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Campus Writing Centers, Student Attendance, and Change in Student Writing Performance

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CAMPUS WRITING CENTERS, STUDENT ATTENDANCE,

AND CHANGE IN STUDENT WRITING PERFORMANCE

by

Suzana Glass Brown

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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ABSTRACT

CAMPUS WRITING CENTERS, STUDENT ATTENDANCE,

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This dissertation examined the relationship between students attending a writing center and the change in students' writing performance over the course of a semester. The study also sought to determine whether demographics (age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, and whether a student is a first-generation college student) were related to students' change in writing after they attended a college writing center.

Five Mississippi colleges and universities participated in the study. The study began with 110 students; however, only 78 students submitted two essays during the semester. Of those, 34 reported that they attended the writing center, 28 reported that they did not attend the writing center, and 16 did not report attendance. English instructors at each college selected one of their English composition classes for the study, and during the semester, the instructors submitted unmarked copies of their students' first essay and unmarked copies of a later essay to the researcher.

Upon receipt of the students' papers, the researcher copied and coded all of the papers removing all identifying information. A panel of three trained raters individually graded all of the students' unmarked papers using a first-year composition rubric obtained from the University of South Florida, which included the four criteria: focus, evidence, organization, and style. Using the Cronbach's alpha of .7, the researcher

determined interrater reliability and was able to average the scores of the raters for each of the student's essays.

The results indicated that the majority of the student participants did not attend their college's writing center during the semester. Additionally, the majority of those who did attend, only attended one time. However, of the 8 students who attended their writing center at least 4 times, their scores on the 4 criteria improved on most of the criteria, with only two students showing a decline on any criteria. The remainder showed either no change or an improvement. The results of this study suggest that a change in student writing performance occurs after multiple visits and could be useful to higher education administrators, especially writing center directors, who may seek to replicate the study within their own centers.

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August 2015

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my dissertation to my family. I have been fortunate to have the support of a large family. First of all, I would like to thank my Mom and Dad for the words of encouragement and for the many prayers, but most of all, thank you for teaching me that hard work has it rewards. I would also like to thank Jay and his family for being patient with me and for understanding the demands on my time. Thank you to my husband, Walter, and my son, David. Walter, thank you for being a patient and understanding husband. Thank you for always offering words of encouragement and for making me laugh when I wanted to cry. David, thank you for being you. You have gone from being a little boy to a young man while I have been on this journey. Thank you for making my life easy and for always knowing the right thing to say to keep me on track.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Writing is a struggle for many individuals, and college students are no exception. Their difficulty in forming grammatically correct sentences, paragraphs, and essays has been noted for well over a century (Elliot, 2008); however, discussion of the issue and determining the best methods for teaching and improving student writing did not begin on a large scale until writing composition became a recognized field of study in the late 1950s (North, 1987). Today, colleges and universities address the improvement of student writing through a variety of methods, including the use of college writing centers.

Writing centers were originally introduced to higher education in order to bridge the gap for underprepared students (Boquet, 1999). They typically support their institutions' initiatives, academic offerings, vision, and mission, so they are as unique as the higher education institutions they serve. For instance, some centers function as stand-alone centers with full-time tutors; others are stand-alone centers with part-time tutors or peer tutors. The location of the writing center also differs among college campuses. Often, the writing center is placed in or near the English Department, but it is becoming more popular to position the writing center in the middle of campus or near other student services (Schendel & Macauley, 2012). Due to their many differences, practitioners in the field have found it problematic to develop a set of standards and outcomes in which to measure student success on a broad scale. As a result, most of the studies related to writing centers are narrow in scope, focusing on single institutions (Bell, 2002; Lerner, 1997; Newmann, 1999; Niiler, 2003).

In addition to being limited in scope, writing center research has focused mostly on a practical explanation of writing center work. Unlike educational programs that are richly grounded in theories of behavior and pupil development, writing programs, especially those that involve writing center usage, lack a firm foundation. Eric Hobson (1995) in his essay "Writing Center Practice Often Counters Its Theory. So What?" claims that

> Writing Center Theory has problems keeping up with writing center practice because writing center theory, to a large extent, is not based on the same foundations as the practice it is most often called upon to justify. . .Writing center theory grew out of practice because no theory called Writing Center Theory existed. (pp. 2-3)

Even though his statement may be true, several scholars can be credited for laying the foundation for what is currently recognized as Writing Center Theory. One of the first to do this was Stephen North. North is referenced throughout writing center literature due to his expertise and extensive research within the field. In his most referenced work, "The Idea of a Writing Center" (1984), North claimed that college writing centers should be producing better writers through a "student-centered" approach (p. 50).

A student-centered approach, unlike a subject-centered approach, calls for tutors to meet students where they are; therefore, success is measured "in terms of changes in the writer" (p. 51). In *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration* (1984), North placed writing center research in three categories: reflections of experience, survey, and speculation. Reflections of experience relate to writing center directors' experiences in establishing new centers, training tutors, and keeping up with administrative tasks.

Survey refers to the collection of information including student visits and teacher/student reactions to the services offered in the writing center. Even though North acknowledges the value of reflections and surveys, he emphasizes the need for studies that derived from a theoretical framework, assessing the effectiveness of the writing center. He referred to this as speculation. North's (1984) declaration is that writing centers

> rest on this single theoretical foundation: that the ideal situation for teaching and learning writing is the tutorial, the one-on-one, face-to-face interaction between a writer and a trained, experienced tutor; and that the object of this interaction is to intervene in and ultimately alter the composing process of the writer. (p. 39)

Like North, Brian Huot (1996), a professor of English and a writing program administrator, also called for writing center studies that measured student success. Huot developed a set of principles for measuring student success in a writing center based on his research in measurement theory and composition pedagogy. According to Huot (1996), writing assessments should "emphasize the context of the texts being read, the position of the readers, and the local, practical standards teachers and other stakeholders establish for written communication" (p. 170). He suggests that writing assessments should be "site-based, locally-controlled, context-sensitive, rhetorically-based, and accessible" (p. 171). Even though his proposed principles are intended for assessments of individual institutions as referenced above, he defines the criteria broadly enough that they can also be applied to multiple sites that meet the same criteria.

