewall protected, as well as using password secured networks when working on the research. Additionally, I attempted to avoid bias, even in the limited relationship between the researcher and the interviewees. Bias in questioning can disrupt the results, and bias in the researcher while in interacting with interviewees skews data (Patton, 2002). Bias in the interview was eliminated as much as possible. I do not deny that part of the data collected in observing and interviewing writing center directors depended upon my state of mind at the time of the interview. Therefore, I attempted to schedule interviews at the same time of day, attempted to be well rested, and attempted to remove all other forms of distraction in the observation process.

To audit my research methodology and to limit bias and personal views, I contacted a professor at a 4-year university, and a research librarian concentrating in APA at a community college. The use of this analyst triangulation from these two outside observers to my research plan and writing provided helped limit bias and personal viewpoints, and supported the research credibility.

Chapter Summary

A qualitative design was appropriate to discover characteristics that writing center directors indicate define writing centers. The qualitative approach used open ended questions to

research what consensus emerged. Participants from Southern Appalachian higher education institutions were interviewed, and then transcripts were reviewed to determine if any additional comments should have been added or if any information should be changed to accurately reflect the views of the participants.

Chapter 4. Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how directors of writing centers defined the writing center. Writing center directors who worked or had worked in writing centers were interviewed. The research was guided by the four research questions. The data were collected through 13 interviews with writing center directors from Southern Appalachia. The participants were selected on the criteria of being working professionals with at least a year as a writing center director, two years of writing center experience, and a graduate college degree. After selection, each of the interviewees was asked the same questions in the same order (see Appendix A).

Ethical issues in this study were examined by the East Tennessee State University Institutional Review Board which granted approval to conduct human subject research. Each of the participants were emailed first, and after agreeing to be interviewed, were asked to review the consent form (see Appendix B). During this time of Covid-19, no face to face interviews were conducted. Each interview was conducted by telephone or by using Microsoft Teams. Both were recorded using Teams. Interviews lasted approximately 45 to 90 minutes and were conducted at a time of each participant's choosing. During interviews participants were informed that names of schools or individuals would be changed to protect the anonymity of the interviewee. Interviews were transcribed by the researcher as the interview took place, and immediately following the interview, that transcript was emailed to the interviewee for review. Because the interviews were simultaneously recorded on a laptop using Microsoft Teams, any issue with the initial transcription could be modified at the interviewee's request. Additionally, interviews were offered the opportunity to add any ideas or comments they thought were pertinent to the initial transcription. In this way member checking was used to assist with establishing data validity.

Study Participants

Writing center directors provided brief demographic and educational obtainment information as well as about their years of experience teaching. Table 1 provides a summary of demographic information pertaining to writing center director participants. The numbers assigned below to participants is not representative of the order the interviews took place, but does correspond to the order of recorded answers that follow.

Table 1

Demographics of Writing Center Directors

Participants	Gender	Years as Director of Writing Center	Years Working in a Writing Center	Director's Degree(s)
Participant 1	F	1.5	8	MFA
Participant 2	F	6	6	MA & MFA
Participant 3	F	6	6	MA
Participant 4	F	16	18	PhD
Participant 5	F	14	18	MFA
Participant 6	F	4	8	PhD
Participant 7	F	4	4	PhD
Participant 8	F	2	2	EdD
Participant 9	M	32	30	PhD
Participant 10	F	2	4	MA
Participant 11	M	9	15	PhD
Participant 12	F	4	6	MA
Participant 13	M	1	4	PhD

Research Questions Responses

Research Question 1

What criteria or common practices define a writing center in Southern Appalachia? (Interview Questions 1-5 addressed the first research question.)

1. What criteria do you think define a writing center?

Participant 1 answered:

It is a physical location or digital resource that provides tutoring, not editing, for students who are seeking help with writing assignments.

Participant 2 answered:

We are a small writing center. I am the only person students meet with. Our goal is to offer to any students. So, to be accessible and to offer help at any stage of the writing process. Of course, I am working with student with college degrees but often they have just as many problems as freshman comp students. We want to be available in the writing process from beginning to end. I also help students with writing samples, resumes, and other things that help them look for a job or internship.

Participant 3 answered:

There are two schools of thought. The purist: that is a student comes in and they talk about their writing and the student guides all the questions, and purest offers suggestions. I believe in the practical approach. We need to help, knowing we serve the population we serve. Too, I know a writing center needs to have computers, a teaching station for classes or small groups, private areas and importantly, trained tutors, and also a trained dedicated adult with a history of teaching writing. I cannot imagine someone without teaching experience doing this job.

Participant 4 answered:

I know they can look different in different settings. What I think it takes to call a writing center is a service for assisting writers. In our context we serve writers in all disciplines and all levels and our community if they have writing projects. We have individual appointments with writers to give them feedback.

Participant 5 answered:

A community of students supporting other students through the writing process. We are a peer run center, with peer tutors. I like to tell tutors I am not the boss, and if I am the boss, no one is going to be happy. Most students have interactions with tutors, so writing centers should be peer run. I help out and make sure there is funding.

Participant 6 answered:

Woah. An openness to genre—a loose affiliation to any discipline—a loose allegiance to genre, so we can say If you are writing in an academic environment, we want to help you. That is part of it. There is a sense of being outside of the requirements of grading and assessing . . . we do not have to assess the student's writing value. The fact that the student is writing is valuable and that gives us equality and egalitarian-ness that is lacking in non-writing center areas. I always come back to hospitality and respect.

Participant 7 answered:

One to one individual tutoring is the showcase. I like to think about when I was creating a writing center at my university: I was taking over in the 3rd year and it had not had a director, only an interim director, and the writing center was only doing the one-to-one tutoring—which is supporting the needs of students at the University, and that is the bread and butter—but I also wanted to support faculty. We are implementing some

writing in the discipline here, and I was envisioning me and my Assistant Director to be the hub of that writing in the discipline so that the faculty who have no pedagogy in writing can join workshops here and learn about making writing integral part of class. So, we support students, which is one- to-one tutoring, community events, and our food pantry, and a great space and then we support the faculty.

Participant 8 answered:

By its purpose by focusing on student writing. I do not consider myself a tutor or overseer of tutors, but outside of writing I do not feel a writing center is equipped or purposed to help students in general. I help students within the context of their writing. I like to goal toward a draft.

Participant 9 answered:

I want a center that is in line and reflects the kind of work people are doing in good composition programs and writing centers. So for instance, a composition program and the writing center have to have a connection. Another criterion is that the writing center needs to be open to working with students all across campus and with students from every major.

Participant 10 answered:

Great questions. It depends a bit on the environment. The community college and 4-year university are very different. The common threads are an inclusive welcoming space both socially and culturally and the physical space. All social backgrounds should feel confident comfortable. I use 'cozy' when I talk about writing centers.

Participant 11 answered:

We can look at it in number of different ways, but one writing centers are peer based—peer-to-peer—and I think writing center provide access to those peers by means that make sense for the campus community regardless of the definition of the students or university: that is core criteria. Pedagogically, on the other side, we have a little more flexibility because so much of what we do is driven by the student we reach, however that student population is defined by the institution. Also, many campuses have moved to virtual spaces, and physical space and virtual space is not defined in the same way. The writing center is defined most broadly, so, back to that basic criteria of supporting student writers on campus within the campus context, providing access and level of support that best represents the institution's student population.

Participant 12 answered:

A writing center is . . . what I have now and what my previous experiences were are part of that. I train tutors in other disciplines, but writing centers seem to be more established constructs and they seem to be different in that a writing center is the background for many people who are later interdisciplinary tutors. There is not as much out there on the interdisciplinary tutoring. So, for instance, I am a member of the SWCA. There is not anything like that for interdisciplinary centers. Any center that tutors writing could be considered a writing center whether that be virtually, in person, synchronous, and so on. We encourage our students to use our specific services but sometimes there are issues and we offer Smart Thinking, which I do not think of as a writing center, but is useful. Some large online tutoring services do not have a centralized, community that is part of the definition of the writing center. In this Covid-19 world we are living in I have broadened

my view. Before I would have said that the writing center needed geographical space, and hierarchy, and so on, but my definition has broadened, but there is something there about community that is part of the writing center. It is very much embedded in that idea of academia with some central culture that the writing center has.

Participant 13 answered:

That is a good question. I think first and foremost a good writing center by tutors who are committed to helping the people who come in to claiming ownership of their writing not just helping with specific elements of work. Tutors need to develop strong practices. A writing center needs a great training method for tutors. A writing center should constantly critique or improve itself and not rest on past results. Ideally the writing center has administrative support, which means funding, which means a good physical space, maybe database subscriptions so tutors can remain on top of current scholarship . . . an institution that wants to foster the idea that the writing center plays an integral role on campus across all disciplines. A strong writing center would be flexible, looking for new ways to engage, not just relying on older models or concepts of the writing center.

Common themes in Interview Question 1

Many of the directors indicated that a writing center is defined by tutors and a welcoming, comfortable, cozy, hospitable space, either in person or virtually. Most of the participants specified a willingness to help with writing in any discipline, and a good training program for tutors. A few directors indicated that the writing center is not place for remedial work, and yet others suggested that a writing center helps with more remedial writing also.

2. What common practices do you think define a writing center? (Interview Questions 1 and 2 addressed the first research question.)

Participant 1 answered:

Universal approach is a minimalist tutoring approach, where tutors are asking questions and providing feedback when the student makes it clear what they need help with.

Participant 2 answered:

The key is one on one. Face to face. I think that is the only way, which is difficult to do. We are NOT an editing center. The teacher in me refuses to miss an opportunity to teach. I do quite a lot of diagnosis, but my thing is tell students to know thyself. I try to point out the issues so they can improve. The largest issue is students cannot write arguments. I try to teach them to create a complete product, an argument to the best of their ability. I am not a lawyer so the students can share more with me about the construction of their argument. I go to classes, one is legal process where students learn about legal writing. I have copies of assignments so I know students need to do.

Participant 3 answered:

We have a center that is open and available at different hours of the day and evening with a lot of tutors, with some drop-in availability because college students do not plan well. Trained tutors go through a class in the spring, and I pull out the ones who want to be writing tutors and I further train them. A common practice is to also be positive. I say to my tutors when you read a paper and the tutor thinks oh my god, where do I start, then the tutor's first question should be about seeing what the student's assignment is from the prof. This is of course after reaching out and getting them comfortable. So, once a tutor knows what the professor wants, sometimes it is unpacking a rubric, or explaining the assignment clearly. A common practice is to help with all stages of writing: planning,

research, printing, drafting or wherever they are. Our tutors read and write from a hard copy the student brings. They teach as they go, but do not fix it.

Participant 4 answered:

Dialogue and conversation about writing and about the writer's concerns are at the center of a lot our meetings. No asynchronous meetings. We are doing Zoom or telephone appointments for sessions. For a conversation about the editing and about the writing too.

Participant 5 answered:

Compassion as a practice. Listening. Dialogue. Care. Empathy. Those are the practices I want to see.

Participant 6 answered:

Talk. Interpretation. Up to this point I would have said face to face interaction but this year has shaken my firmness in that. Feedback is important but a person is seeking qualified assistance, so guidance in some way shape or form.

Participant 7 answered:

I think that writing centers have first training and professional development for the tutors, so we support students who are working in the center and the students visit the center. I work with freshman who observe and learn before they start tutoring, I want student to professionalize in a way that will help them. I have projects such as social media, boosting our online presence, creating materials for STEM writers or other such material, so when they leave the center they can professionalize the experience. Therefore it is important to me to support tutors as much as students need help. One to one tutoring is the most important thing we do. I think I took for granted at my previous institution that students sign up but when I got to my new institution that was a different situation.

Professors did not know we had a writing center. I prepared and got tutors ready, and I had to go out and tell faculty what we do and where we are. I increased appointments by 70%. You have to tell people. You have to promote. We are always battling the idea that we are a remedial center. The best writers in the world seek help, and I have to spread the message.

Participant 8 answered:

I think . . .this is difficult to answer. There is the one I work in and the ideal, which is where student could sit down with a peer. So students come with a draft and we look at that, and that is where privacy and confidentiality come in so we could not have embarrassed students. Our writing center is open in an open lab where classes sometimes go and that harms student privacy. We send emails to instructors when students send us their papers, and that is something I want to evaluate later on. I can see issues with that. I think in general if students know the feedback from a tutor session may go to the instructor then that is problematic.

Participant 9 answered:

The writing center is foundational to the entire project of the university, and as such a director has to understand how writing is important across all disciplines in the University. You cannot ignore students from math, or prompts from writing of any sort. You want students who can write reports in their engineer programs, science programs, and so on. You need to get rid of the notion that responding to the rhetorical situation cannot change. Being free from the precepts. It has to be a University's center.

Participant 10 answered:

The Socratic Method is the most fundamental. My community college experience probably influences that. Open ended questions that allow student autonomy allows students to learn for themselves. Being grounded in a subjective point of view is a common thread.

Participant 11 answered:

The one-to-one support is usually central, but also more writing centers are moving in small group and workshops (defined broadly) and we are seeing more interest in tech in a variety of forms, such as videos, PDF's designed for an institution's specific needs, or something complex such as a multimodal tutorial.

Participant 12 answered:

I certainly think the culture of the college . . . the English department and the culture of the college has such an impact on those tutoring and training practices at a writing center. So, for instance, the college where I started guaranteed student anonymity. Where I am now, student's privacy is not even really a thing when it comes to tutoring. We serve a lot of writers and focus on helping the student write to the instructor's specifications . . . to do what the instructor want the student to do, which I suppose is what the students wants, but we do not make that assumption. You do not take over the paper . . . so helping find his or her voice, learn to tackle projects, papers, whatever, that is the goal . . . but where I am now, that is not what instructors want us to do. So, I am newest here, and so I see it differently than my colleagues who have been here longer. I choose my fights but that is something I have been pushing back against, that is that instructors get what they want as opposed to us serving students. I do not think it is a community college vs. larger college

kind of thing. I would say that other community college that I tutored at did not have that idea. They were more student oriented than instructor oriented.

Participant 13 answered:

I believe that tutors should primarily ask questions and help the writer discover answers or practices. Tutors should not give always answers or edit papers. I like the idea that students should read out loud and have a copy of the essay. I ask that tutors not write on documents, or at least not write too much. Maybe only the bare bones of an idea and then ask questions about that. I see the best practice as guiding-through-questioning rather than telling, which means often not fixing stuff but helping students to learn to fix things themselves.

Common themes in Interview Question 2

Many of the directors indicated that the common practices that define a writing center are guided tutoring, often by a peer tutor, and that tutoring session should be by trained tutor who is empathetic, able to ask the right questions, not too forceful in editing or commentary, and knowledgeable. Most of the directors pointed out that a common practice faculty involvement, and how faculty involvement differs depending on the college.

3. Based on your perceptions, what do those who take advantage of the center's services find most effective?

Participant 1 answered:

Many students come to us for help with formatting styles, first year students come in often with APA formatting, and a lot are coming to us with grammar, proofreading problems, but in the long run we are creating more confident writers.

Participant 2 answered:

Interestingly, having a better grade is important by not losing points on the assignment. Some students only come for that reason because they want the best grade, perfect paper. Those students often do not need my help. Other students have to admit they are not the best writers and seek help . . . everything I do is about constructing the most concise, precise, and to the point argument.

Participant 3 answered:

I work closely with nursing students, because that is a tough program, and I have become connected to the nursing students who have several writing intensive courses . . . they find the planning process invaluable, and they find our help with sources and research invaluable. The last-minute students also appreciate the emergency room response where we stop the bleeding.

Participant 4 answered:

The consultant's feedback on the writing is the most effective—the teaching and learning that occurs in a session between a reader and a writer.

Participant 5 answered:

I think faculty would say better writing, or at least a perception of better writing. Students would say working with a peer consultant forces them or allows them to engage in the writing process more so through that in the short term at least they produce better papers.

Participant 6 answered:

They say they really listened to me. They really helped me. There is always a tone of surprise. They have a sense of being heard. A lot of our training is understanding what the client wants and what they need. In our case it is talking to a peer, or undergraduate,

so sitting down with a peer who has been trained to guide the consultation is important and they know when to back off, to ask questions, to help with format, and to brainstorm. Being heard and getting real assistance is a common practice. Being directive and non-directive is a big idea that comes up.

Participant 7 answered:

I collect students' surveys to gauge this kind of stuff. I do not know that freshman would articulate this, but I did last year look at comments and categorize the survey's comments and from that tried to make the argument to administration that students were becoming more autonomous and self-aware of their writing. It is not that students come to a writing center and become depended on the writing center, it is the opposite. Students highlight organization and development and the fact they said that in a survey indicates they are becoming better at writing with readers in mind. Students are writing in a way that readers understand. Students are always asking for help with editing and proofreading and I think that is what people see—they become a more reader focused writer. It is possible that is what I want and so that is what I see, but I do think our data backs that up. When a survey answer from a freshman says "I used evidence so my reader understands" then that is what I want from a writing center.

Participant 8 answered:

Students are able to get feedback over writing without a grade. I have taught English for over 10 years and I understand the relationship between grading and writing in the student. It is impossible to remove all bias between instructor and student. But, when a student comes to the writing center that bias does not exist, because we service so many. We see 500-600 students and I do not know them or remember them, so previous bias is

not really existent. A great feedback to instructors is that the writing center should cut down on grading time, because we are helping students to improve. That is a major benefit. A benefit at large is that there is a limited time for instructors to work with students, and so the writing center provides the one on one time that students often need, and with tutors and myself students are able to get that time and instructors, who are working with 120+ students in 15 weeks do not have to try to provide that, especially when they simply cannot.

Participant 9 answered:

Students come for so many reasons so it is hard to say, but if students feel like something useful happened then they appreciate that and that is most effective.

Participant 10 answered:

What I hear students say is having access to an educational interaction that is low stakes (meaning they feel comfortable exploring ideas where they do not feel there are any dumb questions), that sort of freedom and lack of judgement from tutors is well received by students. Our writing center more than any other is the most welcoming and hospitable center I have worked in. I would argue that the radical hospitality is an ethos that bleeds into everything we do.

Participant 11 answered:

I think it is the process. Revealing the process of writing, of designing communication, that is so often hidden behind the scenes. Writing centers make that work public. They make that work of writing that is so often hidden in classrooms public—from behind the scenes. That is the value and a core value of a writing centers. There is that revealing of creativity and process orientation that make writing centers so important.

Participant 12 answered:

From the faculty perspective, it is conforming to their expectations and I think from a student perspective most of what we see is similar. These students are coming in expecting us to help with doing what their professor wants them to do. Students tend to be grade motivated. Many students just want to do well in the classes, keep their GPA up in order to get into competitive programs here at the college. Part of that might be how we market ourselves, but students also come in with that mentality to get the grade they want.

Participant 13 answered:

Our numbers here have been way down (due to Covid-19) but ideally the takeaway should be on higher order concerns, and not the grammar necessarily—that is, the longer term payoff of what students are doing: accomplishing major goals, and not the nuts and bolts of grammar only.

Common themes in Interview Question 3

The directors specified that students who take advantage of the center's services want help with getting a better grade, want to be comfortable, want to find something useful in the experience, and desire "being heard." Participants suggested these are the most effective practices. Some directors replied that faculty find that better writing as a result of visiting the writing center results in less grading time. Also, some directors indicated the idea that the writing center conforms to what the faculty expects it to do is what faculty find most effective.

4. What do you think individuals, other than yourself, who work in a writing center think constitutes a writing center?

Participant 1 answered:

I think the common misconception is that the writing center is a fix-it-shop for papers and that is a common misconception shared by faculty and students.

Participant 2 answered:

Students are often deficient when they enter college, and that is frustrating.

Participant 3 answered:

I might be unusual for writing center people. I feel like the other individuals are academics and they believe in the purist form of what I would say is discussing the paper to no end, and talking about what they should do, but they do not get right down in and say what needs to be done. . . I do think you can help edit because the language breakdown is so great across the US in public education that editing needs to be shown to students. They do not have the skills and we have those skills so we must conference and help students.

Participant 4 answered:

I would assume they would say something general, but also that it depends on the context. Institutional context matters in what a writing center looks like. I would say they serve writers. That is where it stops and ends.

Participant 5 answered:

I would say they think it's a community. We stress the idea of community here. I think general students and faculty think this is where you go to get your papers fixed, but in unfortunately that is still the case. North's essay should be passé, but it is not. You go to

the writing center because that is what writers do, so students should not come because they need help, but because they are writers.

Participant 6 answered:

I would not dare to lump them into one because I know there is a lot of variety across the spectrum nationally. Older directors seem to get locked into ways of thinking . . . there is a sense that we do not want to tell people what to do, and that if you ask good questions, the writers will know what to do. Identity is intersectional, right? . . . so it depends on the student. There is an unacknowledged allegiance to non-directive practice, and I think that is still a part of writing center thought.

Participant 7 answered:

People are going to think we are fix it shops and work on kids grammar and we are remedial. I think that is view of writing centers and writing in general. So, when I work with faculty they ask how much do I take off for a comma, then that is not the goal. I can teach faculty in other disciplines to teach writing, but it is surprising how on the nose the criticism is about people who do not teach writing is. Generally though, people want to learn to teach writing. That romantic idea that your words are your soul and that writing is little bit natural is an idea that exists, but there is also, can someone fix these kids' grammar? I love working with faculty though. I have not had anyone argue directly against what I show faculty. I tend to be flexible in how I think about curriculum, but I have been trained to teaching writing and know how to do it, but ultimately the curriculum shift here at my university is good, but it has to be monitored and there has to be support for teachers who are teaching writing, and that is an area for us to be in.

Participant 8 answered:

I think the most basic definition is that it is where student can get help with writing outside of class.

Participant 9 answered:

Writing center directors are all over the map in terms are what they think or who they are beholden to. I had a faculty member whose perceptions were that, with an international student, that even a tutor giving a student a word is plagiarism. That is one extreme. Of course some faculty are grateful.

Participant 10 answered:

First . . . I think we do not have a robust staff. I have myself and a part time person and (number of) part time tutors. These are all professional tutors. We have high school teachers, basic skills teachers, former students, and so on. We have a mixture. We are pretty in alignment with what writing center is. Tutors might have a more rigid idea, so I do not know they would see the admin work as reinforcement of the pedagogy. I think the narrative on campus is something we have to combat because we are not only a remedial service, because what we think and what campus community thinks is not always in alignment.

In my experience, centers use peers or are staffed by existing faculty, but my college is fairly unique.

Participant 11 answered:

The core is peer-to-peer tutoring, and most would agree that it is the peer-to-peer support; however, I would guess it is the offering of service of supporting writing and writers. From there it would vary wildly dependent on the context and goals of the institution.

These would be largely students and services offered, such as one to one and tutoring services. Here is has evolved to include more faculty services and student service that are more than the one to one tutorial, but in addition to one to one tutorial. For many writing centers those services are emerging. Most writing centers are driven by student population and serving that one to one ratio of students.

Participant 12 answered:

I think that most people unless they have worked in an interdisciplinary space they likely think a writing center is a place that tutors writing, and that is a writing center. Most people who have not had experience would say the writing center is there to tutor writing. I think there is a movement to integrating writing center into a larger tutoring system. From an experience with a former colleague, we were able to attract interdisciplinary tutors. Interestingly, even people who are over multiped subjects are writing center focused often. I think it depends on the experience, but so many people who administrate tutoring come from a writing background.

Participant 13 answered:

I think that is going to vary for everyone but the people I know who are directing or helping in writing centers would see a strong writing center as a space, either physical or virtual, where writers can feel comfortable knowing they will get the type feedback that will help them improve.

Common themes in Interview Question 4

Many of the directors indicated that individuals who work in a writing centers (aside from themselves) think that what constitutes a writing center is a comfortable space where students can receive help on writing. However, perceptions even among directors were likely to

be very different. Some of the participants pointed out that a writing center will be partially defined by the institutional needs that vary depending on writing center location, institutional goals, and staffing.

5. What is the primary goal of your writing center?

Participant 1 answered:

To provide our clients with the tools they need to be successful writers in all their classes. Our tutors use the word clients when speaking about students. I think it sounds more professional and lends the tutors some “adulthood” and is clear for the student tutors.

Participant 2 answered:

It is to have the students pass their professional exam. A large percentage of the exam is writing, and I help faculty help students pass the exam.

Participant 3 answered:

To serve the customer. They are paying and if they come and say they need something, I am here to serve. If they need planning, we plan. If they need research, we help research. More, our goal is to show that writing is process. If we can get them to buy into the process, then we can get them to come next time to plan our outline, and be happy with that process.

Participant 4 answered:

To meet the demand or need for writers on campus especially. That is something we struggle with sometimes: all the demand. We meet our goal when they learn something and are satisfied with the experience.

Participant 5 answered:

The primary goal of our writing center is to help students, or whoever uses the writing center, to become better writers.

Participant 6 answered:

In an atmosphere of hospitality and respect to help students navigate writing in college to both teach the norms, and teach how to circumvent the norms.

Participant 7 answered:

The primary goal is to enhance students writing and communication skills so when they leave the university they can communicate more effectively and think more effectively. If you are better at expressing thoughts on paper, you become a better critical thinker too. I worked with a lot of STEM people at my previous institution, and as a graduate assistant, it was really cool because I was able to work with a professor of engineering in a lab who struggled with writing; she really came to appreciate rhetorical research and let me help her enhance her research. I worked with helping her explain exigence in writing and filling the gap in the research she was doing, and so on. Eventually, she became a devotee of writing center work. She became a total convert! That experience has inspired me to approach people outside my discipline openly. I really do think that people can come over to my side when it comes to thinking about writing.

Participant 8 answered:

To help students achieve better grades on their writing, and to help ESL and adult and learning support students improve their writing.

Participant 9 answered:

The primary goal is to make students independent writer so they can eventually see how to solve writing problems on their own. If a student can eventually recognize and remember strategies to address problems then that is the goal, and not just grammar, but in actual writing.

Participant 10 answered:

I would say that our primary goal in serving our students is to make them feel more competent as communicators and thinkers. I think one of the interesting things about working in a community college is that our goal has to be appropriately broad because of the diversity of students. So what does it mean to the individual students? If they exhibit that growth I call it successful.

Participant 11 answered:

The place I work provides programs that exist to create innovative support for communication, research, and teaching and learning initiatives that enhance deep learning at my university—it is multiliteracy center offering integrated support for writing, speaking, research, and multimodal communication. We help students develop effective communication skills by promoting critical and creative thinking through peer-to-peer meetings called consultations, as well as by providing technology, spaces, and resources, with or without a consultation. Additionally, the multiliteracy center where I work serves as the umbrella program for multiple campus units, including those that support faculty development via a faculty learning center.

Participant 12 answered:

Our mission statement says we are here to serve . . . we are getting ready to revisit that in 2021. We serve students, faculty, and community members. . . to make learners more independent learners. Certainly in all that we do that is the intention, but I do not know that all of our actions achieve that stated goal. I think that most any writing center or learning center tends to support student in gen education classes and the purpose of those gen education classes is to help students practice broad skills and prepare those students for later academic classes. I do not know that our practices line up with our mission statement. So, we say these things to tutors as we begin, but in our training there is a lot of discussion about faculty expectations. So many of our tutors are peer tutors who were students (we have only a few professional tutors) and they pick up on faculty expectations, and coming from a larger university where tutors participated in longer training to now I think our tutors have picked up the idea to work toward the unstated goals.

Participant 13 answered:

Other than staying alive at this point? At this point at my current institution, we are beginning to develop a presence on campus. Even before Covid-19 traffic was slow, and we are trying to improve that. Many of our visits are concerned about lower order grammar related areas, but we want to also help with higher order concerns. Most of my work now is about increasing awareness, increasing knowledge about our studio, and working on making tutors advocates for our center/studio.

Common themes in Interview Question 5

Many of the directors articulated a primary goal of serving student needs, whether that is regarding student grades, overall writing abilities, or helping students become better writers. Most of the directors indicated that becoming a better overall writer is the main goal. A few directors pointed out that the survival of the writing center to meet the goal of helping students is also a primary goal.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2: What constitutes an effective writing center?

(Interview Questions 6 and 7 addressed research question 2.)

6. What elements of a writing center make it most effective?

Participant 1 answered:

It needs to be a welcoming place. We serve a lot of first gen and low-income homes, and a lot of minority and ethnicity demographics. They need to feel belonging and comfort, and without imposter syndrome. There is some stigma attached to the writing center from the opposite side of the spectrum, being kids who are coming in from high income or private high schools who are honor students, but you want include those students as well.

Participant 2 answered:

To work with a professor as well as student to make sure goals met. My job is to follow up with problems. Part diagnosing and remediating problem, but other half is producing job related materials, such as a writing sample and resume.

Participant 3 answered:

The same research that was done in classrooms suggest that it is the teacher, the people, the workers, the relationships.

Participant 4 answered:

Budget. If you cannot hire people and pay them, you are dead in the water to start with, but if you can hire people, then the second most important thing is staff education. An administrator above you who will advocate for you. You can be at the whim of a new dean or provost at any time, and someone with power can prevent that. I report to a vice provost instead of a department chair or dean.

Participant 5 answered:

A place that is welcoming where the people who use the writing center feel comfortable and not afraid to express themselves and can work through the writing process without feeling judged. Personality then for a tutor is a bigger issue than knowledge because dealing with students requires empathy to make the students feel comfortable.

Participant 6 answered:

I think a writing center is only as good as the training model. Training and mentoring to me are very important. You are only as good as your training and modeling. If I do not make my consultants train then we cannot do any of the stuff I want in a hospitable and respectful environment because consultants create that space. I think you have to have buy in from faculty and administrators. If I have an amazing training program but no buy in, which is what happened here when I came here, then . . . so, there was a narrative that the writing center was a joke when I got here. People change though and now people say if you went three years ago you should go back. If you cannot get buy in it is much harder to succeed.

Participant 7 answered:

The previous work at a writing center was in an enormous one with 50 tutors that saw thousands of students, and we had a lot of international students and engineer students whereas my current institution is much smaller. I was in the writing center here at all d the time, sometimes all day last year, and when you are present that much, you know we knew everyone by name. We had a very communal space. I get that we are more than comfortable places where students feel comfortable and supported, but having that space is incredible at fostering community. So I think that at my current smaller institution, a place like that really thrives, whereas at a bigger institute like my former institution, the communal space might not be as important. Students here at my current institution though want individualized support and want that kind of space. I think that is really important. That creating a space that is trusting and comfortable allows students to come back.

Participant 8 answered:

Number one, I think there has to be a good leader, with vision and goals, because as soon as the writing center loses sight of goals then it is dead in the water. It needs a good leader and it needs good workers. It needs well trained workers and needs to be well-staffed. It needs resources, whether in house or contracted out. It needs a conducive to writing environment.

Participant 9 answered:

Tutors who are good listeners and good problem solvers, so they can say “Here is what I see happening” and tutors who can take faculty comments and interpret the comments and helps students identify those kinds of places.

Participant 10 answered:

Fundamentally, there are not many moving pieces to just begin opening the doors. The staff and a physical, welcoming location. Your marketing communication and outreach is very important. That could be bias on my part working in a community college but I think the students first exposure to the writing center must be a positive one so you do not lose the student right away. The outreach has to be thoughtful to ensure that the heavy lifting is done right away.

Participant 11 answered:

Designing service to meet institutional population. Every campus has unique group of students. We have to understand how to best reach that student population and design programs to best reach that student population, have the wherewithal to adjust to those students at whatever point they are in the semester, and evolve our services over that time frame: semesters, weeks. That is a great question!

Participant 12 answered:

I think that one of the best set ups to have an effective writing center has to do with who that writing center answers to. Is it its own department in larger structure? Is it tied to the English department where funding is part of that. So, funding is part of the set up for an effective writing center. So the more independent the funding can be the better set up for success a center can be. Not answering to department and having some physical space (where the writing center is located) really matters. Having some space away from the English department is important. Training is too an element . . . I think that a trainer able to focus, in a set amount of time, focus in on the things that the writing tutor needs to know going into a session with a student. Training is hard to get together depending on

time, resources, and so on, but is essential. Currently I get half a day, and in a previous experience in writing centers I was able to work with writing tutors, on just writing, for five days. That experience showed me the importance of training, and so we have now created opportunities for Zoom training, and other types to better work with tutors, but for actual tutoring practices there needs to be dialogue and there needs to be more time and continuous training. Having some sort of system of evaluation of the tutor is important. At the university where I worked before we had two or more grad students who got a class release from a TA position to work as peer mentors with our tutors, and that sort of evaluation, having that structure in place allowed us to talk to tutors about their practices in a much more constructive way.

Participant 13 answered:

More than anything else, a strong writing center has great tutors or instructors or consultants or whatever term you want to use there. If tutors feel authoritative, and have a willingness to help, and they have compassion . . . if they do not see it as a job, but as a chance to help others, then that is the thing that makes the studio most effective. Without tutors who make the practice work everything else falls apart. They really make the writing center.

Common themes in Interview Question 6

Many of the directors specified effective elements such as well-trained, able tutors, and a welcoming, comfortable place are what makes a writing center most effective. Most of the writing center directors argued some aspect, such as training or the ability of the tutor, being the most important effective element. Some of the directors suggested the importance of establishing

relationships between students and tutors, and some suggested budget, working with professors, and whom the writing center is answerable to.

7. What are some aspects, if any, that are part of writing centers that make a writing less effective?

Participant 1 answered:

The complications involved in paying student workers. Funding in general is a problem, but the complication of getting student workers paid.

Participant 2 answered:

There is only one of me. Staffing. I cannot offer as many appointments as I want. It is often feast or famine because students often wait till the last days before an assignment is due.

Participant 3 answered:

Poor tutors. People that I thought were going to do a good job but turned out to be lazy as hound dogs—poor attitudes. You can conference with someone anywhere, and a working pleasant environment is important, but not critical.

Participant 4 answered:

If you cannot afford to hire qualified and pay qualified people. You need the right mechanisms for staff education, someone there who has a background and the scholarly field of writing centers. If the person in charge does not know about writing centers, that is a problem. The lack of a support, a good space, or budget work against a good program.

Participant 5 answered:

Being too cliquish. Being too self-important. A writing center does not have to be run by English faculty. My real training was in writing across the curriculum, so I really do think English faculty do not have any more insight, but maybe some Composition and Rhetoric or adjunct faculty do care more, but maybe a sign of successful writing center is all about the students-clientele.

Participant 6 answered:

In general, when we buy in to the over allegiance to non-directive, when we ask if someone can see the error, and they cannot see the error, then we are not helping. When we shy away from explicit direction it does not go well, and that's why my consultants have to pass the Little-Seagull training quiz as part of their training. They don't like it, but they have to do it, and they do improve over time. If we are afraid of the nuts and bolts of writing then we are afraid of our own craft. When we are not able to see English as language that has a lot of variation then we are wrong. When we become so involved in getting good grades or living up to some misguided idea of what the university wants, then we can fall into patterns where we deny the student the home languages they would need if they want to return and live/work in their home communities. We do not want to be the oppressor; ultimately, I want to train people that their language is already ok, but also have my consultants be ready to explain standard academic English and what the professor might be looking for.

Participant 7 answered:

I am a proponent of imperial research into writing centers. Not that lore is unimportant, but I appreciate the recent research into practices. I do not think some of the maxims such

as read out loud and don't write on students' papers are absolute truths, and that is where reality and lore do not mix. I am also skeptical of generalizations about writing center practices that are not backed up by evidence.

Participant 8 answered:

Personally I feel like the writing center should focus on writing. Perhaps there is some overlap when writing is so niche or unique to the subject matter. So, for example, we get a lot of research request, which should go to the library research coaches, or we get requests about computer technology. I imagine there are writing centers that try to honor those requests, and I am not sure that helps. Having space helps. We offer workshops. I think those help.

Participant 9 answered:

Tutor who wants to take over a paper. I stopped tutoring one-on-one in the last four or five years of teaching because it was obvious to me what a student should do next that I just wanted to do, and that indicated to me that I was not paying attention to the student. If you approach a piece of writing with the attitude that the student is trying to say something then you can still tutor.

Participant 10 answered:

Interesting question. I think . . . in my experience one facet of a writing center is the association with departments on campus. Sometimes a writing center has a very close tie to the English department, which early on in the center's existence is good, but as the writing center grows, it becomes stifling because the pedagogy in the writing center becomes English focused, and that can hinder the center later in its development. It is super helpful early, but if the relationship does not evolve then it can become concerning.

Participant 11 answered:

That is another good question and a tough one to answer. Less effective are the writing centers that do not change or evolve to meet a population. A writing center staff that says here is what we do and this is the way we do things and we just know this. That is a challenge for writing centers. We should respond, evolve, and change. We should gather data. We should rethink how our programs are working. We should be constantly rethinking how our programs are working. When we have that data, when we have that feedback, there is opportunity, but we have to do something with it.

Participant 12 answered:

Not having a tutor evaluation process or formal discussion with each tutor. I think not having that, and I have been pushing for that for years here, makes the tutoring seem less of a job, less of a professional position, and it should be treated as position of professionalism. I think that can cause a lot of problems. I do not want a structured, up-tight sort of space or attitude, I want comfortable but also professional.

Participant 13 answered:

Going back to my answer to the previous question, a mentality that a writing center tutor is just a job. A tutor that has a mindset that this is other stuff and not a primary task will then take the work less seriously, and the center won't be effective. A poor physical space can also make the center less effective. We were in a bad space before, and are in a better one now. The physical space can negatively impact overall student perception too. Lack of support from admin can hurt the writing center. Tutors who feel like they do not have admin support or care, well then that can impact the tutors in negative manner. All of these could make the writing center less effective.

Common themes in Interview Question 7

Many of the directors pointed out that the elements that make the writing center most effective in the previous question, tutors, can make it less effective as well. Many directors suggested untrained tutors diminish the effectiveness of writing centers. Tutors that do the work for the student instead of showing the student how and tutors that do not have good practices in writing tutoring are all less effective. Some directors suggested that a too close relationship with the institution's English department can make a center less effective. Some directors indicated that lack of budget can make a center less effective.

Research Questions 1 and 2

Research Question 1: What criteria and common practices define a writing center in Southern Appalachia?

Research Question 2: What constitutes an effective writing center?

(Interview Questions 8 and 9 addressed a combination of the first two research questions.)

8. How is the physical space part of the definition of a writing center? Is that physical space essential?

Participant 1 answered:

Up to this past March, we discouraged online tutoring except for online students, but after March we offered only online. I have changed my perception on what a writing center is, but you still feel that making welcome physical space is important, but realistically right now that cannot happen. Temperature matters!

Participant 2 answered:

I have an office and a writing center and I think it is essential. With a designated space the student feels more comfortable with coming and with studying. They go there even if they need to study which allows me to approach and ask if they need help.

Participant 3 answered:

It is essential if you want to have the whole program. And for some people it is essential for maintaining confidentiality, and so from that aspect it is important. It is important to have computers, desks, comfortable areas, and resources, but money designates space. I find a rolling chair between several tables is effective. Marker boards and such are often useful for visual learners. Our writing center is currently a math classroom because of Covid-19, and I am totally virtual now.

Participant 4 answered:

On our campus it has always been a place. It started here in 1974 and until 2011 when we started to do virtual appointments. We still did 90% of tutoring face to face. When I got to my present location, we had our writing center in the English Department, which was important to get out from and when we moved from the English Department physically, it changed our program in many good ways, but then we outgrew our space again, and 2.5 years ago, we moved to the Library. Our physical space has reflected the growth of the program. Right now it feels weird to talk about it because we are not in our space physically really. I will likely be the only person meeting face to face this semester, which is my job. But, we can do everything online. When you add all the health concerns, the physical space is not as important, but when those are absent, face to face is really

important and good for our community too. I did welcoming through an online orientation recently and it just is not as easily done.

Participant 5 answered:

I used to think it was super essential, and I always advocated for a space that was visible, housed in academic affairs, middle of the campus, and still think that it is important. The library is a great space to house a writing center and tutor services. I do think visibility is important; for example, not that we have moved online because of Covid-19, we are dealing with a lack of visibility.

Participant 6 answered:

What a year to ask that question! I think there is something, I actually have a consultant, I have one student who cares so much about design, she is child and family studies major, and my students have helped me see that how you set up space does matter. It does affect how comfortable you feel, how much intellectual work you can do; the space can affect your ability to work. If you feel uncomfortable then that is a problem when you are doing something that is cognitively hard. So, physical space absolutely matters when helping people write and making them welcome, and making the students identify with the other students when they come in. Before, we were tucked away on the third floor on the far end of campus. We are in a completely open space. My office opens out now into a giant study space in the campus library, and our numbers have gone way up, and that is because we are findable. This fall, of course, we are operating virtually with no consultations in this space.

Participant 7 answered:

For me yes absolutely. I am not a Luddite. I don't think technology is bad. However, will never think online education will reproduce the magic that happens in a classroom. Part of what makes me a good teacher is being in a classroom, and I think that transfers into the writing center. This year because of Covid-19 we are only physically open 8 hours a week. I know I need online tutoring and I am glad we had protocol in place for online tutoring. But I think online tutoring is not the same. This year I do not know my freshman tutors. It is sad and lonely and our beautiful space that typically is hustling and bustling is empty. So, I am not against virtual, and I think having students leaving the brick and mortar walls of the writing center is good. Last year I had students go to a space that other students visit often outside the writing center and offer quick one on one sessions, but I just value my space so much. I have a fantastic space.

Participant 8 answered:

I think it is essential. It is very important. When I interviewed for this position, they asked me this question. State mandates and budgets and higher admin all impact physical space. So, I have done some things to revamp this area. I find that physical space matters because colors, space, and such matter. I painted my room subdued colors. I want almost like a coffee shop. I want students to feel comfortable coming in. I want the conversation away from the bare minimum to pass the class to how can I improve overall as a writer? Environment can absolutely play in to that. If students can come place where they are an author, a serious writer, then that place plays into their mindset as well.

Participant 9 answered:

Absolutely essential. And for my preference, it needs to be an open space where students can see others being tutored, and might even hear some of the sessions. We call our tutors coaches because tutor has become a hard term to use . . . because tutors have some negative connotations from public education, such as high school. When are you given a tutor right? So coaches is a better term and that physical space healthy atmosphere. A room with tables is important. When I came to this location, there were two huge rooms with no light and black carrels with two chairs and an alarm clock because you only get so much time. So, I got rid of that.

Participant 10 answered:

The physical space is essential. Assuming you have a traditional writing center and that space is a reflection of the pedagogy. Students see that. Our space was a glorified computer lab, and it was not a good space or welcoming. That bleeds into how students think and work with us. That was one of the main things I changed when we came here.

Participant 11 answered:

My thinking has evolved. Being a researcher in situation, the geographic space indicated on the campus map or in a department building is critical. My earliest research suggest space is political, and a writing center has to show its value, and where it is located on the campus map suggest the political power of the center. More and more, we are thinking more about writing in terms of a skill and we are learning that we can make more connections now because we are producing more research . . . the geographical space is essential. It suggests the position of writing center work on campus. I think we can evolve beyond that space, but so much work is difficult to relocate outside this space.

Can we do the space outside of the physical space? Absolutely, but there is something lost when we do not have that space, and the things that make campus special is part of that geographical space—the things that bring people together, are hard to reproduce—they are being produced outside of the physical space now (Covid-19) but there is great work inside the walls of a space and we should invest in those because investing in those help move the institution forward.

Participant 12 answered:

I do not know . . . I don't think it is the main defining, the sole defining factor, but I do think most writing centers and learning centers need to be tied to some kind of academic institute. I do think being kind of connected to an institution of higher education is important. We have transitioned so much to online, so no I do not think the physical space as important to identifying something as a writing center. Our learning center is so different. They are housed differently, they are set up differently, they are housed in the library, but some of our satellite campuses have different set ups. A tutor and a student may meet in a lobby, so while physical space may have an impact, it is not what makes a writing center.

Participant 13 answered:

In an idea world, it is the core of the writing center where many other good things can branch off. A good space can create an idea of professionalism and good work. It can be a comfortable space for students. However, sometimes a good space is not possible (money, Covid-19, or others). Even a space that is not the center itself, but a place where students feel comfortable, such as agreed upon meeting spots where students and tutors get together where the student is comfortable.

Common themes in Interview Question 8

In response to the idea of a physical space being important, nearly all directors indicated that the physical space was essential. The idea of space was often emphasized by ideas of student and tutor comfort with the space, and there was a clear thoughtfulness about the question because of the need for virtual space during the Covid-19 pandemic. Most directors used words for the physical space like “essential,” “core,” and “important.” In the absence of health concerns, the consensus is that a physical space is a defining characteristic of the writing center. Some directors indicated that while physical space might not be the absolute core, such as tutors, but being tied to a physical space is important for a writing center.

9. Is a virtual space part of that definition? Is that virtual space essential?

Participant 1 answered:

Yea I am still wrapping my head around how we are going to function as a virtual writing center, but yes.

Participant 2 answered:

Definitely. I think a virtually space is important, as student does not feel comfortable in a physical space with me, then the online option is important. Especially today because of Covid-19. That is how I have been able to meet one on one with students with notes and being able to point to specific things just as in the office. The more options for meetings the better.

Participant 3 answered:

The virtual idea is definitely part of it now. That evolved in my world. Online students found and me and I ended up working with those students. I was on the phone once with a device in hand while my husband drove us to a vacation conferencing with a student.

Thank goodness for Zoom, Facetime, and so on. A virtual space is essential--Does not matter if we are in a pandemic or not.

Participant 4 answered:

Oh sure. Yes. In our case it is. Maybe residential campuses do not need to do virtual, but I think it makes us more accessible and is key feature of writing centers, because students use tech to mitigate other issues, such as disabilities. It is a matter of choice, but more and more writing centers are going to have to do online tutoring.

Participant 5 answered:

Yes! Especially now. I would have said no a year ago, but now especially it is essential. It is just important for visibility. We have web page, but students have to go to it. The university website does not advertise us on their main pages but the outward faces of university websites does not do a good job of supporting the students in the now because they are ran by university marketing who see that page as a way to attract students. So visibly is important, but how?

Participant 6 answered:

I do not think it has to be a definition of the writing center, but if we care about reaching everybody, then it is important. I have student parents we were likely not seeing before, but now we are. I do not know if it is essential, but it is important to reach everyone we can with every means we have available. Virtual is very nice. I built a Microsoft Teams platform for the staff this summer so that we could have a virtual office space. Virtual space is still space that requires construction and maintenance, and I think you always have to take that labor into account. We prefer face to face for the work we do, for our

population, but if we can reach more people with virtual options, then why not have those as well?

Participant 7 answered:

Reluctantly, yes. I do want to have an online writing lab with resources for people. We have a lot of material we are about to put online, but it is not my priority. I have delegated that to my graduate assistant tutor who has two years' experience, who loves online stuff, and who is creating that space online. It is not my priority but I recognize that online is important, particularly at larger universities with multiple campus. I did online tutoring as a tutor and I hated online sessions.

Participant 8 answered:

Yes. It is definitely essential. My goal this year was to create a virtual online writing center. Covid-19 actually slowed me down. OWL at Purdue is sort of the goal. I would love to have our own space online. Covid-19 has changed the way we approach virtual space, but we need to grow quickly to adapt to that. We now have chat which is new. I think even OWL does not have that. Students can get live synchronous help now. Virtual space will be important in years to come.

Participant 9 answered:

I don't know. We just started to do this at the end of the time I was there, and we only started because we were getting money from all over campus and from the Grad School deans so we needed to provide services to students in many different areas. We got two teaching assistant positions from the graduate school, and that need had to be addressed virtually. We set up one on one sessions in real time. I think now they have moved to having students send papers in advance, but the session still is one on one.

Participant 10 answered:

In terms of essential, I do not think there is a definitive answer because student populations change. But here on a community college campus, the virtual space is absolutely essential. Moving forward, all virtual space could become essential, but on four year campus with students living on campus, it is less essential.

When I first started we had a rudimentary calendar system and we graded to WC online and that changed the way students viewed us and our numbers changed, so that professional, polished virtual space is essential if you are going to have it.

Participant 11 answered:

Yea absolutely the virtual space is part of that definition. We should try to expand the writing center ethos beyond are walls, and right now many of those outside the walls have expanded in virtual spaces, that are interesting and complex, and that are more robust that we thought they could be. They are representative of the geographic in person spaces. The virtual space in terms of asynchronous and synchronous resources, web space, both low bandwidth and higher bandwidth are absolutely part of those spaces. The access to those spaces is political and economical in terms of who has access to them: students, faculty, or the writing center itself. We have seen that on campus. We need to make sure that the bandwidth one has should not determine access or benefits one should receive, but that is something we are dealing with.

Participant 12 answered:

Oh definitely. Absolutely.

Participant 13 answered:

You can create a virtual space entirely. You can have an effective virtual writing center as long as you create the mentality of normal among the tutors and visitors. The director can create the mentality that a virtual space is normal because so many college students have no preconceptions about writing centers.

Common themes in Interview Question 9

Most directors indicated that a virtual space was essential to the writing center, with many suggesting that the virtual space was part of the definition of a writing center, especially in these Covid-19 pandemic times. Many directors indicated that they preferred the physical space to the virtual, but that Covid-19 impacted the director's ideas about the virtual space, as did ideas about student access to the writing center.

Research Question 3

Research Question 3: How are tutors part of the definition or criteria of a writing center?

(Interview Question 10 addressed the third research question.)

10. Are tutors part of the definition or criteria of a writing center?

Participant 1 answered:

Well for us they are the, they are doing the work, providing the feedback. They need to be part of that definition. The writing center needs to be a place where tutors provide feedback or tools for student success in writing.

Participant 2 answered:

It would be at some universities, but here not as much. I am still doing tutorials, but they are tailor made because this is a graduate school.

Participant 3 answered:

Yes. And ours are peer tutors, but larger universities might have professional employed tutors. Here, no one works with nursing students but me. Nursing students are not ok with peer tutors, so at some higher levels adults have to be part of the writing center.

Participant 4 answered:

You need to have someone who meets with students. We call our consultants. Readers, tutors, consultants, whatever the terminology, but you need someone to give feedback to writers that the writers need. AI programs can help, but cannot supplement human interaction. We do not use AI programs. We model for students and rely on text to mentor new tutors. I would never try to encourage students in lieu of writing center visit.

Participant 5 answered:

They are the most important part! Without them there is no writing center—the way I see it they are the ones we are counting on to do the job we trained them for. They need to make other student see value in writing.

Participant 6 answered:

Yes.

Participant 7 answered:

Yes. Absolutely. They are the most important thing. They are more important than me. I guess you need a leader who knows what they are doing but the tutors are more important. I train and teach them, but the most important thing is that tutors feel direction and feel comfortable doing a tutoring session.

Participant 8 answered:

I think those staff members are vital. I like the writing coach term because we are not tutoring so much as guiding and helping. Writing is a skill that has to be practiced and honed. So coach is better phrasing. It is very different than math. Writing is not a formula. It is a creative process. So yes, tutors or coaches are vital to the writing center.

Participant 9 answered:

Yes I think so. Those tutors need to be paid, one way or another, and they need ongoing training. There needs to be sense that you are always learning and working.

Participant 10 answered:

The presence of tutors is an essential, but the peer centric model is the traditional, and I do not think that matters as much. I do not think a category of tutors is part of that definition, as long as you have good tutors whether peer or professional, and that is part of the criteria.

Participant 11 answered:

Yea I think they are although of course how we situate students within a writing center or staff members within in a writing center, matters, but they are part of the definition because of the real time exchange between tutors and students, and tutors come in many different forms, professional or student tutors, but very broadly, yes

Participant 12 answered:

Yes. I think so . . . I think tutors come in all kinds of different ways, peer, professional, I consider myself a tutor, so yes . . . I think about how much success I have seen when students set up their own study groups, but if we are talking about a writing center there has to be tutors

Participant 13 answered:

Absolutely. They are the core of it.

Common themes in Interview Question 10

Every director except one answered yes to the question of a tutor's importance to the definition of a writing center, with most indicating that tutors were the "most important" part of a writing center, whether those tutors were peer or professional; volunteer or paid; virtual or in person. One director indicated that while not important at that director's institution, tutors were important at other institutions.

Research Question 4

Research Question 4: How do writing centers directors identify and help students with writing problems and what barriers are there to a student's access to writing centers?

(Interview Questions 11-14 addressed the third research question.)

11. What barriers are there to a student's access to writing centers?

Participant 1 answered:

The stigma or sense of not belonging or being embarrassed about writing or not wanting to be laughed at. We have a diverse staff. I think if students do not see a representation that is diverse they feel they do not belong. A lack of knowledge about what the writing center is and what we can do for them. Sometimes students do not as sophomores realize there is a center. A lack of preparation in order to make appointments could be problematic. Students have to schedule appointments this semester and I am scared that will cut back on meetings. Weather can be problematic with snow, etcetera.

Participant 2 answered:

Being able to show students what I do helps break down barriers, and I do that by going into classrooms. I am their best friend and they just do not know it yet. I am very much a guidance counselor in some ways, and by creating a community of trust, I get them to be comfortable with sharing their writing with me. This is a place to be helped.

Participant 3 answered:

Motivation. Sometimes student motivation. Sometimes our schedule is a barrier. We are not open at 2am and yet we all know students who work then. We are open from 9am to 8pm, and many nights I am there longer.

Participant 4 answered:

We try not to have any. Right now, there are fairly significant barriers due to the pandemic. In normal times, we work with disability services and make accommodations as accessible as we possibly can. Getting around APSU with a disability is tough anyway. I would not say disability issues are a common accommodation, but our plan is to work out what a person needs, regardless. I am still geared toward trying to feature accessibility as incredibly important.

Participant 5 answered:

They simply do not know it exists. One is that the only reason students come is because they feel they have trouble. They should instead come at any point in the process, even if they are good writers. I had students say I don't need it because students do not understand the process, and that is problematic. Revision and reflection and thinking are the exciting parts and those often happen after the first writing. Student do not give themselves over to the writing process. And this issue is a faculty issue.

Participant 6 answered:

I think for the students who would most benefit, the barrier of time is considerable. If you are working and taking classes and god forbid you have family commitments you may not have time to figure out how to use student support services. There are physical barriers, such as location, and how safe and welcome one feels, and what the hours are and what the typical class times, and many of our students have family obligations. Our men of color do not use, actually our Appalachian men as well, do not use the writing center with the same frequency as women on campus. Men have cultural barriers to using help services. I can stand up as the writing center lady and say come get help, but there are real cultural barriers in play that tell men from multiple cultural backgrounds that they need to do things on their own. So that is one reason I won't ban required visits.

Sometimes international barriers are an issue. Having consultants who are multilingual and come from international backgrounds can really help; any time you can use a service and feel like your consultant understands where you are coming from, you are more likely to feel a sense of belonging.

Participant 7 answered:

The number one barrier . . . our data shows that our students come because the professors recommend it. Most come because the professor tells students to come. So, professors that do not tell students to come. . . well then students won't come.

Participant 8 answered:

If they want to come in person there are physical barriers. Students are often embarrassed to seek help. I cannot relate to that because my grades were important to me, but I think

there is a stigma or taboo with being seen in a writing center, and certainly those psychological barriers exist.

Participant 9 answered:

There should not be any. Writing centers should be free to students, be open to students from any class and any level of instruction, including faculty. There are barriers and often those barriers are other faculty. Faculty who do not like the idea of students who work with someone else. Faculty who require that students do not use the center. A center cannot address all the various needs of all faculty.

Participant 10 answered:

Depends on the nature of the center and student population. There are some consistent ones though: first, a barrier related to self-esteem and personality. Students are so insecure and vulnerable that sharing their writing is a large barrier—that fear of feeling stupid is a real barrier. The stereotypical ideas of a writing center is a barrier. Students who think the writing center is for remedial or a place just for humanities. Those students self-eliminate. In some cases physical connections and space are a problem. In other cases the virtual space is problematic because students do not have the tech. Right now that is an issue. When things are normal, scheduling is problem. Childcare. All sorts of things! The investment of energy and time does not seem worth it to them because they have not utilized us before.

Participant 11 answered:

When I first started working in and researching writing centers, the geographic space was the barrier, and nationally the conversation was that a writing center was lucky to have closet on campus. That was late 2000's. And so finding the writing was a barrier. I visited

writing centers that were often located behind doors that required access codes or hidden in basements or dorms, and they were perhaps separated in different buildings, or different parts of campus, and difficulty in finding the center's physical location was the thing. They were located in hard to find places and there was no signage, and even if you did find the right building you had to go through multiple doors, all of which looked like the doors would sound alarms, and that was such a barrier. A writing center should be easy to find and comforting and welcoming, and students should be encouraged to come there and do the work there. We are having those conversations now about virtual spaces, and who has access and that is similar to those conversations we had about geographical space. It is a higher stakes conversation when we talk about barriers and access, but those have been happening for some time. Many institutions have said, ok our students need to write and communicate and this is an investment in our students and we can't expect them to decode campus maps and go find this valuable resource on their own, especially since this center is along the lines of mission central.

Participant 12 answered:

I see so many and saw so many even before the pandemic . . . I am comparing experiences in answering this question. So, at one campus on a University we were able to offer flexible hours and students tended to live close to campus and could visit the writing center, but now at the community college where I work students come from very far away, across times zones, and from very different social economic backgrounds. We have first generation college students, and technological barriers, and even internet access. There are lots of barriers. So I think that all those are part of it. Many students see tutoring as remediation and do not want to see themselves as needing help, even when

you tell student that the best students are often the ones who come to writing centers and learning centers. I do not know how students don't know we are there, but there are students who simply do not know we are there. So we have a campus where cultural differences sometimes makes barriers that are problematic.

Participant 13 answered:

The main barrier is Covid-19, but in general it is perceptions on the students' part on what a writing center is for. If students think the writing center is just for bad writers they will not come in. Even if they think they are, they will not come because they do not want to be humiliated. This branches off to race and economics. People who come from rural or urban areas who think of themselves as bad writers because the English they grow up speaking is not the same as academic writing. Physical space can be a barrier. Too far away. Unsafe space or at least feels that way. Commuting students, suitcase campus, where students go home or move further away are not coming back in for an appointment.

Common themes in Interview Question 11

Most directors indicated that barriers to student access to writing centers are physical, and several directors pointed out that faculty who do not promote the writing center are a barrier. A few directors pointed out that a student's busy life is a barrier, as are cultural perceptions about remedial services. Several directors indicated that Covid-19 has created an access barrier.

12. What do you think is the future of writing centers in colleges?

Participant 1 answered:

In the near future we will see a lot more online tutoring. Writing centers may find it is less expensive, easier, more convenient for students, so that might be where are headed.

There are more connections between social justice and writing centers where we can help disenfranchised students speak their truth.

Participant 2 answered:

They are more important now than ever because of the weakness of student writing which is because of the testing culture in public education. Most students in public schools are not challenged by doing the type of writing expected in the real world. They need more writing—they never learn the process of rewriting, and that is the best: rewriting. Because of the lack of writing classes, creative writing classes, along with teachers not being able to give long research papers because of too many students and the test environment, and so the students are weaker—so now the writing center is more important than ever.

Participant 3 answered:

I think they are needed, and needed even more. They should be wrapped up in student services, often where freshman go. They should be integrated as part of the success for students to make it in college. First generation college students do not have the code. They do not have parents and grandparents. They are often B students from D high schools. I cannot even find a common short story they have all read before. They do not know. Maybe one or two, but there is not common thread. They have not all read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, for instance. We have to help build a code. Writing centers are vital to helping underprepared students have an opportunity. I get upset when someone says Writing centers are only for the underprepared though because writing centers are about polishing also. We are about helping students at any level write—a smart person uses all their resources.

Participant 4 answered:

I worry they will look like expensive, unnecessary things that can be cut, but I feel like people complain regularly about student writing, and there are quite a few students who rely on us. We need to keep analyzing our data and reporting to people too, and I think there is a move toward accountability and effectiveness, which won't go away, and being able to prove that your work matters.

Literacy is not a one shot thing. Writing centers are there to move people along a little bit. I have had people who have wanted to start in writing centers with no concept of what a writing center is. Writing centers should be where they are best supported and in different campuses that is different places. I think in places where writing center directors are hired as staff, but access to tenor and faculty status is helpful because we can perhaps say or voice concern that staff cannot.

Participant 5 answered:

I think the place of the writing center . . . well we are getting software like Grammarly that help, but as we embrace the diversity in spoken and written English, and as we break down barriers in academic writing, as those notions fall away, more people will engage in writing, especially as people use computers, and the personal touch will become more important because a computer will tell the writer grammar issues, and the writing ideals and arguments itself will become more important.

Participant 6 answered:

I do not know. The bubble is bursting right now, isn't it? What is the future of higher-education right now? The future of writing centers is uncertain. Many colleges seem like they are about to shutter, and it looks dicey from my perspective, and if a college or

university closes, that means that those writing center workers are also not going to be around . . . I don't know.

Participant 7 answered:

I hope the future is not online. I think the future that we as a discipline, as a group of scholars, is that we are going to continue to research and clarify writing centers. Writing center scholars are really engaged with writing centers and the research. I got disillusioned about research in graduate school. Writing center people read and care about writing center scholarship. My experience with scholars in writing centers is that we are engaged. The empirical work that has come out in the past decade has been great stuff. That is a positive turn.

Participant 8 answered:

I think that colleges are going to invest more in student services all around, so student service can make a big difference. That is only going to increase. I see writing centers becoming more important. Especially when administrators see that writing centers service more than humanities.

Participant 9 answered:

From my experience here at the university, it is good. But it depends on University buy in. The department has to support the program. We had no budget, no tutors and no philosophy when my university started. For a writing center to grow, Deans and department chairs have to invest in the writing center.

Participant 10 answered:

Two things: One, there is going to be after Covid-19; there will be a greater acceptance of virtual space, particularly asynchronously tutor interaction. I think writing centers will

build on that format and grow in it. Two, I think writing centers will broaden their student work. They will shift more into composition and communication centers where students might get help with multimedia presentations and such.

Participant 11 answered:

For institutions of higher education, I think writing centers are positioned in an exciting way. We will continue to be sites of scholarship, but it will evolve and look different than historic notions of scholarship. We will see more evidence based work and more undergraduate research, and that will open up new opportunities for writing center, in terms of being sites of undergraduate research and faculty enhancement and development. We will rethink our physical space as institutions more carefully define themselves and their student populations. We are going to see more options informed by student population and access. Quite a few of the inside higher education conversations are making their way to writing center's right now, so thinking student population, about thinking about faculty and how the institution delivers higher education experiences to students, and how students are going to navigate the way they use writing centers is part of the future of writing centers.

Participant 12 answered:

I am hopeful that we are learning some new ways to be flexible and connect with students effectively online. I think we are able to reach more students because we utilize more tools virtually to access them. I do think there will be a big movement to virtual synchronous tutoring. I am hopeful despite current experience looking at the larger trends the community of writing centers that there is you know a lot of innovation I think we are trying to expand what it means to write and help our students learn that whether that is

writing across disciplines or multimodal or getting our tutors comfortable with that or finding writing experts from other fields. People talk about APA and MLA and there are so many genres that someone who just has a degree in English is not going to be familiar with and that is something I see a lot of people working on.

Participant 13 answered:

I am profoundly unqualified to answer this but I'll give it a shot. I guess finding ways to adapt beyond the physical limitations of writing centers. Even if we find a vaccine or cure, still being able to create virtual or non-tradition spaces, creating access for student in different ways, and how can we use technology to facilitate that access to make conferences go better.

Common themes in Interview Question 12

The consensus among writing center directors indicated was one of cautious optimism in response to the questions about the future of writing centers, with most directors indicating some worry about Covid-19's impact on budgets and worry about how writing center might change to greater allow access. A few directors indicated that writing centers were, during Covid-19, more important than before.

13. How does your writing center identify and help students with writing problems?

Participant 1 answered:

We ask students to self-identify. We do advertise and have students referred to us, but we go into classrooms giving presentations and providing information on our website. We offer credits to student athletes. We may contact coaches and sometimes coaches refer students. We advertise by recording videos for professors and into all student, all faculty and campus wide announcements, and we encourage faculty to provide extra credit.

Participant 2 answered:

Faculty often refer students to the writing center. Students refer themselves.

Participant 3 answered:

Some teachers require visits to the writing center, such as nursing students who are told to see me. I always required developmental students to visit the writing center and some of the teachers here require that. We are in a different world right now with Covid-19.

Participant 4 answered:

We tend not to, I think of all writing as developmental. Writing struggles are something everyone experiences. I think if something is an unfamiliar discourse. We do not need to categorize. We match students up with resources. If we see students who might be commonly assigned to a developmental course, we might encourage that student to use us regularly, so they get more feedback, and some cases that is line by line on their work, so we develop strategies for working with writers across the process. We have handouts for every major program on our campus, and those handouts help our staff as much as our students. We try to support students with writing problems in building their confidence as well as teach them about writing. Sometimes struggling writers are just extremely discouraged writers who need reassurance.

Participant 5 answered:

Definitely faculty, advisors, and staff who have cognitive things (accessibility office) identify and send students, but students who come in feeling they have a problem, and we work on working through relabeling that as an area of growth and try to do several sessions and help support students in particular areas they feel they need help with. It is

not us. We do not identify students. If we did that, I do not think we could say writers come here if we tried to identify students.

Participant 6 answered:

If professor sends a student, we obviously work with the kind of feedback the professor gave, but typically we try to get the student to voice their concerns so we can give them agency in the process. I tell our consultants to find out what the student is there for, but typically we rely on the student to tell us what the student is uncomfortable with in their own writing. The student should have agency in the consultation right? I would like to say it is a negotiation between what the student wants and what the consultant sees in their writing that the student might not otherwise have identified. Maybe the professor requires the student to come, but the student tells us what they think the problem is, and that is how we identify.

Participant 7 answered:

Through Professors. Our numbers show overwhelmingly that students come because professors recommend it, which illustrates the need for me to continue to improve and show that the writing center is effective so that our faculty recommend us to their students. We might get one or two visits because a student seeks us out on their own, or they remember that I visited their classroom, or they are friends with one of our tutors, but overwhelmingly it is because faculty recommend us. Our numbers and data are kind rudimentary, but I am working on creating better ways of assessing how and why students come, but currently that is what the data say.

Participant 8 answered:

Students come voluntarily or instructors ask us to help students. But mostly it is students being offered extra credit, or instructors suggesting to the entire class they can use us. We do advertise by flyers, and participate in college events so students can see us and know we are here.

Participant 9 answered:

Depends on the student. The best thing a tutor student can do is listen to students. You cannot help if you think you know what the problem is. You have to listen and let students identify their own problems.

Participant 10 answered:

When I speak with students and prepare our public face. I move away from the idea of problems. I frame it as goals or areas of concern or areas of revision and areas of improvement. I think the way we do that is twofold. We encourage self-reflection and get students to identify that themselves if possible. We do get tutors to identify areas of concern b/c tutors have the experience and ability to identify and help with those areas of concern.

Participant 11 answered:

We are and try to be on the front line for student recruitment for the university. When a student decides to come here, we want to be right there. We want to be the front line for the students. We don't want them to come here and not know our program is available to them. We work on being close to first year students and students have access to course embedded writing center consultants, and have access to the writing center as they move on into second and third years. On the other side, with senior and capstone projectors, we

are helping. We are with new faculty, and as the faculty progress here; we are constantly working on capstone development, and helping faculty course design new projects for the senior students.

Participant 12 answered:

A lot of that depends on student coming to us. We have an academic alert system set up where our faculty and student success coaches can identify students and can make recommendations. I have started getting some academic alerts about students. I have started reaching out to students mostly through texting and saying “hey” and that has been incredibly effective. Using text is important. They do not want to be called or emailed. Text is friendly and less intrusive to students.

Participant 13 answered:

So we do not do much direct outreach to students. We have email notifications. I am trying to do a flyer and brochure currently, but other than that we mostly reach out to faculty. We do basic email to faculty. This year I created survey that I sent to faculty and anyone who responded to the survey I emailed back and asked if they wanted some presentations to class and we created a video that professor could share with students. I asked professors to share prompts that they use regularly, and lot of it is reaching out faculty at this point to get them to advertise for us and to help getting students in.

Common themes in Interview Question 13

In response to the question about how the writing center identifies students and helps students in need, most directors stated that professors or faculty send students, with a few directors indicating that students self-identify. A few directors indicated the need for marketing style outreach to identify and help students.

14. Once identified and helped, should students be advised to continue using writing centers?

Participant 1 answered:

On one hand, any student can benefit from writing tutor. Even faculty can. Another set of eyes is important so encouraging people to come in. On some levels, we are teaching folks to fish so they can feed themselves. We have three common errors that we see, and we tell students about those problems repeatedly and once they get them, in theory they would not need us anymore, but as they get confident in seeking help, they come back. Too, they develop relationships with tutors that motivates them to come back and see their tutors.

Participant 2 answered:

Yes. Because I work closely with professors, they often do.

Participant 3 answered:

Yes! Absolutely! Once you build the relationship they keep coming back and that is good word of mouth to build clientele. Success builds success. Students who do well will come back.

Participant 4 answered:

Yea. I mean our image of the writing center is that is for all writers who care about their audience and that their writing is doing what they want it to do. Sometimes I bring books where authors thank the people who helped them, and show this to a class to show how many people read even great writers work. I think we also help students become independent they more students use our service because we move students along the writing process as they grow and develop. We ask informed questions so the writer can

figure out what they need to do, and that happens at any level. Student are always welcome back, but we do not create dependence so much as a resource. We are here for both struggling writers and the advanced ones. I think we often miss the people in the middle.

Participant 5 answered:

Yes. Because it is a process. Students get better. It is a craft. The more you do writing the better you get, and the easier it gets to talk about writing. The more you talk about it the better your language becomes around the topic.

Participant 6 answered:

Oh yea. We have loose parameters on how they can use us. We have a no-penalty-just-come see us model; they can make up to three appointments a week. The only thing I don't allow them to do is back-to-back consultations because I don't want them to burn the consultants out.

Participant 7 answered:

Answer: Yes. Absolutely. They should.

Participant 8 answered:

If we do a good job, students will return. That is word of mouth advertising. We have a folder of student email of student praise. They come back because they have a good experience. They will return on their own.

Participant 9 answered:

Students who come voluntarily are the ones who benefit the most, but those who see the upmost need are those that come regularly. They continue to come for years.

Participant 10 answered:

Sure. We regularly recommend that students utilize the writing center repeatedly. We do not like to put forth a template for using the writing center. We want student to use it the way it works best for them. We recommend that students work with more than tutor. We ask they come back during different stages of the writing process.

Participant 11 answered:

Yes. Absolutely. Writing centers are for all students and writing is thinking, it is reflection and it is metacognition. We want students to come back and see writing as part of a process. It is not about what is right or wrong, or incorrect or correct, I think we as centers are thinking differently about patterns of errors, and we are thinking differently about creative process, and that core literature too, and recognizing that we are, very broadly, modelling learning. That work is never done. Writing centers are also social spaces, and there are sites that benefit from that senior level student that shares back with the writing center through capstone presentations or senior level celebrations, and having that as part of the writing center experience, so you contently want those new ideas coming back into the writing center. From year one to whenever; it is continuous, perpetual, ongoing, and sustained over time. That first experience, however that is defined, is just the beginning. For us, it is often the one-on-one tutoring session, but sometimes it is greeting students as they tour, or with maybe the parent, or maybe meeting just the parent!

Participant 12 answered:

Absolutely. That early often is important. We spend a lot of time helping student plan and those students keep coming back and those tend to be more successful students. This is

where space comes into question. Most of our main learning centers are housed in computer labs, and so a lot of our students come in knowing they can work and get help if they need it. Just having a regular schedule time that they can come is good.

Participant 13 answered:

I believe so yes. It is process not fixing one particular assignment. I had weekly appointments to work on writing as student, and so I believe that students will continue to improve as they come back in.

Common themes in Interview Question 14

Every director responded “yes” to the idea of students continuing to use the writing center after being identified and helped. Directors also suggested that students should come voluntarily, even when not prompted to do so by professors, and that students should visit writing centers multiple times and this is true for the entire time students are at the institution.

Research Question 5

Research Question 5: What role does administration have in the operation of a writing center, and what is the future of writing centers in community colleges? (Interview Questions 15-18 addressed the fifth research question.)

15. How would you describe/characterize the support and guidance the writing center receives from your administration/institution?

Participant 1 answered:

We have a relatively new administration. The earliest I have received my budget is in October. One time we were told we would have to close the writing centers, and we led a campaign to overcome the decision to close the writing center by using testimonial from

faculty and students in order to overturn that decision to close the writing center. It took a little fight to earn the support of the administration.

Participant 2 answered:

We have a new dean who started last year. I was part-time until she came along, and she is a retired State Supreme Court Justice. She knows the importance of writing. The dean had me present in front of the staff about code switching to try get our faculty here to work on perception. She is very much invested in the writing center. I am part of the academic success team. She is very supportive and sees this a crucial need for our students.

Participant 3 answered:

Our provost has developmental education background, and our president is as well, and I taught his son, but he truly believes in the student support mission and the writing center is part of that. We have continued with the same level of funding for several years—it has not been cut since our inception five years ago. It is wrapped in the Quality Enhancement Plan and Covid-19 is on so we will see what happens, but I do not expect it to change.

Participant 4 answered:

Pretty good. Verbally, no one is saying it is worthless. But that does not always translate into resources that we need. We compete with a lot of other resources. I do not get everything I ask for, but I do not take that as a lack of enthusiasm or support. Some people do not think we need professional consultants, but hiring faculty to work in the writing center might be an issue. So for the Provost they sometimes do not understand. My current Vice Provost has a math background.

Participant 5 answered:

You think they know we are here? I mean they give us some money to function, but I wish we had more moral support, and they would be at the table when discussion academic issues. They are glad it is here, but they do not know how it works. I especially think now with budget constraints . . . so I was on a call with the Provost and it was obvious the Provost did not know how the center functions on a day-to-day basis. Essentially, what it came down to was they asked how much it took to run the writing center, and at some point the Provost asked about details and how we pay even if no one is there at the moment. The provost immediately began to wonder if we could pay tutors for appointments only, and that corporatization of university is already bad enough, and paying someone to be present so if one student shows up and there is someone there, then that is worth what little budge we have. I hate to see in education the first thought being, how much does it cost? How often does an administrator walk into a Library or writing center? They are glad we are here because it is a nice marketing tool, but they would say that a writing center is where you go get your paper fixed.

Participant 6 answered:

Benevolent supportive ignoring. In terms of funding, it is fine. We are a work college, so federal work study dollars pay our consultants at this particular institution. We have twenty students, all federal work study, so no budget there. The college does allow the budget I need to do this work. I don't have tons to spare, but it is adequate. In 2020, that says a lot, right? I have insulation from department squabbles, which is nice. It can be isolating, and sometimes there are weird layers between me and upper admin, but it is ok. Sometimes people do not know what we do. I have to say, yes, there is an expertise to

what I do. Not just anyone can do this. We are slowly getting support and the faculty is more supportive of the workshops we offer.

Participant 7 answered:

My immediate administration is awesome. My department chair is really supportive of the writing center and whenever I send him a report he sends it to other chairs. My Dean and Chair both have a stake because they are English Chair and Dean of Humanities. Do I feel supported by higher ups? I don't know. I don't know what they think about me.

Participant 8 answered:

So we are housed in the Humanities department, and my direct supervisor who comes from an English background and he helps a lot. I do not know about higher administration above him. I do not meet with them. I am not at the table when they talk about student services. They report to a different vice president and we are not there. Overall, I think everyone is very encouraging about the writing center.

Participant 9 answered:

I wanted to move the center from the aforementioned room to the library and I spent hours making a presentation to the library dean who stopped me halfway through and said you can stop. I wanted you to come to the library. That was a good experience with administrators who understood my ideas. I have been quite lucky in my career with administrators who gave me the freedom to create good writing centers, both at my former university and my most recent one.

Participant 10 answered:

I am luckier than most. We have a supportive administration. My dean and direct supervisor support and advocate on our behalf. Our vice president has buy-in for our writing center and is able to advocate for us.

Participant 11 answered:

It is critical, regardless of the way the writing center is situated. Writing center success is about relationships. For a writing center to thrive, we really have to have good relationships on campus, and that means a writing center won't always know what is going on in the provost, or dean, or administration offices, but a close collaborative relationship with those offices and an understanding of the challenges in those offices is critical, and really trying to be involved on the larger campus community!

Participant 12 answered:

Depends on the level or branch of admin. We are supported in terms of budget pretty generously . . . we . . . I am thinking of how to answer. It is a mixed bag. We have some administrators . . . so our dean of institutional effectiveness is one of our greatest advocates and that dean is always on the cutting edge of research into higher education, and is constantly encouraging innovation through teaching or tutoring to prepare students. Other administrators are less interested. They know there should be tutoring services, but they mostly stay out of it. Our learning center dean is new, and we have been shuffled around to be under a different umbrella . . . so it depends.

Participant 13 answered:

I would say that on a smaller level (English Department) is very supportive. We have a committee that helps, troubleshoots, and brainstorms, and they are willing to help as

much as the director is willing to work with them. They are generous with TA's (graduate students in English program). Beyond that, I cannot speak from before, but I am not sure currently that the admin has knowledge of what we are doing. The authorized the funding for my class release, but I have not heard anything from admin. I am not bad mouthing them. I have not reached out to them, but also have not heard about more support or allocation of funds from them.

Common themes in Interview Question 15

In response to the questions about the support and guidance the writing center receives from the administration at their institution, most directors indicated that the level of support depended on the level of the administrator. Participant's direct administrators were characterized by most directors as supportive, while upper level administration were characterized as neutral or not supportive with a few exceptions.

16. How would you characterize your administration's/institution's understanding of the writing center mission statement?

Participant 1 answered:

Our administration did not understand and now they do . . . in theory. Maybe not. I think they understand what we want to do now, but a lot of people see the writing center as a fix-it-shop, so on that level there is some misunderstanding.

Participant 2 answered:

Every professor here is supportive of the writing center because they have seen how students have been helped and how students have more easily passed the bar. Professors know and appreciate.

Participant 3 answered:

Our provost is connected to the work we do. He is part of the conversations we have had. He is very connected. Our former president was not but the current president, but he believes in the students—education for the whole student. Do I have every faculty members' support? No. But for the most part, they are very supportive, and we are integrated across campus, in the writing intensive program, general education program, and other programs.

Participant 4 answered:

My first Provost was an English background, and he understood. My last few might not understand, but they trust me and I write reports to help them. Everybody thinks they know about writing, but what people think they know is not supported by research or practice, and so when confronted with that there is often a cognitive dissonance.

Participant 5 answered:

My flippant response is that they do not know any of that. Call it a mission statement, vision statement, or underlying theory of what we are trying to accomplish . . . they do not know it all. That is because a misunderstanding on their part.

This Ann Rand/Darwinian twisted way of thinking of the world suggest they only reason to go to writing centers is because of a problem, and that hinders us and society overall.

Participant 6 answered:

Poor. This is where the layers come into play. We are in a center for teaching and learning, and they have a mission statement, so that dilutes the mission statement for the writing center. I think most of our administrators think of us as a remedial place where you send bad first year writers, but I do also see that narrative starting to shift.

Participant 7 answered:

I have no idea. The President came to the English Department meeting last year and mentioned the report I sent last year. I have no idea if they think I am burden or if I am boon. I have no idea because there is tutoring center and . . . there is a . . . I am maybe in the administrative political crosshairs between my dean and the tutoring center's provost. It is a mystery to me what the provost and president think about my writing center.

Participant 8 answered:

I think upper administration . . . to be honest, the writing center where I work is such a growing baby that it has not registered on radars of administration yet. We are growing and recently have begun working outside humanities. I think maybe administration is on the same page as my division and are supportive, but we are still in infancy.

Participant 9 answered:

There are people, administrators, who do not understand what you do, but if they give writing center directors the freedom to create then that is good. Mary Croft was sort of my long-distance mentor for many years. She said just keep doing what you do. In order to get respected you have talk about the research you do and not talk about the lack of respect. A university is an intellectual state, and writing center directors have to engage in that.

Participant 10 answered:

Not very good. I think their understanding is from an older model from 30 years ago where a writing center was coming out of remedial space. We work with a different clientele than that and the admin do not understand that. We do not get financial

investment. We do need another full-time person here and they do not get that. It was a need before me and getting that sizable and significant investment has been a challenge.

Participant 11 answered:

We have been fortunate here that our leadership at every level has not only understood the value but also has advocated for the writing center. It is again about relationships. The knowledge level has been very high here, and I think that is happening elsewhere, that is gaining traction at other institutions too, at least I hope it is. We are gathering information in interesting ways, and share that information productively and that is allowing partnerships with academic affairs, departments, deans' offices, and other parts of the institution. We can say, this is really interesting. We used this initiative or this population of students gained this. We can share that information, and that increases knowledge level and involvement here, and I think that is also gaining momentum at other institutions as well.

Participant 12 answered:

They don't. They don't understand. Most of them don't even know what we mean when we talk about tutoring students. I do not think most of them know what we do. They can tell you that we tutor but they do not understand all that tutoring entails. I have been very vocal . . . I am on general education committee and that is point of communication with administration and I am very vocal and so have tried to let them know, but without someone out there yelling hey this is what we do, there is not much knowledge in admin.

Participant 13 answered:

I would say it depends on the individual administrators or faculty members. A lot think of the writing center as an area to get grammar or language checked out. But some have a

better understanding and will send any level of student to us for help, and most all have been willing to learn about our mission and engage to send their own students in.

Common themes in Interview Question 16

The directors' consensus responses were that administrators do not know the mission statement or even the writing center's goal. Some directors indicated that whether administrators or faculty know about a writing center's mission statement, or about what the writing center should do depends on the individual administrators and faculty members. One director indicated they were unsure whether administrators knew or did not know.

17. How does administration influence how writing centers are defined?

Participant 1 answered:

I do not think they have much impact because they are so high above the writing center that they do not have an impact on the definition of the writing center.

Participant 2 answered:

If you administrator does not see the reason for the writing center, the center is going be a boat with only one oar. You have to have not just funding and support and a physical space, but also recognition of what you do. The dean will refer students to go work with me. My administration is aware that it is a process.

Participant 3 answered:

They do not influence it at all. I am sure they do on some campuses but not on mine. They would only jump in if they got complaints from faculty, students, or both. If something is humming along they leave it alone.

Participant 4 answered:

It depends on whether the administration listens to internal experts. Leaders who understand and support us leave it to us to define our mission and importance. So people who think they know about writing, who do not, can be dangerous to a writing center because they might wonder why one needs professionals to tutor in writing.

Participant 5 answered:

I do not think they do. The closest it would get would be an English Department having some influence. That is probably a good thing that administrators do not get to define it, because most administrators forget about student's reality of day to day existence. Administration do not in general go out where the grunts are. Most people in higher-education administration want to be higher up, whereas most writing center directors want to help students.

Participant 6 answered:

I mean, I can only influence definitional work if I am at the table, and I am not usually at the table. To my boss's credit, she wants me to start meeting with the associate provost over our writing center more regularly in order to make sure my program is getting some direct communication. I am seeing little improvements, but you only get awareness if you are there. I am also classified as staff and not faculty, which means that my voting powers, etcetera, are limited.

Participant 7 answered:

They heavily influence it. I feel very much constrained about how I define myself in relationship and in contrast to the tutoring center. I have to make sure I am not

encroaching on their territory, which negatively impacts what I do and who I can reach. I am friends with the tutoring center director, but the political relationship is beyond me.

Participant 8 answered:

I do not know. We have so few conversations with higher administration. I do not know what their goals are. I imagine they would want to improve writing. In the past few years writing has become I think more important across subjects and now writing centers have become more important, so administration is likely to take a more active role as we serve a greater number of students.

Participant 9 answered:

The administration has enormous influence. If an administrator says, the writing center changed my life, then that is going to be good right? A former dean of mine some years ago helped me secure \$5000 in seed money to start a writing center, and that was huge. That dean worked in the community with several organizations. He could tell you more about deans and administrators and their opinions on writing centers.

Participant 10 answered:

In my experience they do not play a significant role in how they are defined. The writing center flies under the radar. They are these little misfit areas that are not classrooms, and maybe they define themselves organically. The only real the admin define or impact is in marketing. We have to pass the marketing through workorders so they have overall vision and that has to align.

Participant 11 answered:

Sharing information and sharing data, and welcoming writing centers to the table. Taking an interest. Asking academic questions. Advocating for writing center is advocating for

students and faculty: so, involvement; stopping by; having a tutor session; meeting the tutors. The tutors . . . they are the future leaders possibly at the writing center, and in administration. Administrators could showcase the tutors. Tutors could feature what it means to be a student. The tutors could illustrate what a student is at that institution. For a writing center . . . to host a meeting and invite leadership, or host a session on tutoring and invite the leadership to attend so that leadership becomes advocates at the institution. The complex work that happen in the writing center is part of the academic and pedagogical mission of so many higher education institutions, and we do not think about how rigorous and hard that work is, and so should leadership immerse themselves in it, should they see it, and they would see how incredible that work is and how meaningful that is.

Participant 12 answered:

So we are given our expectations, our goals, and they are typically (I am painting with a broad brush here) reflective of that lack of understanding or are just not good practice. Anyone who has spent time in a writing center knows what the best practices are, and people who are in administrator are unaware of what those are, and thus set goals that go against those best practices. There should be someone saying hey this is what we should be doing, and we can meet these goals in a different way. Because administration does not understand what we do or should do, we sometimes have to give into those administrative goals even knowing they are not best.

Participant 13 answered:

That is a good question. I do not have a good answer. I would say the influence of administration comes through respect and support. If they create an impression that the

writing center is of low importance, then that will trickle down to everyone involved. My predecessors and I do this as extra work without a lot of compensation or work release. That has the potential to negatively influence how we do our work, in outreach, training, and time.

Common themes in Interview Question 17

Most directors indicated that the influence of administrators on the definition of a writing center was either non-existent or very little. Several directors indicated that they were unsure if top administrators were aware of the writing center. A few directors indicated that they were unsure of how administrators influenced the definition of a writing center.

18. Do you think the community in your area is aware of your writing center, and do you provide any community services? If so, what are they and how does that work with funding, staffing, and security? If not, what would you do if you could provide community services, and how would that work with funding, staffing, and security?

Participant 1 answered:

Not recently but we have had community members who have taken advantage of the writing center. We are not a public university so there is a question of student money paying for community services, but we might have to create a student first idea for tutoring, but it is not an issue currently I think we could do more. That is an area we could benefit from.

Participant 2 answered:

Our school is community based, and students do community service. I have taught many of the students and some of the professors. I do not see community services for higher

education writing centers as something important. I think it would be beneficial for rising freshman from high schools to know. Tutors could go to high schools let students know.

Participant 3 answered:

We have talked about that before. Three of the (local center that helps people) employees are retired teachers, and we would like to reach out to high schools and work with teachers there. We would like to help teachers be aware of what students need to be successful in college and in the business world. We have thought about that, but the time constraints limit us. That is what I would like to do. We do have some community awareness. Our alumni board has stopped by several times with questions and I have taken them on tour. They are highly respected and have connections in the community. One or two of our trustees have been here. It is a mandatory stop on the college tour, so parents, possible students, and members of the community know we are here. I have a letter from a mom to me (as I am director of the whole learning center in addition to the writing center) that says I can't believe my daughter has already been there five days and she loves it. We chose your school because of the services that your team offers. In another letter a mom said she rested easier knowing we were a resource for her son.

Participant 4 answered:

I do not think they know about us, but we do offer community services, and we do that because we do not have an overwhelming demand from the community so we can serve the community members. If we had more interest, we would have to have more staff so we could serve students first. It is an area we could do more to develop. With funding uncertainties and staffing issues, I am hesitant to move in that direction.

Participant 5 answered:

We have older folks who come in, and making them feel comfortable, and other members of our community feel welcomed. Because things are limited, we do not go out into the community, but on our internet presence we let people know we are open to the community. Just as the writing center is a community in the community of the university, the university is a community within the larger community. So we serve graduate students and other students and high school students if they come. We tell the world you are welcome here because we need the community as much as they need us. If I can get my 12 writing consultants to care and be compassionate, then we are making the world a better place. Writing shapes not only the academic world, but our whole being, and hope

Participant 6 answered:

That would be my dream. So a lot of the work I did at an earlier university was explicitly community focused. If I went out and told community members in my current community to come, they would love to have something like that. I could not just say come to the writer center (because that wouldn't have meaning for most community members), but I could offer help with resumes, job applications, and so on. If I could get my consultants out in the community that would be a dream. There is a center on campus that helps do community outreach, and that is in my 10-year dream to make happen, but we are not there yet.

Participant 7 answered:

I do not think the community has an idea of our writing center now, but would I change that? Yes, absolutely. However, right now I am trying to make sure we have a place in the University's community. Eventually I would love to have a community element. I

think it is so cool when Universities do. I think there is place for community. I volunteer in the community and I know people would love having workshops and there is absolutely a place and time, but currently doing so would be a misappropriation of funds and resources of this writing center.

Participant 8 answered:

No, I do not think they are aware. So last year someone from physical therapy, who did not have any sort of writing for resumes help for students asked for helped with resumes and cover letters, and we were planning to integrate that this year into a workshop for resume writing for Occupational Therapy here on campus, but covid-19 happened.

However, that is an area where our services are likely to reach out to the community.

Participant 9 answered:

We did provide community services and tried some outreach but it was not the best. We tried to work in the public library, but most of them people who came to those did not really need our help as much, but now I know we have refugee program with Syrian refugees who need language instruction the writing center has done some workshops. Our community has some people who are aware of the center. The community involvement is important.

Participant 10 answered:

No. That has been a point of contention for me because I think we have an obligation to serve the community because that would be great marketing tool as well. I think community colleges have extra support service that should be advertised more effectively and a writing center should be out in the community helping people improve their writing and communication, but funding does impact that and we have not been able to yet.

Participant 11 answered:

So yes. Our University prides itself on the connection to the region and we have designed several programs that invited in local high schools, and also we have gone there, specifically, in our efforts to provide writing, communication and composing positive experiences for high potential students. Not always the most academically successful students, but with a great deal of potential, and in addition we worked with teachers outside the university, public school teachers in the area, to work on writing pedagogy. We work in a number of different ways and have had a good deal of interest, and a good deal of need. That is what we have done . . . we actually had an incredible experience in a pilot phase of a program, that really was interesting . . . high school teachers nominated students, students who had an interest in college, students who would benefit from seeing a university academic setting, and we brought students here for a week based on teacher recommendations.

Participant 12 answered:

We do provide tutoring to community members. We have provided quite a bit to middle and high school students but also to retired community members. I do not think that as a whole the community is aware that we exist. We do not advertise that broadly, or rather the college does not advertise us. Most people . . . you say writing center, and most people do not know what that is. Unless someone from our college tells someone in the community about, they will not know we are here.

Participant 13 answered:

At this point our community is not aware because we don't do any outreach because we don't have sources, tutors etc. In an idea world, I would love to do outreach. At my

previous institution working in writing center, we had satellite posts of the center in the public library. We worked with community. We had people come in who wanted help with all kinds of writing, from short stories to resumes. Particularly now with the economy and Covid-19 community support would be wonderful to provide. Imagine having writing center as a community resource for those who have lost jobs, need help with resumes and are going back to school, and how wonderful that would be to help them?

Common themes in Interview Question 18

In response to the questions about community involvement, writing center directors spoke about the college community and outside-the-college community. Nearly all directors indicated a desire to serve in some capacity the outside community, but indicated as well the lack of funds to do so. Most directors indicated that the writing center serves a community of students, and that is the primary focus. A few directors pointed out that budgeting for servicing people outside the college or university would be hard to obtain.

19. Do you have anything to add?

Participant 2 answered:

This is a different situation than your average writing center, yet we offer the same service. Writing centers are not just for community colleges or first year comp, writing follows student throughout, even into grad school and I think that is important. I think writing centers are undervalued, because they think writing is something students just do. Writing centers are stuck in the corner somewhere when they should be more prominent, especially in today's world. It is like a library—an important service for everybody. Sometimes it is nice to have a friendly face to go to.

Participant 4 answered:

We develop positions in the writing center, we hire non-tenor track to work in our programs as part of their job. So, we have people who teach Rhetoric and Comp, and they teach say three classes there and work 10 hours in the Writing Center. The English faculty is not particularly fond of the Rhet/Comp people. The state of the world requires better communication and anything we can do to help that is a good thing, in other words writing centers are driven by something greater, a larger purpose, than helping student get a good grade. To go back to Dewey, we are helping people beyond college as well.

Participant 5 answered:

I would love to see the dissertation when you are done! I think it is important. Writing center directors need to coach administrators better on what we do, but actions speak louder than words, and I think doing a good job in writing centers is helpful. People in academia who are touting something often seem to do so for their own benefit. I do not want to do that because I feel that is part of the corporatization of academia, and the politics behind it all. My immediate supervisor should be doing that. The atmosphere that is created in a writing center is so important, that welcoming and caring space is so important.

Participant 6 answered:

I love writing centers. I love the potential for radical understandings of education. Showing the students the rules, and how to break them, appeals to me. Watching consultants develop over time is fabulous. I enjoy the work I do and it is important work. Writing centers at their best allow one to see what education could be if we dropped some of the constraints around it.

Participant 7 answered:

I am concerned that writing centers might lose in the current environment, what with budget cuts and Covid-19, but writing centers post Covid-19 will be interesting.

Participant 9 answered:

A writing center is an easy place to walk away from. If you are a tenure track professor, then the last thing you want to think about is working in a writing center, and few people in the English field respect it . . . I should not say that, but there is a truth to that. I do think the writing center is one of the best places in the University. It is a place where students can come together, and a good writing center is a generous space, and there are sometimes so few of those on universities.

Participant 10 answered:

I think the most important perspective to have when understanding is that while writing centers have a basic pedagogy, the centers will change depending on the students being served.

Common themes in Interview Question 19

In response to the question of anything to add, some directors indicated they did not, and some expressed a worry about the future of writing centers. Most directors who answered wanted to reiterate how important they think writing centers are to students, higher education, and the development of pedagogy in real time.

Analysis of Reoccurring Themes

As the above answers indicate, there are reoccurring themes that emerged in the interviews:

1. The need for real tutors/instructors, and that those people must be trained.

2. The student to tutor relationship as the main core principal.
3. The responses indicate that directors think having a physical space to work, and having a virtual space, are important, but that the physical and virtual space is secondary to very important tutor/student part of the writing center.
4. Primary goal of writing centers are improving student writing, and secondarily to help the student achieve passing or good grades.
5. Identifying students who need help is not a primary concern. However, marketing the writing center to faculty and students is a concern, primarily so that faculty can identify students who need to visit, and students that have a need can self-identify.
6. A welcoming environment for first-time students is exceedingly important.
7. The physical space is very important. That physical space is where the student feels comfortable, and not always dependent on what the writing center wants, but rather anywhere a tutor and a student can meet where the tutor and student can work.
8. Having top administrators who understand, support, and listen to the writing center's needs is paramount.
9. That top administrators are likely ill-informed about what writing centers are and do.
10. That writing center directors do not think that their top administrators know or think about the writing center.
11. Writing centers are driven by a greater purpose than college or grades, and that purpose is to improve student's writing. This makes a person better able to communicate in the larger world and that is extremely important.

Writing Center Directors' Insights

Writing center directors have unique positions, and offered some unique insights into higher education administration and college politics. For instance, one writing center director suggested that administrators need not interfere in the writing center, but did need to support and listen. Another writing center director pointed to the use of English Department faculty as writing center directors, suggesting that the majority of English faculty were not rhetoric and composition trained. Many of the directors acknowledged their own role in making a strong writing center, while many indicated that regardless of their role, without tutors the writing center would cease operations. Directors pointed to a theme of limited understanding on the part of their top administrators when it comes to writing centers; however, they also indicated that as long as directors had support, such understanding was not a requirement for a writing center.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 4 includes the main ideas in each writing center director's responses to the interview questions, as well as a brief summation at the end of each questions. The chapter includes a brief analysis of reoccurring themes along with insights into writing centers that the unique position of writing center director allows.

Chapter 5. Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this research was to investigate, from the perspective of writing center directors in Southern Appalachia, how professionals define writing centers. This qualitative study was based on a single round of telephone interviews and follow up transcription emails with 13 educators who work in writing centers and who met specific criteria. The 13 directors who were interviewed are working in the Southern Appalachian region, and all are working, or had worked at least two years in writing centers, and as directors in writing centers. All 13 had post graduate degrees and at least two years of experience in writing centers. Each director was interviewed one-on-one using open-ended questions about what defines a writing center, important aspects of a writing center, perceptions about writing centers, administration's perceptions of writing centers, and community involvement in writing centers.

Summary

The interview questions were grouped into five categories mirroring the research questions:

Research Question 1: What criteria or common practices define a writing center in Southern Appalachia?

1. What criteria do you think define a writing center?
2. What common practices do you think define a writing center?
3. Based on your perceptions, what do those who take advantage of the center's services find most effective? (Community, faculty, staff, students)
4. What do you think individuals, other than yourself, who work in a writing center think constitutes a writing center?
5. What is the primary goal of your writing center?

Research Question 2: What constitutes an effective writing center?

6. What elements of a writing center make it most effective?
7. What are some aspects, if any, that are part of writing centers that make a writing center less effective?

Research Questions 1 and 2: 1, what criteria or common practices define a writing center in Southern Appalachia and 2, what constitutes an effective writing center?

8. How is the physical space part of the definition of a writing center? Is that physical space essential?
9. Is a virtual space part of that definition? Is that virtual space essential?

Research Question 3: How are tutors part of the definition or criteria of a writing center?

10. Are tutors part of the definition or criteria of a writing center?

Research Question 4: How do writing centers directors identify and help students with writing problems and what barriers are there to a student's access to writing centers?

11. What barriers are there to a student's access to writing centers?
12. What do you think is the future of writing centers in colleges?
13. How does your writing center identify and help students with writing problems?
14. Once identified, should students be advised to continue using writing centers?

Research Question 5: What role does higher education administration have in the operation of a writing centers and what is the future of writing centers in community colleges?

15. How would you describe/characterize the support and guidance the writing center receives from your administration/institution?
16. How would you characterize your administration's/institution's understanding of the writing center mission statement?

17. How does administration influence how writing centers are defined?
18. Do you think the community in your area is aware of your writing center, and do you provide any community services? If so, what are they and how does that work with funding, staffing, and security? If not, what would you do if you could provide community services, and how would that work with funding, staffing, and security?
19. Do you have anything to add?

Well-Trained Tutors

The single most important and defining characteristic of the Writing Center is the tutor. Decker (2005) affirms that “The core of a writing center is its tutors” (p. 26). Every writing center director that was interviewed reiterated this idea. For instance, when asked what elements make a writing center most effective, one writing center director said “Tutors who are good listeners and good problem solvers, so they can say here is what I see happening, and tutors who can take faculty comments and interpret the comments and helps students identify those kinds of places.” When asked if tutors are part of the definition or criteria of the writing center, the responses from all but one interviewee indicated that tutors were important. Indeed, one center director stated:

They are the most important thing. They are more important than me. I guess you need a leader who knows what they are doing but the tutors are more important. I train and teach them, but the most important thing is that tutors feel direction and feel comfortable doing a tutoring session.

Yet another interviewee stated, “They are the most important part. Without them there is no writing center.” The only interviewee who did not immediately affirm the importance of tutors responded positively about tutors. When asked if tutors are part of the definition or criteria of the

writing center, that particular interviewee said that tutors “would be [part of the definition] at some universities, but here not as much. I am still doing tutorials, but they are tailor made because this is a graduate school.” Even in this answer, the director acknowledges that tutors are important. The difference is that this director was also the tutor in that writing center.

Within that idea of the tutor as the most important defining aspect of a writing center, the idea of training tutors was paramount. Writing center directors were adamant that well-trained tutors could perform their duties online, in person, in the writing center or in another location. One writing center director indicated the importance of training tutors:

A writing center is only as good as the training model. Training and mentoring to me are very important. You are only as good as your training and modeling. If I do not make my consultants [tutors] train, then we cannot do any of the stuff I want in a hospitable and respectful environment because consultants [tutors] create that space.

Another pointed out that a writing center “needs well-trained workers and needs to be well-staffed,” suggesting that having a well-trained and fully staffed writing center is important to the definition of a writing center.

Another idea associated with tutors as the most important defining aspect of the writing center is that an untrained tutor could have some negative impacts on writing center practices. For instance, one writing center director suggested that writing centers were less effective when the writing center had “poor tutors. People that I thought were going to do a good job but turned out to be lazy as hound dogs—poor attitudes.” Clearly, the idea of well-trained tutors was important to defining the writing center.

Space: Virtual or Physical

The second most important idea that defined a writing center was the space the writing center inhabits. Many of the directors indicated that physical space was essential, but also indicated that virtual space was essential as well. In answering the questions about space, all of the directors articulated the idea of a comfortable-to-students, a clean, a welcoming space that made the student feel comfortable during the tutoring sessions. Furthermore, most of the writing center directors indicated that while an anchoring physical space that could be easily found and accessed was an important aspect of the writing center, it might not be a defining one for long. Indeed, several of the directors suggested that the physical space of the writing center was wherever the tutor and the student met. For instance, one writing center director suggested that meeting where the student is most comfortable, even if that is outside the confines of the writing center, is where the writing center exists. The directors indicated that a comfortable space where tutoring can occur is important, but that the space must be transferable in both a physical and virtual sense.

Leadership of Directors

The leadership of writing center directors was another defining characteristic of the writing center. While tutors were certainly the most important aspect, a director is often the lead tutor, and also the trainer of tutors, and the director is the face of the writing center to the institutional community. Training, publicity, tutoring, scheduling, developing virtual and physical space, and administrative work are all tasks that directors in my research indicated make writing centers possible, and creates the space where tutors can work.

Other Criteria

These three characteristics define a writing center according to this study, and yet there are some other important reoccurring themes that seemed to emerge after the interviews were examined. Those themes were:

1. A reoccurring concept of a writing center was the importance of administrative support, that did not require administrative understanding necessarily, but support nonetheless. Gardner and Ramsey (2005) wrote that there is “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” (p. 26). This lack of language to deal with others outside the writing center begins with not being able to articulate precisely what a writing center *is* or *does*. Administrative support can be in the form of support without understanding the role of a writing center, and in that case is mostly financial. Support with understanding is better, but not absolutely needed. Being able to say to administrators that a writing center needs a director, a staff of tutors, and a physical space offers the discourse Gardner and Ramsey indicate is lacking.
2. Better administration understanding leads to better writing centers.
3. Students, many faculty, and most administrators perceive the writing center as a place for remediation. This is a perception writing center directors would like to change in part because it inhibits students from coming, but also because while some remediation might be needed, the goal is to improve any level of writer.
4. English departments are often the birthplace of writing centers, but writing centers must move outside the English department to be complete writing centers.

5. Writing centers can be housed in tutoring services, but must still retain an identify separate from tutoring services, mostly because a writing center needs a leader that can train tutors in good writing center tutoring, and because writing is a crucial aspect across every curriculum.
6. Politics and perception play a large role in how writing centers are shaped and administered.
7. There are several differences in the pedagogical approach to tutoring writing, but most types of tutoring are better than none.

Conclusions

From my own perspective, the most important component of a writing center, the one thing that defines a writing center is the writing center directors. I did not go into this research with the idea that the directors would be the single most important defining characteristic of the writing center, but after speaking to the directors, and hearing many of their anecdotal stories, as well as their specific answers to the questions, I strongly believe that writing center directors are the single-most important defining characteristic to a writing center, and arguably the driving force behind what defines writing centers.

Four research questions guided this qualitative study. Those questions intended to ascertain writing center directors' perceptions on what criteria define a writing center. From the interviews with directors, three major defining criteria that clearly defined a writing center emerged:

- I. Well trained tutors.
 - A. Able to work in any space.
 - B. Intensive and continuing training.

- C. Attitude towards tutoring
 - D. Dangers of bad tutors
- II. Space: Virtual or physical
- A. A space that welcomes students and makes students feel comfortable.
 - B. Several different types of spaces: online, in person, where a student chooses to meet the tutor.
 - C. The comfortable, welcoming space can be created by an astute director.
- III. Leadership of Directors
- A. As trainers of tutors, they ensure an effective WC exists.
 - B. The public face and advocate of the WC.
 - C. While a lead tutor, also an administrative person.

These findings may be used to more accurately create quantitative research plans to study the efficacy of writing centers and writing center pedagogy. Also, results from this study may help writing center directors, and those working in or advocating for writing centers, in advocating for the three definitive elements indicated by my study (physical or virtual space, funding for tutors, and a director to lead the writing center). Earlier studies (e.g. Boquet & Lerner, 2008; Carpenter, Whiddon & Dvorak, 2014; Diederich & Schroeder, 2008; North, 1994; Payne, 1996; Spigelman & Grobman, 2005) combined with this study indicate that writing centers are areas where relationships between students and tutors, and students and the director are important.

In addition to the philosophy of Dewey (1915) and a diverse student population, other macro factors such as the GI Bill, were in part responsible for the reaction of colleges and universities that resulted in the creation of tutoring services and specifically modern writing

centers. Those writing centers were more solidly articulated in North's 1984 essay that simultaneously broadened and limited writing centers in that he conceptualized the idea of writing center, but also suggested the pedagogical approach that writing centers were not editing drop-offs for student papers, an idea some directors in my research reiterated, but the majority of directors rejected.

Boquet and Lerner (2008) explicitly highlighted the lack of research-based writing that my dissertation addresses. Diederich and Schroeder (2008) determined that "the variables targeted pairing with a writing center tutor and pass rate are related or dependent" (p. 22). Diederich and Schroeder showed that a relationship does exist between how well students do and whether they developed a relationship with tutors. This idea of the tutor being essential was echoed by the participants in this research. Many of the directors used words and phrases like "most important," "vital," "essential," and "the core." Payne (1996) indicates that such relationships are crucial to student success, and writing centers are in this study defined as a place where that relationship is crucial.

The definition of a writing center is amorphous, and yet the writing center can be defined. What defines a writing center according to directors within the regions of this study is three aspects: the tutors, the space, and the director. These are the three major elements that define and shape a writing center. Higher education administrators impact how a writing center is perceived and operates on campus. Administrators are not crucial to the definition. The perceptions of those who access the writing center are important, but that perception is not crucial to the definition. Even the pedagogy that writing centers apply is less important than those three aspects. Although a writing center orientated pedagogy is a must for the tutors, that pedagogy must be adaptable because of the wide range of student development in writing. Salem (2016)

indicated that “Writing centers are one of the few places where college students have the opportunity to choose the type and amount of writing instruction they will receive” (p. 150).

Salem indicated that choosing to visit a writing center is one of many “micro decisions” that can influence a person’s educational achievement and career pathways. The pedagogy is dependent in many ways on the student population, and having the director, space, and tutors that define a writing center does seem consequential for students in higher education. Salem described the writing center as:

I envision the writing center as a kind of pedagogical workshop—a place where writers encounter writing tutors who know their stuff—and a space where pedagogical practices are constantly being developed, explored, and tested. (p. 165)

Salem’s description indicates a place with tutors and a director overseeing it. Whether the space is virtual or physical, or both, is according to my research, not as important as the existence of that space.

In ranking the importance of these three elements, it seems clear that a director must come first. Tutors who are not trained by a director are possibly more harmful than helpful, and the creation of space, whether virtual or physical, relies on that director. That is not to say a motivated student could not create the space and de-facto become a director, but rather that an institution of higher education looking to create a writing center that will have an impact on the institution must first seek a director. The director then creates the space and trains the tutors. Those three main aspects are where the writing center lives. My research supports the generally accepted idea of a writing center and more firmly anchors that amorphous idea to a working definition.

Decker (2005) pointed out that writing center directors have a “fundamental belief that

students can become better writers and learn from writing better if they have a place to practice writing and share writing . . .” (p. 17). The dedication and interest the writing center directors I spoke to had for their work was evident, most seemed to enjoy, and felt good about their work. Not one spoke disparagingly about the jobs they had, nor about the students they served. They spoke passionately, knowledgably, and extensively about writing centers and the work of writing instruction. In many cases, even after years of study, the directors indicated some interesting research suggestions that I had not discovered and influenced the section in Chapter 5 about further research.

Recommendations for Practice

A director who is part of an English department can be effective, but this study indicated that directors who are working fulltime in writing centers are logically able to accomplish more. The training and supervision of tutors, and arguing for more tutors with benefits, such as pay for those tutors, is the purview of the director. The directors often found and maintained space on campus, argued for budgets, and coached administrators on why a writing center is part of the college mission. Directors who had achieved space, tutors, and some administration support were able to more effectively build and maintain writing center staff and space.

North (1994) and Decker (2005) both indicated a possible future of writing centers as the clearly demarked lines between the writing center and classroom have recently become less clear. North indicated a less “distanced relationship between classroom teachers and the writing center, not least because the classroom teachers are directly involved with, and therefore invested in, the functioning of that center” (p. 16). North suggested this idea of less distance is an aspect writing center scholars should examine. Decker indicated the benefits of putting peer tutors from writing centers into classrooms, stating, “I have found that far from compromising the writing

center, peer tutoring in the classroom can forge a diplomatic partnership between the center and the instructors that is healthy and supportive” (p. 18). More recently, Carpenter, Whiddon, and Dvorak (2014) explain the practice and impacts of embedding peers into the classroom. Several of the directors in my research were involved in placing tutors into classrooms, or having tutors work from home virtually, and several other ways of getting students and tutors together in a space that was not married to the physical location of the writing center. Such practices are likely to continue.

Spigelman and Grobman (2005) indicated also that delivering tutoring into the classroom rather than waiting for the student to come to the writing center is method worth examination. Later scholars building on Spigelman and Grobman’s work, Carpenter, Whiddon and Dvorak (2014) suggested that access to writing tutors, and specifically well-trained tutors under the leadership of a writing director, positively impacted classrooms and students.

The practice recommended by this research for institutions of higher education are:

1. Hire graduate level writing center directors with backgrounds in writing center work.
2. Insure director gets a space, virtual or physical, in which to work.
3. Make training of tutors part of director’s job, and create funding for tutors.

Recommendations for Further Research

There is a need to study what criteria define writing centers and how those centers operate. Writing centers are areas in higher education where pedagogical practices are often tested before moving into the classroom. Writing centers are areas where practice and theory intercept in interesting and often revealing ways. Further study into the following areas are needed.

1. A study using writing center directors from areas outside Appalachia to compare their

- perceptions of writing centers to my research.
2. A study of the demographics, to include race, of students that use writing centers;
 3. A study of the academic classification and academic standing of students that use writing centers;
 4. Interview higher education administrators (provost, vice presidents, and presidents) about their perceptions of the value of writing centers;
 5. Research into how Covid-19 has changed the function and format of writing centers and if that change is likely to be permanent;
 6. A study of the tutor/director dynamics at effective writing centers; and
 7. A quantitative study that is designed to measure the effectiveness of writing centers.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What criteria do you think define a writing center?
2. What common practices do you think define a writing center?
3. Based on your perceptions, what do those who take advantage of the center's services find most effective? (Community, faculty, staff, students)
4. What do you think individuals, other than yourself, who work in a writing center think constitutes a writing center?
5. What is the primary goal of your writing center?
6. What elements of a writing center make it most effective?
7. What are some aspects, if any, that are part of writing centers that make a writing center less effective?
8. How is the physical space part of the definition of a writing center? Is that physical space essential?
9. Is a virtual space part of that definition? Is that virtual space essential?
10. Are tutors part of the definition or criteria of a writing center?
11. What barriers are there to a student's access to writing centers?
Physical:
Economical:
Racial:
Religious, gender, or cultural orientations:
12. What do you think is the future of writing centers in colleges?
In 5 years:

In 10 years:

13. How does your writing center identify and help students with writing problems?
14. Once identified, should students be advised to continue using writing centers? Why or why not?
15. How would you describe/characterize the support and guidance the writing center receives from your administration/institution?

(Positive: Describe what is good. What would you like to change, if anything?
Neutral: What is good? What is bad? How is support/guidance helpful or harmful?
Negative: Describe what is bad. What would you like to change, if anything?)
16. How would you characterize your administration's/institution's understanding of the writing center mission statement?
17. How does administration influence how writing centers are defined?
18. Do you think the community in your area is aware of your writing center, and do you provide any community services?
19. Do you have anything to add?

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

I appreciate your time and that you are allowing me the chance to ask you questions about your experiences in the writing center, and about the writing center you work in. There are many ideas about what writing centers should do, what makes them effective, where they should be located, and how their services should be delivered. The purpose of this interview is to garner as much knowledge as possible from your experiences as a writing center director. The questions herein are designed to allow you as much freedom as possible, while still staying close to the concept of writing centers and the work therein.

Of course, before we begin this interview, I have here a consent form for you to review. Remember, all the information you relate to me during this interview will be utilized for my research and dissertation. I will be recording this interview as well. However, I am using several methods to protect your personal identity.

I am sure you are aware that there are risks and benefits to participation in this study. One risk is the negative feelings you may experience after discussion your experiences in the writing center, and yet others may benefit from knowing your experiences. As you examine the consent form, ask me any questions you may have. I will also later, after we are finished with this interview, to clarify and talk about your answers.

Thank you for reading the consent from. The interview can begin now.

Preliminary questions: How long have you worked in the writing center? What other experiences have you had as a writing center director? How many, if any, tutors or support staff do you have working for you? Do you know how many students visit your writing center?

Appendix A interview Questions Here.

Thank you for the opportunity to interview you about your experiences and about your writing center. Do you have any thoughts, ideas, or impression you would like to add that you

feel are important to understanding writing centers? I will be contacting you so in order to give you your copy of the transcript of this interview. At that time, you will be able to review and clarify, or omit, any portion of your responses during the interview. Thank you again.

Cold Email

My name is Paul Ludwig, and I am a doctoral candidate at ETSU's College of Education. I am emailing/calling because the research for my dissertation requires that I interview writing center directors. I was hoping to schedule a time with you in the next few weeks to conduct about an hour-long interview. Would you be willing to participate in this small study? Thank you!

Follow Up

Thank you so much for agreeing to/interest in the interview! I cannot express how important it is to me. Your experience is great for this research. So that you know . . . I am a full-time faculty member, an Assistant Professor of English at Walters State Community College, and a doctoral student in the Education Leadership program at ETSU. The research study I am conducting is entitled "Research to Define Writing Centers from the Perspective of Writing Center Directors." The purpose of this study is to examine how and what those who work in writing centers think is most essential, what happens most often, what perceptions you and others have, and what the future of writing centers might be. More than that I am hesitant to say simply because I do not want to influence your answers before the interview. Should you decide not to, I can say much more, and should you decide to participate, then of course after the interview I can talk at length about the research. As you likely know, your participation in the interview process would not bind you to allowing me to use your responses. You can, at any time until the dissertation's publication, opt out. Too, I am taking multiple steps to make sure that your anonymity as an interviewee will be protected.

My faculty mentor at ETSU is Dr. James Lampley. I have of course obtained IRB approval, and have conducted several interviews already. The interview should not take more than 45 minutes to an hour. Some of the interviews have lasted longer but only when the directors want to talk about writing center trends and such, which of course I am interested in and willing to do. I have also attached the consent form for you to examine. Of course, during these unusual times, you will not need to sign it, but if you have any issues with some part of the consent form, then let me know. Otherwise, I look forward to scheduling and interviewing you. On that note, do you have any free time soon? I will work my schedule around yours. Thank you!

VITA

PAUL DOUGAN LUDWIG

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