



**KEEPING TRACK OF DATA:
WHY?
HOW?
WHAT NEXT?**

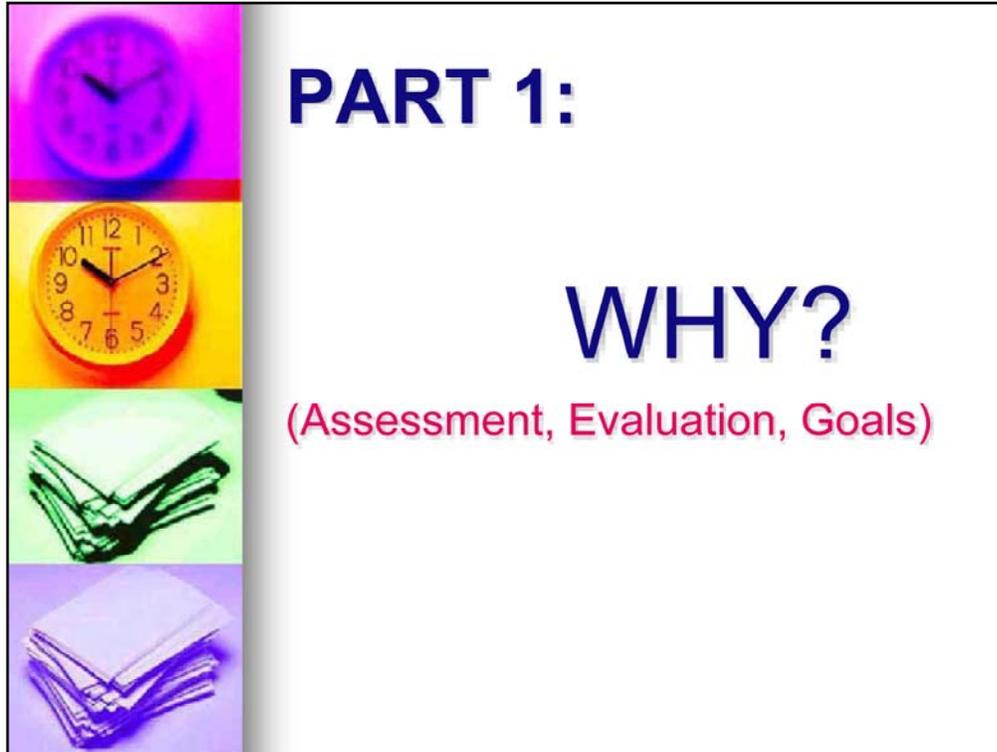
*MENAWCA CONFERENCE, AL AIN
FEBRUARY 19-20, 2009
N. Jean Hodges
Writing Center Instructor
VCUQatar
Doha, Qatar*

Starting a Writing Center Wherever You Are:

KEEPING TRACK OF DATA: WHY, HOW, WHAT NEXT?

In 2004 new Writing Center Instructor Jean Hodges inherited little for running the Writing Center at Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar (VCUQatar). This presentation examined why record-keeping is important; explained the manual system of forms, software, and reports that has been evolving at VCUQatar from 2004 to the present; and identified benefits from record-keeping.

The purpose of the presentation was to convince attendees that record-keeping, regardless of what system is used, is a necessary and important part of Writing Center work.



Many of these ideas came from the IWCA Pre-Conference Workshop on Writing Center Assessment at Las Vegas, NV, 29 Oct 2008.

Assessment versus Evaluation

Assessment is getting the **outcomes** that you wanted, i.e., success of the **values** set by your Writing Center. *Evaluation* is comparing performance against a standard. Writing Centers should be doing **values-based assessment** because the Center's values are of central importance. "You must identify what is important for YOUR center, figure out how to measure that, and recognize that it may be a FLUID process."

Reasons for assessment:

- Data interpretation makes possible **evidence-based decision making**, which supports claims
 - objectively and factually, thus strengthening them
- Because people care:
 - Stakeholders (local, institutional, state, country, beyond)
 - Writing Center Personnel and Clients
 - Faculty and Administrators
 - Networks (such as IWCA, composition researchers)
- Because your institution cares:
 - Examine documents governing your institution (strategic plan, mission statement, etc.)
 - Align your Center's goals with key objectives stated in those documents
 - Use their same wording when possible backed up with the facts that your data support



PART 1: WHY?

- **POTENTIAL BENEFITS**
(assuming positive outcomes!)
 - Knowledge
 - Continued existence
 - Increased funding/money
 - Control (“do, before being done to”)
 - Prestige/status
 - Promotion/position
 - Improved practices
 - Student/tutor learning

Reasons for assessment (continued):

Finally, there are numerous potential benefits, the most basic of which is KNOWLEDGE.

Of course, if your data show *negative* outcomes—for example, if very few students are using the Center—this is a red flag that something is wrong. In these cases, you need to figure out what is the problem and take steps to remedy it.



PART 2:

HOW?

(Forms and Procedures)

This portion of the presentation involved showing the various forms developed for use in VCUQatar's Center, which were primarily Microsoft Word documents except for the database, which is in Excel.



PART 2: HOW?

- Components of a MANUAL System
 - Rules
 - For use of the Center
 - For making appointments
 - Registration Form
 - Appointment Sign-up Sheets
 - Writing Center Reports
 - Notes (handwritten)
 - Email typed report to faculty member
 - File Copy (of typed report)

RULES FOR USE OF THE VCUQ WRITING CENTER

The Writing Center is designed for creative thought, study, and classroom use. To promote these purposes and to express courtesy and consideration to all users, please observe the following rules while in the Writing Center:

The Writing Center is reserved for the use of VCUQ students, staff, and faculty.

Please turn off your cell phone as you enter. If you must call someone, please do so outside the Center.

Please avoid talking, but if you must talk, please *whisper quietly*.

No food is allowed.

Drinks are allowed in the Writing Center, but drink containers **MUST HAVE A LID THAT REMAINS ON THE CONTAINER** and drinks should be kept a reasonable distance from all computer equipment.

Downloading music, accessing pornographic materials, and plagiarizing are prohibited.

If a class is using the Center, you may enter quietly and use the four computers along the back wall if the class is not using them unless a sign on the door indicates otherwise.

If you need special consideration because of a disability, please tell the Writing Center Instructors.





PART 2: HOW?

- Components of a MANUAL System (continued)
 - Filing System (2 sets of files)
 - Sign-up sheets with note sheets (by month)
 - Student files (alphabetical by name)
 - Excel Database
 - Month-by-month entries
 - Summary sheets

RULES FOR WRITING CENTER APPOINTMENTS

SIGN UP FOR AN APPOINTMENT:

Print your name in a time slot in the appointment book (the white notebook on the countertop beside the printer). Students may have no more than two (2) appointments per day (one hour total time).

TIME YOUR APPOINTMENT:

Sign up **AT LEAST ONE DAY BEFORE THE ASSIGNMENT IS DUE**. (Making the appointment SEVERAL DAYS before your assignment is due is even better in case we discover some major problems that need to be worked out.)

Making your appointment for the same day your assignment is due is **TOO LATE**; we will not honor same-day appointments.

PREPARE FOR YOUR APPOINTMENT:

Bring to your appointment:

- Your assignment sheet from your instructor,
- A draft that you have written and read through at least once,
- Your journal if you are in a class that requires keeping one, and
- A list of questions that you have about your work.

Note that the Writing Center does not proofread papers!

Appointments begin promptly at the time scheduled and last 30 minutes. If needed, students may sign up for one additional appointment on the same day.

A student late by more than 5 minutes may forfeit her appointment to a walk-in or to the next-scheduled student.

Professors always receive a report of the work done in your appointment. They may consider your Writing Center attendance in computing your final grade.

CANCELING AN APPOINTMENT:

If you cannot keep your appointment for whatever reason, either mark your name off the appointment book or email jhodes@qatar.vcu.edu or pmburroughs@qatar.vcu.edu **AT LEAST 24 HOURS BEFORE YOUR APPOINTMENT**. This enables another student to take your time slot. Failing to cancel is counted as a "No-Show."

"NO-SHOWS":

Professors are notified when you fail to cancel an appointment properly. In the English Department, two "no-shows" count as a full absence from that professor's class. Other professors may adopt similar penalties for "no-shows."





PART 3:

WHAT NEXT?

(Using Data to Advantage)

This section of the presentation focused on suggestions for ways to use the data gathered by keeping records of Writing Center activity. In VCUQatar's system, all the manual forms work together to supply information that is entered into the Excel database shown in the notes section of the preceding slide. This database serves as the official permanent record of the Center's activity for the academic year, and it becomes a part of the historical standard against which succeeding years will be compared.



Part 3: What next?

- **The Annual Report**
 - Are the Center's goals being met?
 - Is the Center supporting the institution appropriately/sufficiently?
- **Proposals/Changes**
 - Procedures
 - Policies
 - Personnel (numbers, types)
 - Services
 - Mission

The most important document required of the VCUQatar Writing Center is the Annual Report. In addition to answering the questions posed above, it compares the Center's progress during the current year with that of preceding academic years.

In addition, the Writing Center data are used to support various petitions (such as requests for additional personnel, space, or equipment). The data help track whether the Center's procedures, policies, services, or mission are effective and can reveal shifts in students and professors served that may signal the emerging need for responsive changes of various types.



Part 3: What next?

- **Kinds of information reported and how it might be used:**
 - **Numbers of students using the Center**
 - **Classes of students using the Center**
 - **Professors whose students come most often**
 - **Number of appointments per day, week, month**
 - **Students' perceptions and comments**

Numbers of students using the Center:

Calculating the percentage of the student body who is using the Center helps assess how well the Center is supporting the institution's academic mission.

Classes of students using the Center:

Determining who is using the Center can raise many questions for consideration: Do freshmen know about the Center's services? Do seniors think they no longer need to come? If a particular class is not coming, are they not writing in their courses? Should the Center talk with professors about incorporating writing, encouraging students to come, or doing classroom presentations?

Professors whose students come most often:

Target these classes for student evaluations at the end of each semester (more effective and timesaving than blanketing the entire university). Also, this information raises another important question for consideration: Why are the *other* professors' students not coming?

Appointments per day/week/month:

These figures help identify demand peaks and valleys. Knowing these help the staff prepare and justify hiring additional staff when overload becomes the norm.

Students' perceptions (from student evaluations):

Students' comments that they are having trouble signing up or are not getting the assistance they need can signal the need to change procedures, policies, or staff. Students often perceive the Center's space differently from the staff and can suggest needs otherwise unanticipated.



IN CONCLUSION . . .

- Keeping track of data is important because it can provide you with **FACTUAL KNOWLEDGE**
- The system for keeping track of data presented today is manual, and it is just one way
- Having facts about your Center's operation helps you play an active role in shaping the future of your Center