Many other advocates of writing center studies have emerged over the past ten years, providing researchers with methods of conducting stronger, more meaningful research (Babcock & Thonus, 2012; Driscoll & Wynn-Perdue, 2012; Haswell, 2005;

Liggett, Jordan & Price, 2011). For instance, Haswell (2005), recognizing the need for writing center research that could be "replicable, aggregable, and data-supported (RAD)" (p. 201), developed a rubric that researchers could use as a guide. The criteria in this rubric included (a) background and significance, (b) study design and data collection, (c) selection of participants and/or texts, (d) method of analysis, and (e) presentation of results.

Using Haswell's formula for meaningful research, Driscoll and Wynn-Perdue (2012) added two additional criteria to the rubric (discussion and implications and limitations and future work), and they used the new rubric to analyze 270 writing center research articles published in *The Writing Center Journal* from 1980 to 2009. As they expected, few writing center studies scored high on the RAD rubric, especially in the replicable and aggregable areas, with the majority of the articles leaving out important information such as the number of participants involved in a study or a detailed methodology section.

The assessment of student writing is not new to higher education, especially within the humanities, but the examination of improvement of student writing as it relates to student attendance in a writing center is. Like many areas of academia, the purpose of establishing outcomes and collecting data is to show success of a program. Even though institutions may be interested in the success of their own programs, the push for assessments in higher education is driven by accreditation agencies and federal funding dollars (Rhodes, 2012). This study sought to examine students' change in writing performance after their attendance in a writing center by combining the ideas set forth by North (1984), Huot (1996), Haswell (2005), and Driscoll and Wynn-Perdue (2012).

Statement of the Problem

As Robert Baden (1974) said, "If there is one generalization popular with regard to the writing of college students, it is the one that says, with varying degrees of emphasis, that they cannot write" (p. 430). Writing centers are an institutional response to underprepared students. Unfortunately, there have been few studies conducted to show that the writing centers are in fact producing better writers. The studies that have been conducted focus on individual higher education institutions and their centers rather than multiple centers, and at this time, few standards have been established to provide guidelines for assessing the success of writing centers or the students who attend the writing centers. For these reasons, most of the recent studies have been qualitative instead of quantitative (Babcock & Thonus, 2012). The qualitative studies provide researchers with an in-depth view of writing centers at a variety of locations, often focusing on the demographics of an institution, the size and location of the center, the demographics of students who attend the center, and the unique characteristics of the centers involved in their studies. Liggett, Jordan, and Price (2011) categorized these studies as empirical studies that are descriptive in nature.

Several historical accounts also exist like Boquet's (1999) article titled "'Our Little Secret': A History of Writing Centers, Pre- to Post-open Admissions" which provides a detailed account of the origin and necessity of writing centers in higher education. Although these studies have played an important role in defining the overall purpose of the writing centers, they offer little quantifiable evidence that the writing center should remain a permanent fixture on college campuses. Of the quantitative studies in the literature today, most of them focus on only one institution, and their

sample sizes are quite small when compared to the number of students enrolled in college and the number of writing centers on college campuses. Also, due to time constraints and limited resources, many writing center scholars develop their studies on loosely defined principles. Few scholars dissect the writing center through the lens of a theoretical framework. For this reason, many leaders within national and local organizations for writing centers urge researchers in the field to take a quantitative look at writing centers. Although quantitative studies have begun to appear in the literature in more recent years, they make up only a small percentage of the research, and they tend to focus on the center's role in remediation or in developmental courses (Babcock & Thonus, 2012).

If research is to contribute to knowledge about the relationship between a student's improvement in writing and his or her attendance in the writing center, then it should reach beyond that of qualitative measures or of a narrow focus on remediation. Therefore, the researcher chose to focus this study on writing centers within Mississippi's colleges. Mississippi is unique in that it has a statewide writing center association that encourages its members to not only seek opportunities to assess their individual centers but to also identify and promote system-wide assessments for its membership. The study employed the theoretical framework of writing center and composition theory to inform the research questions, methodology of the study, and interpretation of the findings.

Hypotheses and Research Question

The purpose of this study was to examine writing centers at public and private colleges and universities in Mississippi and determine whether there is a relationship between a change in students' writing performance and the students' attendance in the

writing center. This study further sought to examine whether a correlation exists between a student's improvement of writing and the student's demographic makeup.

H1: There is a statistically significant relationship between English Composition I students' performance in writing a focused thesis statement and their attendance in their college's writing center.

H2: There is a statistically significant relationship between English Composition I students' performance in providing supporting details in their writing and their attendance in their college's writing center.

H3: There is a statistically significant relationship between English Composition I students' performance of writing a well-organized paper and their attendance in their college's writing center.

H4: There is a statistically significant relationship between English Composition I students' performance of writing style and their attendance in their college's writing center.

H5: There is a statistically significant relationship between English Composition I students' performance of writing a properly formatted paper and their attendance in their college's writing center.

RQ: What demographics are related to students' change in writing performance and their attendance in their college's writing center?

<div align="center">Definition of Terms</div>

Attendance – For the purposes of this study, attendance will be any visit a student makes to the college writing center in which he or she works with a writing tutor.

Developmental Education **–** "a field of practice and research within higher education with a theoretical foundation in developmental psychology and learning theory. It promotes the cognitive and affective growth of all postsecondary learners, at all levels of the learning continuum" (NADE, 2014).

English Composition I– College writing course that "prepares the student to think critically and compose texts for academic and professional rhetorical situations" (MBCC, 2014, p. 48).

Evidence – The use of credible sources and supporting details and student's synthesis of the material (Appendix A)

Focus – Thesis statement and analysis of subject relevant to thesis (Appendix A).

Format – Constructing a paper based on the Modern Language Association's (MLA) 7th edition of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (2009). This includes in-text citations, annotated bibliographies, and works cited (Appendix A).

Improvement – For the purpose of this study, improvement will be defined as increasing at least one level on a given criterion on the scoring rubric.

Interrater reliability – "the degree to which different individual observers or graders agree in their scoring" (Maki, 2004, p. 93).

Organization – Development of introduction and conclusion and use of topic sentences and transitions throughout. Logical progression of points (Appendix A).

Reliability- "the degree to which test scores for a group of test takers are consistent over repeated applications of a measurement procedure and hence are inferred to be repeatable for an individual test taker" (American Educational Research Association, 1999, p. 180).

Scoring rubric – "a set of criteria that identify the expected dimensions of a text and the levels of achievement along those dimensions, [and that] provide a means to assess the multiple dimensions of student learning represented in students' projects, work, products, and performances" (Maki, 2004, p. 121). The first-year composition (FYC) rubric from the University of South Florida (USF) was used in this study. It assesses student writing in five areas: focus, evidence, organization, style, and format.

Supporting details – "evidence to persuade your reader that the opinion expressed in your thesis is a sensible one" (Wyrick, Kirszner, & Mandell, 2008, p. 47).

Thesis statement – "the writer's clearly defined opinion on some subject" (Wyrick, Kirszner, & Mandell, 2008, p. 33).

Validity – "the degree to which evidence and theory support the interpretations of test scores entailed by the proposed uses of tests" (*Standards*, 1999, p. 9).

Well-organized paper – an arrangement of ideas into a "logical, fluent, and effective paper" (*MLA Handbook*, 2009, p. 43).

Writing style – USF's rubric defines style as grammar, punctuation, syntax, diction, word choice, vocabulary, and use of figurative language (Appendix A).

Delimitations

Due to the limited number of studies regarding writing centers and the vast number of centers throughout the country, this study was limited to colleges and universities within the state of Mississippi. Doing so was beneficial to the state's higher education institutions, and could also be a model for other researchers to follow within their own states or regions. The study addressed writing centers from public and private universities and community colleges within the state. Even though the student

demographics vary among the institutions, the purpose and mission of the writing center remain the same – to produce better writers. The study involved reviewing writing samples from freshman English composition students only. Additionally, this study did not focus on students' final grades in an English course or student retention. Even though improved writing may lead to improved grades and student retention, determining that relationship is beyond the scope of this study.

Assumptions

The researcher made several assumptions while conducting this study. One assumption made was that students in English Composition classes from each institution involved in the study would voluntarily attend the writing centers on their respective campuses during the course of the semester they were enrolled in first-year composition. The researcher also assumed that all English Composition classes taught in Mississippi's colleges and universities require at least two written essays during a single semester, and that at least one of the essays would be written within the first six weeks of the semester, and another essay would be written within the last three weeks of the semester.

The researcher also made assumptions regarding the quality of instruction, both within the classroom and within the writing center. English Composition instructors must meet the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) requirements in order to teach in Mississippi's colleges. Writing center instructors are qualified to tutor through the training programs provided by their individual institutions. In selecting participants for the study, the researcher sought out institutions that provide such training for their writing tutors through the Mississippi Writing Centers Association (MSWCA).

A final assumption made by the researcher was that people selected as graders of the students' essays would grade fairly and honestly. The graders would attend rubric-training sessions prior to grading essays used in the study to ensure interrater agreement and interrater reliability. In other words, they would agree on the terms of the rubric, and their evaluation of essays would consistently reflect similar scores.

Justification

The potential benefits of this study are far-reaching for higher education practices. Practitioners in the field of writing centers may benefit from the study as it could add to existing literature and offer more credibility to the writing center field (Jones, 2001). Further, it could provide a baseline for conducting writing center assessments that meet the criteria for the measurement of student success, as defined by local accrediting agencies (Rhodes, 2012). Writing center assessments are usually conducted by writing center directors within an institution, and the results of the assessments are viewed in the same manner as other institutional assessments. Administrators use assessment results to determine whether a program aligns with its institution's mission and to gain a greater understanding of the value of the program to the students, the faculty, and the institution itself (Schendel & Macauley, 2012).

Leaders in writing center organizations such as the International Writing Center Association (IWCA), the Southeastern Writing Center Association (SWCA), and the Mississippi Writing Center Association (MSWCA) encourage their members to conduct studies in the field, especially quantitative studies. A recent article written by the SWCA 2013 Conference Chair reinforces the importance of continued studies and publications in

the field as a means of showing administrators and other policy-makers the significance of having writing centers on college campuses (Dvorak & Bruce, 2012).

Likewise, in 2013, in an effort to encourage research, the IWCA and SWCA established grants and research scholarships to award to individuals pursuing research on student academic success related to writing centers. The IWCA also set up a research exchange page on their website asking for reports of any and all research related to the field. The push for research is not new, but the simultaneous offerings of stipends, scholarships, and grants demonstrate the urgency felt by those in the field to prove their worth through quantifiable data.

As conversations related to research and accountability began to heat up nationally, the MSWCA reconvened for a statewide meeting in 2013 after a three-year hiatus. The meeting allowed participants to share their ideas on the mission of the writing center and form a network of writing center professionals within the state. The participants further discussed their desire to collaborate in research efforts focused on writing centers and improvement of student writing. The MSWCA members desire to have a system in place, that will allow for a statewide collection of data that substantiates what they do in their writing centers. The results could be beneficial to existing centers as well as stakeholders who are gathering information in order to determine whether to invest in establishing writing centers on their respective campuses. The MSWCA could also benefit from a collaborative study in that it could drive positive changes for the association as well as the members of the association (Schendel & Macauley, 2012). Many professional organizations in higher education use assessment in order to determine how to best improve teaching and learning (Maki, 2004).

Not only could this study meet the needs of the MSWCA members in terms of showing their worth, it could also establish a baseline for accountability standards for all of Mississippi's colleges and universities while potentially building credibility for their on-campus writing centers. The members of the MSWCA recognize the challenges faced by higher education in Mississippi. According to a study led by Complete College America and the National Governors Association, Mississippi's college freshman are underprepared for freshman composition, with approximately one third of Mississippi's college freshman enrolled in remedial English (Complete College America, 2012). Writing centers have gained attention, but are they proving their worth enough to justify financial support? In a world of data and accountability, which also influences external funding, writing centers have been absent from the scrutiny of accreditation agencies, but that time may be nearing an end. This is due to "increasing access to higher education, connecting the funding of public institutions to student retention and completion" (Rhodes, 2012, p. 36). Accreditation agencies like SACS have already begun to implement institutional effectiveness policies in which assessment and accountability of every aspect of an institution must be documented and tied to the mission of the college (Head, 2011). It is only a matter of time before writing centers are included in the process.

Additionally, this study could provide college administrators the information they need in order to justify spending money on their writing centers as the ongoing financial crisis in higher education continues to trouble institutions (O'Neill, Moore, & Huot, 2009). As evidenced by the number of writing-related Quality Enhancement Plans proposed to SACS in 2013, improvement of writing is an important issue in higher

education; however, writing centers are not the only tools available to promote the improvement of writing. Administrators need to be provided with more data on the success rates of all of an institution's programs, including the writing centers, so that they can make sound, data-driven decisions related to funding these programs.

Even though the results of this study could impact both two-year and four-year institutions in terms of providing them with statistics related to writing centers, the two-year institutions may be able to use the data to support additional national initiatives. Community colleges in the United States have been tasked with a unique charge through President Obama's American Graduation Initiative, which challenges them to produce an additional 5 million graduates by the year 2020 (*Building American Skills*, 2013). In response to the President's call for action, Charles Dassance, President Emeritus of the College of Central Florida, says he believes community colleges "should provide national leadership in helping more underserved students achieve success, guiding unsuccessful students to alternatives that will allow them to be successful, and preparing students for meaningful citizenship" (Prihoda, 2011, p. 39).

Having worked within the community college system since the late 1960s, Dassance has witnessed the many changes occurring within higher education and believes the future mission of the community college will need to focus more on underprepared students and the appropriation of monies to resources that will see these students through to completion of their programs. While the writing center may not meet all of the needs precipitated by the new community college mission, it could certainly be one piece of the puzzle. Determining the best methods for accomplishing this task is not

easy and will rely heavily on statistical data regarding student success in a variety of settings.

In addition to the writing center community and to college administrators, college students may benefit from the study as well. The time they spend on campus and the time they dedicate to studying are often limited by their outside obligations. The data could help them make wise decisions regarding whether they should seek assistance in the writing center. If the study shows a relationship between attending the writing center and improvement of writing, counselors, advisors, and instructors could use the results of the study to encourage students to visit the writing center in order to improve their writing skills. Not only could improved writing skills help students in their college classes, but it could also benefit them as they prepare for the job market or for promotions at work. It could give them a competitive edge when they build their résumés and write their letters. In fact, some employers are mandating grammar tests or asking for writing samples before they will consider an employee for a job, regardless of his or her formal qualifications (Wiens, 2012).

If the above holds true, then local employers could also be beneficiaries of the study. For instance, if students become better writers, their future employers may be able to save money on training them to write. The National Commission on Writing estimates that employers in the private sector spend over 3 billion dollars per year to train their employees to write (p. 18). They also noted some residual effects of poor writing in the workplace. For example, one grammatical mistake in a brochure or publication could cost a company millions of dollars if it has to recall and republish its publication. Old Navy experienced this pain when it had to reproduce thousands of t-shirts that were printed

with the words "Lets go," leaving out the apostrophe (Mandell, 2011). Although the Commission recognizes the need for writing to begin in the K-12 sector, it also places a great deal of responsibility upon colleges and universities that produce college graduates with poor writing skills. A study such as this could prove to be valuable to employers by positively affecting their bottom line.

Summary

This study aimed to accomplish one goal: determine whether a relationship exists between a change in students' writing performance and their attendance in a writing center. With the literature showing a limited number of quantitative studies related to the improvement of student writing and even fewer studies that span multiple institutions, the researcher sought to develop a study that would fill the gap in the literature and provide future researchers with a "replicable, aggregable, and data-supported" method for future studies (Haswell, 2005, p. 198).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between a change in students' writing performance and their attendance in a writing center. Additionally, the study sought to determine whether a relationship exists between a students' age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, or being a first-generation college student made a difference in students' improvement of writing. This chapter aims to review the historical context of English composition, the theoretical and philosophical frameworks from which this study derived, and the literature relevant to student writing, writing centers, and writing center assessments.

Origin of English Composition

Although English composition courses seem to have been around since the early days of America, they did not emerge in the college curricula until the late 1800s. The phasing out of oral tradition and the development of the first college-level composition class began in the mid-1800s as Henry David Thoreau and his instructor, Edward Tyrell Channing, recognized the importance of the written word (Elliot, 2008) and the necessity of college curricula to reinforce the proper usage of "the mother tongue" (Zenger, 2004, p. 333). Writing allowed citizens to express their feelings, document significant events, and voice their opinions. Scholars believed that the written word would provide the new republic with stability and would serve as a reminder to the European leaders that America was its own country (Elliot, 2008).

In the late 1800s, Harvard offered the first English language composition class. Adams Sherman Hill, Harvard's Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory in 1876, proclaimed,

"a serious effort shall be made to teach boys and girls to use their native tongue correctly and intelligently" (as cited in Brereton, 1995, p. 47). Hill urged professors to make the teaching of English as important as they did the teaching of Latin and Greek. He knew that students would only speak and write English correctly if they were practicing it regularly (Elliot, 2008). Subsequently, Hill's students would be the first ones to endure a writing assessment which evaluated their abilities to write a well-constructed essay on a given topic. Included in the assessment were the following directions: "Write a short composition upon one of the subjects given below. Before beginning to write, consider what you have to say on the subject selected, and arrange your thoughts in logical order. Aim at quality rather than quantity of work. Carefully revise your composition, correcting all errors in punctuation, spelling, grammar, division by paragraphs, and expression, and making each sentence as clear and forcible as possible" (as cited in Brereton, 1995, p. 49).

Hill indicated that of the 316 students taking the exam, only half of them passed, and only "14 passed with distinction" (as cited in Brereton, 1995, p. 49). According to Hill, many of his students failed due to errors in punctuation and spelling, while others failed for not making a strong argument. Hill continued in his efforts and eventually gave up his position to one of his former students, La Baron Russell Briggs who shared his passion for the English language (Brereton, 1995). In addition to Hill, Professors John Franklin Genung, Barrett Wendell, and Fred Newton Scott took it upon themselves to produce the first collection of college-level English textbooks, and in the late 1800s and early 1900s, English composition found a permanent spot among general education courses (Kitzhaber, 1990).

Over the 50 years that followed, English composition underwent numerous changes, and universities experienced an unprecedented increase in enrollment. Unfortunately, a large number of new enrollees were not prepared for English composition. Looking for a solution, many university presidents pushed the burden of teaching English composition to the secondary schools (Brereton, 1995), and they welcomed the new entrance exams that were thought to predict student success in college. The entrance exams required a higher level of proficiency in writing. A variation of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) was offered for the first time in 1901, and American College Testing (ACT) followed suit in the 1950s (Education Commission of the States, 2014).

Warner Taylor (1929), intrigued by the newly formed English composition courses in higher education, conducted a study in which he surveyed English composition instructors in 232 colleges (Brereton, 1995), and he found that the more affluent institutions could afford to handpick their students, thereby admitting students already proficient in writing. Other universities would not be so lucky. Additionally, Taylor found that due to budgetary constraints and the grueling, time-consuming nature of teaching and grading compositions, full professors were rarely being assigned to teach composition, and freshman composition classes were given to assistant professors and teaching assistants. All of these changes created the perfect scenario for the development of writing laboratories. No longer could composition be confined to a classroom; students would have to supplement their class time with trips to the writing lab in order to brush up on their grammar and writing skills (Brereton, 1995).

The Writing Center

The writing center evolved from the writing laboratories of the 1920s and 1930s (Brereton, 1995), and the term writing lab initially referred to a method of teaching English composition common in secondary and post-secondary institutions (Carino, 1995). In the 1940s, especially post World War II, writing labs opened as stand-alone facilities on college campuses to meet the needs of the large number of veterans returning from World War II (Boquet, 1999). The influx of underprepared students made it burdensome for professors to work with students individually in the classroom setting, so writing labs were established to offer students additional educational support.

Much of the writing lab literature from the 1940s and 1950s focused on the role of the writing lab in helping students who were behind (Moore, 1950). Stanley's (1943) essay, for instance, highlights the purpose of one of the first writing labs in the country, the State University of Iowa's writing lab, describing it as a place that would support any student in any subject area who needed remediation in writing. Students could walk in during regular business hours, or they could set an appointment. Most important to note, however, is Stanley's position on the success of the center: "From the beginning we make it clear that the success of a student lies in his own initiative, for instead of class sessions, this work is characterized by individual instruction" (p. 424). Iowa's writing lab did not take shape overnight, and it was not the only one of its kind during the 1940s (Boquet, 1999). Like other new ideas and initiatives in higher education, Iowa's writing lab evolved over time, accommodating the needs of the students and the needs of the institution (Kelly, 1980). In this case, the lab transitioned from a mandatory addition to remedial English classes and became a place where students could go voluntarily,

although that word was used loosely (Kelly). Labs like this would populate colleges for several decades as open-door admissions policies were instituted, and an increasing number of underprepared students entered college (Carino, 1995).

During the 1960s and 1970s, the growth of writing labs, renamed writing centers to avoid negative connotations (Boquet, 2002), paralleled the changes in higher education and the changes in American society. Following the enrollment in colleges and universities post World War II, the 1960s saw an increase in enrollment as the Civil Rights Movement encouraged legislation for equal access to education. While the higher education institutions became more diverse, the newfound students brought with them varying degrees of educational backgrounds that did not fit neatly into the structures of higher education (Cervantes et al., 2005). For these reasons and others, the Higher Education Act of 1965 established Title III, which allowed first-generation students, African-American students, and under-privileged students to attend college for the first time. To assist them, Title III also called for the development of tutoring facilities that could fill in their educational gaps (Higher Education Act, 1965). As a result, many writing centers were established on college campuses and were accompanied by other tutorial services. The trend continued as the 1970s saw another influx of students through the women's movement (Mezirow, 1978), and every decade since has experienced an increase in student enrollment with an approximate enrollment of 8.5 million in 1970, 12 million in 1980, 13.8 million in 1990, 15.3 million in 2000, and 21 million in 2010 (NCES, 2012). Each decade has also seen an increase in underprepared students, with nearly one third of college freshman requiring some type of remediation in English in 2012 (ACT Inc., 2012).

Recent literature suggests that the purpose of the writing center shifted in the 1970s in spite of the growing number of underprepared students. Writing center scholars wanted to be recognized as professionals in the world of academia. Since the 1970s scholars in the writing center field have attempted to convey the writing center's true purpose to those outside the field (Smitherman, 2007). They claim the writing center is not a place where students take their papers to be proofread, rather it is a place that teaches the students how to be their own proofreaders (Harris, 1985; Leahy, 1990; North, 1984). It is a place students go to become better writers.

However, the scholars' efforts seem to have fallen on deaf ears. In some instances, the confusion lies within the center as writing instructors and/or peer tutors who work in the writing centers misunderstand their intended role in the center. They proofread students' papers or provide the students with topics and details before the students have begun to write. This does little to contribute to the overall improvement of a student's writing ability. A misconception of the purpose of the writing center also lies within the college classroom. Instructors send their students to the writing center so the students can get assistance correcting or writing their papers. They see the center as the place to send students who have "special problems in composition" (Leahy, 1990; North, 1984), not as a place that can help students become better writers. The writing centers continue to play that role, but the scholars of the field want to make it clear that they have a much greater mission.

The push for proper recognition of college writing centers began with the hard work and dedication of those in the field. Tracing the origin of the center provides one with a better understanding of the level of dedication and the need for camaraderie among

the professionals involved. Among those scholars are Muriel Harris who founded the

Writing Lab Newsletter (1976) and Stephen North who founded the *Writing Center*

Journal (1980) (Jones, 2001). Both of these publications were created with the intent of

bringing the writing center community together to share their research and their

experiences with others inside and outside the field. Harris and other writing center

directors began gathering at the Conference on College Composition and Communication

(CCCC) in 1977, and by 1979 they formed their own writing center assocation, which is

known today as the East Central Writing Center Association (ECWCA) (Kinkead, 1996).

The 1980s also brought a national professional writing center organization to life with the

formation of the National Writing Center Association (NWCA) (Smitherman, 2007).

Even though several regional organizations had already begun to surface, the field called

for a greater organization that would bring all of the writing center professionals together,

allowing for more collaboration and shared research within the writing center community

(Kinkead, 1996). The trend has continued, and today the NWCA is called the

International Writing Center Association (IWCA), representing writing centers all over

the world (Kinkead, 1996).

Trends in Writing Center Studies and Research

The 1980s produced a great deal of research; however, most of the scholarly

research addressed writing center directors' personal experiences, new methods of

practice (such as collaboration), and collection of data (e.g. number of students served,

hours of operation, types of tutors) (Lamb, 1981; North, 1984). Even though these types

of descriptive studies played an important role in the development of writing center

literature, quantitative studies with statistical evidence would have been useful to the

writing center community as writing center directors tried to justify budgetary needs (Lerner, 2003).

Two such studies cited frequently in the writing center literature sought to demonstrate a relationship between writing center success and students' first-year composition (FYC) grades (Lerner, 2003). Each of these studies, "Counting Beans and Making Beans Count" (Lerner, 1997) and "Demonstrating Effectiveness" (Newmann, 1999), compared the final grades of students who had similar SAT verbal scores. Both of the researchers concluded that if two students began the semester with the same SAT verbal score, and one received a better final grade in FYC after attending the writing center, then the writing center must have been the cause of the better grade (Lerner, 2003). Several years after his study, Lerner discussed the flaws of his study. In setting up his study, he made several assumptions. He assumed a relationship existed between SAT verbal scores and a student's preparedness for FYC, that the final grade would adequately reflect a student's ability to write, and that grading would be consistent with each FYC instructor involved in the study (2003). In his determination to continue assessing his writing center, Lerner began to take a more longitudinal approach, and he also looked to other program evaluations as a model.

From 1980 to 2000, very little changed in terms of writing center research. The writing center literature grew, but with the exception of a few qualitative studies and one or two quantitative studies, the depth of the studies did not change (Bell, 2000). One reason cited by many writing center directors for a lack of quantitative studies was that a standard method of assessment had never been established for their field, and they were not confident in their abilities to design one (Schendel & Macauley, 2012).

Since 2000, several studies have populated the literature, but researchers are still struggling to find the right methodology. Thompson (2006) suggests the lack of pre- and post-tests in writing center studies is the real problem. Relying on Lerner (2003) and Astin (1991), Thompson claims that the measurement of success depends upon a writing center's ability to show a "change" from the student's first entry to the student's last (p. 47). A couple of notable studies have striven to show a change in students' writing. Bell (2002) conducted a study in which he examined students' first drafts that were brought into the center with their final drafts after the students met with a tutor and made revisions. Even though the students' final drafts showed a great improvement over their first, Bell found that much of the improvement was due to revisions made during the session. He could not determine from this study whether student writing actually improved (Bell, 2002).

Niiler (2003) designed a similar study for the writing center at the University of Texas at Tyler. His study posed two questions. The first question asked, "How much are student essays impacted globally and locally by writing center intervention?" (p. 6). The second question asked, "How consistent are independent, expert raters in evaluating writing center performance?" (p. 6). Niiler's study focused on the change in a student's grade from the first draft to the final draft. Following a first draft, instructors gave their students notecards with their draft grades. If students liked their grade on the first draft, they could keep the grade. The instructor would set those papers aside. If they felt they could improve, a clean draft was provided to them, and they took it to the writing center. A clean draft was also provided to Niiler, so he would have it for the study. After the students worked in the writing center, they provided a clean copy of the revised paper to

their instructor, and a clean revision was given to Niiler. Independent raters then scored the students' first and final drafts. Niiler found that the writing center intervention had a positive outcome on students' writing, and he found that the independent raters awarded similar scores to the essays. However, Niiler's sample size was relatively small, only 38 students. Like Lerner, Niiler acknowledged that taking a longitudinal approach and replicating the study within his institution would be more effective. Niiler encouraged other writing center directors to do the same in order to build a stronger case for the success of the center.

Taking a different approach, Calhoun-Bell and Frost (2012) answered the call to provide empirical data on the role of the writing center in support of student success. Rather than specifically looking at an improvement in student writing, their study examined student engagement, student retention, and writing center participation of students at University of Alabama in Huntsville. Their study included students who were identified as basic writers based on their ACT or SAT scores. Students with low scores were placed in a basic writing course. Using data from the office of institutional research, they tracked student usage and student retention over a five-year period. Even though the researchers could not discern immediate success from their participants, they did find positive long-term effects in that "participants, who engaged most often with the writing center, did fare better than the rest of their basic writing cohort who did not participate regularly in writing center support" (p. 23) with a higher percentage of students persisting to graduation in a shorter period of time.

In addition to the aforementioned studies, dissertations related to writing centers have been pursued in recent years. Leonor Vazquez (2008) and Maria Veronica Pantoja

(2010) each conducted studies related to writing centers and community colleges. Vazquez limited his study to one large community college in California, and he studied motivational factors that influence students to attend a writing center. Even though his study provided useful information to practitioners in the field, it did not provide statistical data related to the success of the writing center or of its student participants.

Pantoja's dissertation (2010) included writing centers from four southwestern community colleges. Like researchers before her, Pantoja recognized the lack of standardization in the assessment of writing centers; therefore, her study was a fact-gathering mission in which she identified the goals of each center, the methods they use for collecting data, and the methods they use for sharing data. In keeping with historical trends, the centers' similarities were limited. Only one center had a mission statement, and most of them kept minimal data related to student visits. A noteworthy finding, however, is that all of the directors were interested in working with the others in their district to share ideas and develop some similar goals. They also found that "inviting participation from the surrounding state universities' writing centers could also be a productive way to share best practices and their unique perspectives on writing tutoring as well" (p. 26).

Related Studies

As noted in Liggett, Jordan, and Price's (2011) description of theoretical inquiry, many writing center researchers frame their research around topics related to descriptive inquiries. Werner (2011), for instance, focused her study on age-related issues in a writing center setting. Through her research, she found that age was only a minor factor, while ethnicity, race, and culture had more of an influence on peer-tutoring sessions.

Likewise, Moberg (2010) addressed age and adult learning as he analyzed best practices of writing centers. In his article, Moberg revisited traditional methods of teaching writing to adult learners, and he interviewed writing center educators. He found the traditional methods to be sufficient in the writing center as well as the classroom. Rather than focus on the success of the writing center as a whole, Werner and Moberg focused on individual segments of the college population.

In addition to age, gender and ethnicity have also been discussed in writing center literature. Studies related to gender and ethnicity usually serve the purpose of identifying the framework of a positive tutoring environment. Hunzer (1994), for instance, found that students typically favor working with tutors of their same gender. In the same vein, Threatt (2009) addressed gender as related to the student writer and the influence of gender on a writer's style. By recognizing common language and styles related to gender, writing tutors can provide better service to the students they assist.

Research related to second-language learners has followed a similar path, geared toward finding the best method of serving a specific population of students. Robinson (2009), for instance, explored the reasons English as a Second Language (ESL) students visit writing centers and the challenges faced by the tutor and the tutee. Going a step further, Babcock and Thonus (2012) researched common concerns related to tutoring ESL students, and they made recommendations to help centers overcome those concerns. Their suggestions included hiring tutors fluent in the second language, offering ESL students support in terms of building cultural awareness, and helping them identify topics for their writing assignments. Even though all of these studies add to the literature, they do little to address the question of the overall improvement of student writing.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation for this study was based on a compilation of research related to composition theory (specifically process theory) and writing center theory (situated in student-centered learning). Additionally, the researcher relied on the expertise of Brian Huot and his extensive research on writing center assessment, which was grounded in measurement theory. Most writing center scholars acknowledge the omission of empirical studies grounded in theory within writing center research, placing much of the blame on those in the field for a "lack [of] knowledge and skill to carry out such research" (Babcock & Thonus, 2012, p. 2). Therefore, a considerable amount of research referenced in the literature explores the history of college composition as well as the history of college writing centers, and it seeks to create a link between practice and theory, leading to empirical research.

Composition/Process Theory

Composition studies in higher education have been mostly "defined in terms of practice rather than theory" (Schuster, 1990, p. 33), with many instructors teaching writing according to their personal backgrounds and expertise. As the teaching of composition has progressed and evolved over time, the foundation upon which practitioners rely has evolved as well. One of the theories most widely noted in composition literature, process theory, derived from common writing practices from the 1970s (Yood, 2005). These practices were implemented as writing instructors recognized the need to revamp their teaching methods in order to reach the underprepared students entering their college and university classrooms (Fernsten & Reda, 2011). The writing process involved a variety of "process-oriented methods and techniques – staged writing,

conferencing, strategies of invention, and revision" (Clark, 2012, p. 5). Writing as a

process focused on the writer; therefore, studies conducted in the 1970s and 1980s

concluded that college writing could be defined through the following principles:

1. It focuses on the writing process; instructors intervene in students' writing
    during the process.

2. It teaches strategies for invention and discovery; instructors help students to
    generate content and discover purpose.

3. It is rhetorically based; audience, purpose, and occasion figure prominently
    in the assignment of writing tasks.

4. Instructors evaluate the written product by how well it fulfills the writer's
    intention and meets the audience's needs.

5. It views writing as a recursive rather than a linear process; pre-writing,
    writing, and revision are activities that overlap and intertwine.

6. It is holistic, viewing writing as an activity that involves the intuitive and
    non-rational as well as the rational faculties.

7. It emphasizes that writing is a way of learning and developing as well as a
    communication skill.

8. It includes a variety of writing modes, expressive as well as expository.

9. It is informed by other disciplines, especially cognitive psychology and
    linguistics.

10. It views writing as a disciplined creative activity that can be analyzed and
    described; its practitioners believe that writing can be taught.

11. It is based on linguistic research and research into the composing process.

12. It stresses the principle that writing teachers should be people who write.

(Hairston, 1982, p. 86)

Hairston (1982) noted that these principles were generally accepted by writing instructors during that period, but she also acknowledged that some were reluctant to change or were skeptical of the principles of process theory. Those who had taught before the 1970s were not as accustomed to teaching inexperienced writers, and they wanted to continue to focus on the product rather than the process. Other academics became enthralled with the idea of collaboration, and writing, as a process, became an idea of the past for them as they moved into the late 1980s, and writing became a social activity rather than an individual activity.

In her publication of "Concepts in Composition: Theory and Practice in the Teaching of Writing," Clark (2012) noted the importance of the process movement as it was "characterized by a renewed interest in rhetoric and its connection to composition" (p. 8). The movement also brought with it a deeper understanding of the concept of "personal voice" (p. 15). Even though other theoretical principles have emerged in college composition studies, writing as a process is still a widely accepted practice due to its student-centered approach, and it is often referenced as the best method for teaching struggling writers how to write (Fernsten & Reda, 2011).

Today, composition theory embraces the ideas of other higher education theories like student-centered learning as it encourages writing in terms of process, social interaction, and reflection. English composition's purpose aligns with the *Principles for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing,* which was approved by the CCCC (2014). *Principles* describes English Composition as a method of writing that:

1. emphasizes the rhetorical nature of writing;

2. considers the needs of real audiences;

3. recognizes writing as a social act;

4. enables students to analyze and practice with a variety of genres;

5. recognizes writing processes as iterative and complex;

6. depends upon frequent, timely, and context-specific feedback from an experienced postsecondary instructor;

7. emphasizes relationships between writing and technologies; and

8. supports learning, engagement, and critical thinking in courses across the curriculum. (2013, para. 3)

In addition to the CCCC, these principles are embraced by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) which includes instructors from K-12 and post-secondary education. A clear set of standards exists for what is to be expected in an English composition course, and collaboration among English teachers seems evident through the joint endeavors of national organizations. Nevertheless, students are still entering college underprepared for a freshman English composition class, English composition instructors continue to search for the best methods of teaching their students how to write, and colleges continue to offer writing support through writing centers and labs.

Writing Center Theory

Like composition theory, writing center theory is frequently described in relation to practice. According to Warnock and Warnock (1984), within "many writing centers writing is taught with a focus on meaning, not form; on process, not product; on authorial intention and audience expectation, not teacher authority or punitive measures; on holistic

and human concerns, not errors and isolated skills" (p. 16). Much of what takes place in a writing center falls in line with what Maryellen Weimer (2013) describes as learner-centered teaching. The writing center instructor is a "facilitator of learning" (p. 46) the balance of power is shared between the student and the instructor, and the responsibility of learning lies with the student. Along the same vein, Stephen North (1984) emphasized the focus on student-centered learning and maintains that writing centers should be helping students become better writers. Over the last thirty years, he has written numerous articles about what a writing center should look like and what it should accomplish.

One of North's greatest contributions to the literature is "The Idea of the Writing Center" (1984) in which he outlines what the center is and what it is not. In what initially sounds like a rant, North (1984) articulates the misconceptions made by students, classroom instructors, and writing center instructors. These misconceptions can be attributed to the wealth of literature related to the origin of the writing center or to literature related to student support centers (also called learning centers or learning labs), which were established to serve the underprepared college and university students. Similar to the process movement, the writing center's purpose shifted in the 1970s, becoming more student-centered and less subject-centered. Even though many people still view the writing centers as 'fix-it shops,' North and others (Bruffee, 1984; Carino, 1995; Grimm, 1999; Harris, 1995; Leahy, 1990) laid the groundwork for the true idea of the center. According to North, "writing is most usefully viewed as a process" and "writing curricula need to be student-centered" (North, 1984, p. 50).

Ten years after "The Idea" was published, North (1994) published a follow-up article titled "Revisiting 'The Idea of the Writing Center.'" In this piece, he admits that "Idea" may have been a bit romanticized, and he revisits several statements from his original piece that paint an idealistic picture of the writing center. North acknowledges those ideal scenarios rarely exist. However, by the time he revisited "Idea" in 1994, it had been cited in 26 writing center articles, and by 2005, it was cited in an additional 38 articles (Boquet & Lerner, 2008). His "idea" quickly became the "most important and most quoted essay in writing center scholarship" (Murphy & Law, 2000, p. 65), and it is still referenced in literature today (Babcock & Thonus, 2012; Schendel & Macauley, 2012).

Other writing center theorists claim that success in a writing center occurs through dialogue between the writing assistant and the writer. Bruffee (1984) and Ede (1989) explain writing as a collaborative, social process. Their writing center studies mirror composition studies, which examined collaborative learning in an English composition classroom. Borrowing from Vygotsky (1978), Bruffee (1984) highlights reflective thought as one of the outcomes of collaborative learning. When students problem-solve together, they internally reflect on the process and the outcome.

Ede (1989), in her own self-reflective essay, places the writing center in the same context; however, she says most writing center instructors and directors take a more pragmatic approach to what they do. Like Bruffee, Ede was seeking to define her field through a theoretically grounded approach, referencing the teachings of "John Dewey, M. L. J. Abercrombie, Edwin Mason, and Paolo Freire" (p. 6). Through her personal studies and experience, Ede identified the social interaction between the student and the writing

center assistant as one of the most important attributes of what takes place in a writing center environment (1989). Even though the writing center concept has evolved, the work that many writing center directors and tutors do has not. Their work is grounded in educational theories and philosophies that embrace student-centered learning (Ede, 1989).

Measurement Theory as it Relates to Writing Assessment

Since Hill's first writing assessment in 1879, higher education scholars have debated the best methods of assessing student writing (Huot, O'Neill, & Moore, 2010). Palomba and Banta (1999) defined assessment as "the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development" (p. 4). The method of teaching college composition has continued to change over the years, as demonstrated through the vast amount of composition research shared by the NCTE and the CCCC. Ultimately, however, students are expected to meet the same standards set forth by Hill in 1879. The Analytic Writing Continuum (AWC), developed by the NCTE, as well as the CCCC and the National Writing Project (NWP) list important areas of assessment as

1. Content (central theme or topic, quality and clarity of ideas and meaning);

2. Structure (logical arrangement, coherence, and unity);

3. Stance (perspective communicated through level of formality, style, and tone appropriate for the audience and purpose);

4. Sentence Fluency (rhetorical features, rhythm, and flow crafted to serve the purpose of writing);

5. Diction (precision and appropriateness of the words and expressions for the writing task); and

6. Conventions (usage, punctuation, spelling, capitalization, paragraphing). (Bang, 2013, p. 1)

The AWC has been in place since 2003 and has been used to assess over 40,000 student essays. In a similar vein, the scorers of the ACT assess essays according to the following criteria:

1. express judgments by taking a position on the issue in the writing prompt;

2. maintain a focus on the topic throughout the essay;

3. develop a position by using logical reasoning and by supporting their ideas;

4. organize ideas in a logical way; and

5. use language clearly and effectively according to the rules of standard written English. (ACT, Inc., 2014)

Even though the wording may differ slightly, 130 years after Hill's first writing assessment, the criteria for a well-written essay are similar. Additionally, the standards for assessing student writing can be applied to writing in any college discipline or program, including writing centers (Schendel & Maccauley, 2012).

Behizadeh and Engelhard (2011) suggest "that the development and structure of writing assessments are hypothesized to be influenced by both measurement theory and writing theory. These theories interact with each other in their impact on what is ultimately labeled a *writing assessment*" (p. 191). They further explain the importance of reviewing measurement theory and writing theory within the context of various time periods.

Behizadeh and Engelhard's (2011) historical review of writing assessment begins in the early 1900s with an explanation of measurement theory and writing theory as each was generally accepted during a given period of time. In this review, they analyze the theories and practices through twenty-year intervals of time. They then explain the impact of these theories, if any, on each other and on writing assessment. Their study shows that testing measures are similar to the "swing of a pendulum" (p. 9), shifting from scaling to test-scores for the last 100 years. In writing assessment this swing has gone from assessments that require students to write essays to assessments that use standardized tests. Writing professionals favor assessments using essays; however, scholars of research favor the standardized approach. Behizadeh and Engelhard's (2011) study encompasses all areas of writing assessment, including high-stakes testing in the K-12 arena. Brian Huot, a writing assessment theorist, focused much of his attention on writing assessment within higher education, and even though much of his research echoes that of Behizadeh and Engelhard, his primary focus has been on reliability and validity.

Based on his research on measurement theory and writing assessment in higher education, Huot (1996) suggests that "all writing assignments, scoring criteria, writing environments, and reading procedures adhere to recognizable and supportable rhetorical principles integral to the thoughtful expression and reflective interpretation of texts" (p. 171). In order to accomplish this on a broad scale, outside raters, standardized rubrics, and comparable writing assignments should be used (Huot, O'Neill, & Moore, 2010; Diederich, French, & Carlton, 1961; Godshalk, Swineford, & Coffman, 1966). Adhering to these suggested guidelines would improve the reliability and the validity of broad-scale writing assessments.

According to the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*, reliability is the "degree to which test scores for a group of test takers are consistent over repeated applications of a measurement procedure and hence are inferred to be repeatable for an individual test taker" (1999, p. 180), and validity "refers to the degree to which evidence and theory support the interpretations of test scores entailed by the proposed uses of tests" (1999, p. 9). For writing assessments, the focus has been primarily on reliability, specifically interrater reliability, which indicates the degree to which separate readers or graders of an essay would agree on the grade issued for an essay (Huot, O'Neill, & