

Redefining the Visibility of a Writing Center

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The Second Middle East-North Africa Writing Centers Alliance (MENAWCA) Conference:
Situating, Sustaining, and Serving.

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Presenters' Biographies:

Hanouf Aljuhail has joined AUK's writing center in the fall of 2007. Aljuhail has obtained a baccalaureate degree in sociology from the University of Colorado at boulder. Aljuhail is the center's senior staff member as well as one of its consultants.

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Introduction:

The Writing Center at the American University of Kuwait was established in 2005 as a center of academic services that caters to AUK's student body, faculty, and staff. As a modern Writing Center, it has constructed its own mission statement to solidify its structure in a constantly growing liberal arts institution. AUK's Writing Center's mission statements emphasizes the role of the writing center in promoting an understanding of writing as a way of thinking, learning, and teaching. To serve this mission, the AUK Writing Center aims to:

- Cultivate an environment of collaborative inquiry with students seeking help with a variety of writing and reading needs, concerns, and goals.
- Develop students' understanding of the variety of writing purposes, audiences, genres, and styles.
- Develop students' strategies for critically reading and engaging with a variety of texts.
- Support students' efforts in all stages of their writing processes.
- Provide thoughtful and constructive feedback.
- Support faculty efforts to develop and integrate a variety of writing assignments into their courses.
- Provide resources on writing for the entire University community

The writing center at AUK, like many writing centers in different institutions, share universal common grounds and features to their practice, and many writing centers have created diverse

mission statements that highlight who they are and what they do. Robert W. Barnett in his article “Redefining Our Existence: An Argument for Short- and Long Term Goals and Objectives” believes that:

creating a statement of short – and long- term goals and objectives not only works to legitimize our curricular positioning in the academy, but also addresses important political, theoretical, and rhetorical questions pertaining to our top priority – helping students become better writers. (Barnett & Blumner 195)

Our mission statement, therefore, identifies our services and goals as a community of practice and has functioned as a clear roadmap to be followed to achieve remarkable results through the efforts of a dedicated director, professional staff, and talented consultants. Upon structuring our writing center, we have chose the title “consultants” for our tutors in an attempt to emphasize on discussion and continuous dialogue throughout our sessions between our consultants and the students. Thereby, the students develop an understanding that they’re going to the writing center for a “consultation”, which would require them to analyze and reflect on their work, rather than expect a tutor to edit or proofread. Although we have the advantage of being situated in a small liberal arts university where we can achieve visibility to both students and administration, we have had our share of challenges that have required us to revisit our management strategies, training techniques, and marketing schemes. This paper will demonstrate empirical evidence showing how AUK’s writing center administration and staff decided to see itself as a necessary component of the larger institution and its mission. Our efforts here will try to answer the following compelling questions: Will writing centers triumph

in their mission once they stop seeing themselves as a “marginalized” entity and engage in a productive dialogue with central administration? Does a constant implementation of pragmatic, yet innovative, solutions to familiar challenges redefine the visibility of a writing center in the long run? And finally, will there always be a need to “going back to basics” in regards to training techniques and management styles to reinstitute who we are and what we do in order to appeal to a wider audience?

Theoretical Analysis:

Many believe that a writing center is designed to have its own institutional identity apart from classroom setting, yet it has certainly originated and evolved from a classroom environment, in principle. Peter Carino, in his article “Early Writing Centers: Toward a History”, believes that “it is likely that centers evolved from a classroom format known as the laboratory method. This format enabled the intervention in the student’s writing process”, he then continues describing the common features on which he bases such analogy in describing the type of services found in both environments by stating that “through individual help from the instructor and peer editing groups, two methods shared by writing centers and classrooms today” (Burnett & Blumner 12). In a classroom, there are always attendees, dialogue, and exchange of knowledge, and an instructor that attempts to answer all the questions. All of these are components that constitute a writing center, however, writing centers as Peter Carino sees them, are places that “are fond of seeing themselves in metaphors of family-cozy homes with soft couches where when students go they must be taken in” (Burnett & Blumner 20). We have started from there. We began in creating a place where students would

experience memorable sessions and volunteering faculty would feel at home away from rigid institutional principles. Unlike a classroom setting, the writing center is a place of unpredictability. Each day we open our doors to a crowd of students and faculty that is anything but homogenous. Their requests, and sometimes demands, are as diverse as their personalities, and we try to construct such diversity to constantly meet the demands through implementing our lucid vision. Like most writing centers, we do set certain standards when defining our role and practice, and students gradually become aware of that. Eric Hobson, in his article "Maintaining Our Balance: Walking the Tightrope of competing Epistemologies" , sums it up by stating that "We see ourselves as coaches, facilitators, those who help less experienced writers see that they can write successfully. We strive to make these writers see that they do have something to say that is worth hearing" (Burnett & Blumner 102).

In order to be part of the wider institutional spectrum, there have been numerous theories that are constructed to comprehend the nature of writing center practice and to invent further collaborative methods to identify writing center's physical and pedagogical locus. Initially, and like many writing centers, the writing center at AUK needed to unveil its services through holding large workshops where writing center's administrators talk about the nature of their practice and have students, the attendees, try out the services. Although it seemed like an efficient plan then, however, it had failed to generate a large number of students on a socially active campus where many events take place simultaneously. A change of strategy was in need, and to better understand the next adapted method, an analysis of theories must be indicated here. To detect the fastest way to reach a growing number of students, we must place the psychological nature of the desired relationship between the center and its visitors

under the microscope. For students, the idea of a writing center needed to shift from it being a disciplinary measure, into an environment where dialogue and collaboration transpire.

Elizabeth Bouquet in her article “‘Our Little Secret’: A history of Writing Centers, Pre to Post-Open Admission”, highlight the Rogerian nondirective method as one of the solutions to the missing links between the center and students. The Rogerian nondirective method is a type of psychotherapeutically counseling that can be modeled in writing center place. She mentions:

Davidson and Sorenson, the two most vocal proponents of this psychotherapeutic approach to writing lab work, advocate an approach they refer to as Rogerian nondirective counseling, a method which has psychotherapists ask questions in order to draw out their patients, leading to knowledge these clients presumably already possess. Rogerian nondirective counseling provided then yet another means for individual students to be held accountable for their own successes as well as for their shortcomings by making students responsible for accessing information which continually eludes them.

(Burnett & Blumner 48)

Bouquet here analyzing the writing labs' - a pre-writing center's' entities - methods and how there was an imperative need to create a dialogue of collaboration, as she interprets Perrin's view on the subject stating that, “students are encouraged to write about what interests them, and models for response are cast in more collaborative, even dialogic, terms” (Burnett & Blumner 48). When examining Bouquet's analysis of the Rogerian nondirective method, there resides an intimate approach to understanding students' tendencies in developing their own perception on what a writing center is/does. We, as many writing center administrators, have

noticed that when a faculty member *requires* his or her students to attend these workshops, a negative conception has already been formed in a student's psyche. However, when the writing center *becomes part of* the classroom experience, students are then presented with a multitude of possibilities. Bouquet's method also can be adapted in developing training strategies for the center's tutors, where the emphasis should be on establishing a non-evaluative and productive dialogue between the student and the tutor throughout the session, rather than falling in the traps of editing the student's work. Through carefully planned steps, and extensive collaborative efforts between writing center and faculty, a writing center can be a socially constructive tool. A writing center then, and only then, can escape being stigmatized as a "marginalized" service that offers "grammar drills". Instead, it would be seen as an essential part of the institutional and curricular field. This leads us to the social epistemologists' view where writing is seen as a social process.

Andrea Lunsford's article titled "Collaboration, control, and the Idea of a Writing Center" has created an ongoing discussion that analyzes her take on collaboration as a vital component of writing center work. Lunsford believes that the ideal structure for a writing center is what she calls the "Burkean Parlors", an entity that falls under the social constructionist paradigm. The model of Burkean Parlors advocates the notion that knowledge is socially constructed, and "such a center would place control, power, and authority not in the tutor or staff, not in the individual student, but in the negotiating group" (Burnett & Blumner 97). The authors of *The Everyday Writing Center* explore the potential of Lunsford's model in their book suggesting that, "shaking up our worlds by revisiting that beginner's mind helps us to be present for the many writers who enter our centers, crossing that threshold into the

academic house of mirrors otherwise known as a Burkean Parlor” (Geller et al. 62). Though the idea of Burkean Parlors can be modeled in contemporary writing centers, however, many opponent of the constructivist view argue that it is ideal and therefore, difficult to be envisioned in the practical sense due the fact that this model prioritizes the role of the group vs. the individual. The social composition of the group dynamics – whether it is a classroom or writing center workshop – they believe determines the outcome of the experience. While this might be true, however to guarantee a successful experience, Lunsford explains that “the kind of collaborative environment I want to encourage calls for careful and ongoing monitoring and evaluating of the collaboration of group process” (Burnett & Blumner 95). Lunsford not only stresses the importance of monitoring and evaluating the results, she also underlines the significance of engaging all individuals, equally, in the process of collaboration “from the student clients to work-study students to peer tutors and professional staff” (Burnett & Blumner 95). By following Lunsford’s model, and many other comparable approaches, we have seen impeccable results once we became part of the classroom’s social experience through the tailoring our presentations and workshops to meet specific the needs of a group or a classroom. Lisa Ede, another advocate of the social epistemic rhetoric, she’s quoted in Murphy’s article “The Writing Center and social constructionist theory”, stating that “to view both writing and thinking – the creation of knowledge – as inherently individual activity,’ minimizing the influence of ‘social and cultural contexts of teaching and learning’ (1989, 6)” (Burnett and Blumner 110). To say that knowledge at the writing center should be socially cultivated does not mean however that student’s would collectively construct what might be stigmatized as being “group – produced” work. Socially collected knowledge would have a direct impact on

an individual's cognitive development. In this process, students, whether in a group or as in an individual session with a tutor, are encouraged to talk about the rhetorical context of their work, the difficulties that they're facing, anxieties about writing, which are all tactics known to writing center's sessions. Most social constructionist theories promote the idea of a writing center adapting the collaborative social approach to writing due to its positive effect not only on learners, but on the center's practice as a whole. The trick here is to find the right formula and the desired equilibrium which when applied maintains the originality of the writing center's mission yet opens doors to new pedagogical conduits.

The Change in Direction:

The current discourse surrounding writing center practice requires us to carefully analyze our decision making methods. There are many factors that influence the way we, writing center people, strategize our process in constructing our own epistemology. It's true that faculty and institutional recognition tops our "To Do" list, however, our main target has always been to bridge the gap between our services and those who need it the most, the students. For that reason, AUK's writing center needed to invest heavily in faculty support and seek out their consensus in recognizing our proposed services and believing in the possibility of alternatives. Once that was accomplished – through clever management strategies and professional staff's efforts, we've reconciled our overly-excessive and pedantic workshops with classroom-tailored ones. Imagine this, a group of student in a lower division research methods' class sitting in scattered groups, where they're asked to come up with the research question, one that they'll spend the entire semester's work in researching and analyzing. They're, for the first time, are being presented with data collections methods, hypotheses and theses

construction, academic research guidelines, APA MLA and many other citation styles requirements for an acceptable format, and of course professor's emphasis on dividing the work between all group members, who looked quite terrified and confused. There walks in a writing center staff to conduct a presentation followed by group workshops on "How to begin research" and "How to develop a research question". A writing center staff begins the presentation, and as it proceeds, sighs of relief are let out across the room. Now they kind of know what topic they would like to present, and therefore, when the presenter started consulting each group and conversing with them about their options, they have asked questions, and answered some as well. They were later on shown how to take the first practical steps to beginning the process right there, rather than being at home or at the library staring at the computer hoping that it does its magic. Few days later, they felt the need to see that consultant again, and therefore, they recalled the instructions given to them on how to make an appointment. So, they logged in to Tutor Trac, a writing center's electronic based appointment system, and booked an appointment with that consultant. Few days later, few members of a group showed up for their appointment, and demonstrated how they applied the knowledge that was collectively shared in class the other day. Bingo! Mission accomplished through collaboration. It is important to mention that earlier that week, the Management professor heard about the popular writing center's presentations from another faculty member, and how student's work passed by the writing center's director's office to see if there is an available staff member to come in to class and present to students. The professor then needed to know who actually continued to work with writing center staff in session, and who's claiming that their flawless work was due to their numerous consultations with a writing center

tutor. We then informed the professor that we can provide a document titled "Confirmation of Visit Form", and in that document, the student's name, course, tutor's name, date, type of material presented (i.e. assignment sheet, draft, instructor's comments, research material), a thorough and detailed final remarks from the tutor describing the session. Finally the form is signed and agreed upon by both the tutor and the student. The professor became incredibly impressed with the organizational factor of that process, it was later on "requested" as an essential requirement upon submitting future assignments. The students on the other hand continued to visit the writing center for their other courses where they had writing assignments of different nature, or when they wanted brainstorm or bounce few ideas off one of the center's staff in an attempt to receive constructive feedback that leads them to actually start writing the paper. Tutors, being a vital part of this operation have learned and applied techniques that were presented to them earlier in the semester by the center's staff and director in a two-hour workshop. After weeks of practicing session tactics, tutors, staff and director meet again to share feedback, concerns and observation in an attempt to further improve their performance. The director also suggested that each tutor and staff member take turns in contributing the writing center's page included in the campus newspaper reflecting on their experience. These meetings and workshops are essential tools to the professional development of staff as well as the writing center's practice collectively. This was a demonstration of some of the strategies and methods that the writing center at AUK has adapted and followed which closely linked to the theoretical approach mentioned earlier in this paper. The following section will exhibit an analysis of AUK's writing center's statistics and figures which will demonstrate the positive outcome of the newly adapted methods.

Findings:

By adapting a practical outreach approach to redefine our position in relation to other academic entities and by participating in the AUK student worker program to conducting class visits and research writing workshops for both lower and upper level courses, we have moved beyond the image of a supplementary student service and have promoted the center as an essential center for students and faculty in realizing the mission of the university.

The verified approaches through which we have applied this theory are diverse. One of which has been the engagement of students in writing center activities and practices through faculty. For this purpose, in spring 2009, Dr Mary Queen, the former Writing Center director assigned her business writing class ENGL 204 to conduct a research on AUK Writing Center's visibility on campus. Throughout their inquiry students who were enthralled to take on such exploratory endeavor often stumbled upon plentiful practical information in their quest for solving the mystery of AUK's then less than renowned writing center. At the end of the day, her class's research resulted in the writing center's electronic visibility as the students in the process of their inquiry interviewed the PR and Marketing department at AUK regarding the online status of the writing center and the outcome of their efforts was the appearance of the writing center page on the main website. This case is indicative of the fact that when collaborating with professors and faculty and reaching inside their class rooms in any given institution, the writing center could pave the academy's ground one step forward in unveiling its concealed existence on campus.

Another attempt in situating the writing center's existence further firmly on campus has been the addition of the Arabic writing tutoring component to writing center's other various activities thus shifting to a new phase of its development, hosting individual conferencing and tutoring writing in multi languages. This attempt, highly valued by Arabic faculty, was the direct result of collaboration between Writing center staff and Arabic language and literature department at AUK that indicated the existence of an intellectual dialogue between these two parties. Thus, writing center at AUK currently embraces both English and Arabic writers providing a solid ground for the prosperity of their writing and intellectual aptitudes.

In addition, perhaps a more effective strategy that has generated more visitors to seek help from the center and therefore contributed to elevated visibility is the numerous class visits that usually take place at the beginning of each academic semester. These class visits are requested from faculty members and are conducted by staff members for the plain purpose of introducing the center and its services to the students. This often results in the faculty demanding their students to visit the center for the improvement of their work later on during the semester. Also, holding various academic sessions such as research writing and MLA and APA citation workshops inside the classrooms per faculty requests, also conducted by the director and the staff, has contributed in formation of a vastly prestigious reputation for the writing center.

To create a more feasible ground on the broader academic life and to create a more rewarding intellectual bond between students and their center, writing center at AUK has recently launched its first creative writing contest geared toward all AUK students which is at

present in the reviewing process. The overwhelming flow of the submissions was indicative of the fact that our center had surpassed its goal of becoming more visible long ago.

The implementation of these assorted approaches and strategies have led to the vast rush of student visits from IEP levels, lower and upper level courses to the writing center where our center currently serves above one third of AUK's student population. Comparing data from fall 2008 to fall 2010, with the consideration of the above mentioned applied methods and strategies, the writing center at AUK has witnessed a conspicuous increase in student visits. Figure 1 demonstrates this increase highlighting the striking gap between the total of 363 students who visited the center in fall 2008 to 604 students out of approximately 1800 undergraduate students in fall 2010.

Writing Center Usage (By Center)

	Visits	Visit Hours	Students	Male	Female:
Fall 2008	1095	524.4	363	139	224
Spring 2009	1427	774	428	167	261
Fall 2009	1810	1017.6	492	167	325
Fall 2010	1961	1,123.0	604	251	353

Figure 1 exhibits an apparent increase in the rate of student visits in the course of two years.

As per this engaging formula and its application in practical field, we have arrived upon the following findings where involvement of the writing center inside the classrooms and its engagement with academic curriculum does affect the academic success/failure rates, most

particularly in English writing program of the university that has utmost significance in the academic curricula of this educational institution. We have data that proves how the Writing center at the American University of Kuwait with its constant efforts in outreaching the classroom setting, has created an intellectually challenging environment on campus, enhancing student body's writing and critical thinking skills. The idea of promoting students' critical thinking is heavily mentioned in AUK's mission statement that, "[AUK] is dedicated to providing students with knowledge, self-awareness, and personal growth experiences that can enhance critical thinking, effective communication, and respect for diversity." Thus, there exists a direct correlation between writing center's practice of fundamentally enhancing students' critical thinking and the theory upon which AUK's mission statement is established.

However, specific evidence here being presented as part of the thesis that this paper is presenting and thus is trying to prove with drawing attention to data and statistics derived from AUK's IT Institutional Research Department is mainly concerned with the improvement in the students' success rates in English program courses of the institution starting from fall 2008 to fall 2010. When comparing the number of those students who had sessions at the writing center and those who did not and their success and failure rates, and according to the data that we have gathered, we stumble upon a vivid increase in the success rate of those who attended the center seeking help for their English courses compared to those who did not seek the center's help. Figure 2 evidently exhibits this fact through different further intricate categories such as gender in ENGL 101, ENGL 102 and ENGL 108.

ENGL 101		No Sessions			Sessions		
		Pass	Fail	Pass Rate	Pass	Fail	Pass Rate
Fall Semester 2008	Female	84	17	83.17%	27	1	96.43%
	Male	81	37	68.64%	11	4	73.33%
	Overall	165	54	75.34%	38	5	88.37%
Spring Semester 2009	Female	66	15	81.48%	33	6	84.62%
	Male	75	37	66.96%	21	2	91.30%
	Overall	141	52	73.06%	54	8	87.10%
Fall Semester 2009	Female	68	20	77.27%	59	14	80.82%
	Male	67	26	72.04%	33	9	78.57%
	Overall	135	46	74.59%	92	23	80.00%
Spring Semester 2010	Female	74	13	85.06%	50	12	80.65%
	Male	69	37	65.09%	34	4	89.47%
	Overall	143	50	74.09%	84	16	84.00%
Fall Semester 2010	Female	82	24	77.36%	35	13	72.92%
	Male	49	30	62.03%	16	5	76.19%
	Overall	131	54	70.81%	51	18	73.91%

ENGL 102		No Sessions			Sessions		
		Pass	Fail	Pass Rate	Pass	Fail	Pass Rate
Fall Semester 2008	Female	12	2	85.71%	1	0	100.00%
	Male	8	0	100.00%	0	0	-
	Overall	20	2	90.91%	1	0	100.00%
Spring Semester 2009	Female	13	0	100.00%	3	0	100.00%
	Overall	13	0	100.00%	3	0	100.00%
Fall Semester 2009	Female	50	11	81.97%	10	1	90.91%
	Male	50	13	79.37%	4	1	80.00%
	Overall	100	24	80.65%	14	2	87.50%
Spring Semester 2010	Female	76	26	74.51%	12	3	80.00%
	Male	39	25	60.94%	6	3	66.67%
	Overall	115	51	69.28%	18	6	75.00%
Fall Semester 2010	Female	100	20	83.33%	36	0	100.00%
	Male	77	21	78.57%	38	4	90.48%
	Overall	177	41	81.19%	74	4	94.87%

ENGL 108		No Sessions			Sessions		
		Pass	Fail	Pass Rate	Pass	Fail	Pass Rate
Fall Semester 2008	Female	117	3	97.50%	2	0	100.00%
	Male	96	5	95.05%	1	0	100.00%
	Overall	213	8	96.38%	3	0	100.00%
Spring Semester 2009	Female	85	5	94.44%	1	0	100.00%

	Male	74	11	87.06%	1	0	100.00%
	Overall	159	16	90.86%	2	0	100.00%
Fall Semester 2009	Female	91	1	98.91%	6	0	100.00%
	Male	88	7	92.63%	0	0	-
	Overall	179	8	95.72%	6	0	100.00%
Spring Semester 2010	Female	83	11	88.30%	7	0	100.00%
	Male	82	11	88.17%	1	0	100.00%
	Overall	165	22	88.24%	8	0	100.00%
Fall Semester 2010	Female	85	6	93.41%	6	0	100.00%
	Male	71	11	86.59%	2	0	100.00%
	Overall	156	17	90.17%	8	0	100.00%

Figure 2. These tables predicate an evident rise of outcomes between students with no sessions and those with sessions from AUK's English writing program.

For the purpose of analyzing this data and to provide a more accurate account, we will select a large sample, in this case, ENGL 102 in fall 2010 where it contains the largest number of visits, a total of 78 students who visited the center for the sheer purpose of seeking help in their ENGL 102 final research papers. ENGL 102 is a general requirement course that introduces students to the academic, intellectual, and public activities of research. According to AUK's catalogue, "Through a focus on research as a process of inquiry generated by particular purposes, audiences, and contexts, students [are to] develop a more complex understanding of multiple research processes and genres." Accordingly and by taking this course, students are to develop and conduct an extended research inquiry to improve their critical and information literacy skills. Thus, writing center's involvement in the improvement of the average grade and success rate of this course in fall 2010 has been a major step in rendering the center as an essential center for students and faculty in realizing the mission of the university. To further dissect the ways in which our center has worked toward this goal, we will scrutinize the following data from ENGL 102 result in fall 2010:

ENGL 102		No Sessions			Sessions			Diff
		Pass	Fail	Pass Rate	Pass	Fail	Pass Rate	
Fall Semester 2010	Female	100	20	83.33%	36	0	100.00%	16.67%
	Male	77	21	78.57%	38	4	90.48%	11.90%
	Overall	177	41	81.19%	74	4	94.87%	13.68%

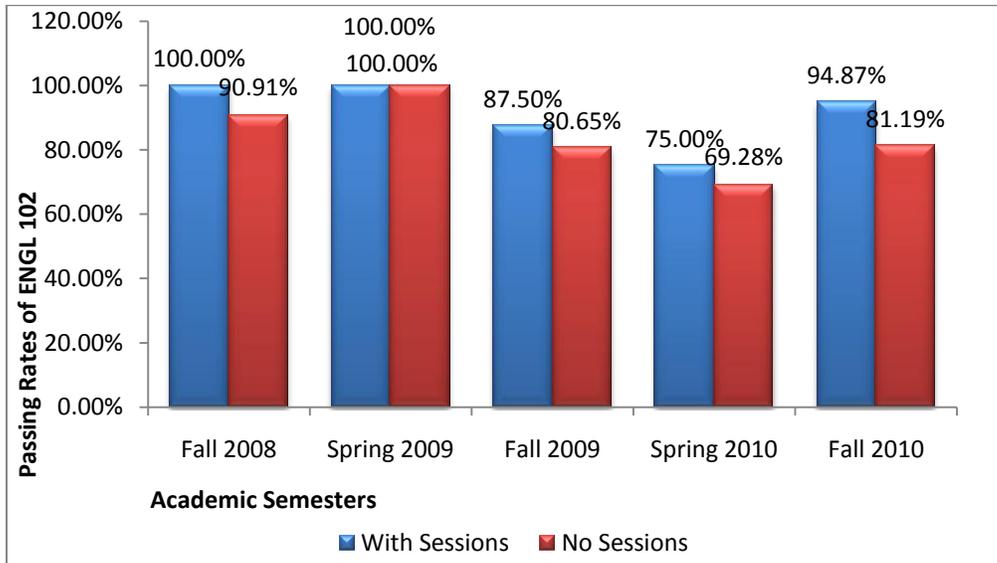


Figure 3. A comparison between pass and fail rate of students in ENGL 102 with and without sessions from fall 2008 to fall 2010

Although the difference between the success/failure percentages of those who attended the center and those with no sessions might seem slight and not as significant of a change, however, interpreting the percentages into numbers could elucidate the difference. When applying the passing rate of students with sessions (94.87%) to the total amount of ENGL 102 students (296), we will find out that from the total of 296 students, both with sessions and no sessions, and considering the likelihood of the entire sample's attendance of the writing center seeking help, instead of 45 failure cases there might only be 15 cases of failed students in

ENGL 102 in fall 2010 had the entire sample participated in sessions with the writing center.

Indeed these are probabilities. Nevertheless, this analysis reveals how the writing center could influence the academic success of the institution positively as it is pertinent to the institution's academic development. This positive impact is endorsed by the rapidly increasing rate of the center's student visitors as there is a correlation between the number of visits and the academic success of the institution, since the more students tend to seek help from the writing center the higher the academic success rates become.

Considering a writing center's background, experience and possible existing options and visions, speculating the future of writing centers is as inconstant as speculating the future itself. However, we assume a broader understanding of writing centers as multifaceted, multi-layered systems that are inevitably incorporated into academic and curricular contexts. While we recognize the limitations of the academy on writing center practices, we ought to see beyond its limitations. We as practitioners of the alternative ethos of writing centers need to expand our professional preoccupations to include our impact on the community. We ought to dream wide about the future possibilities of writing center work.

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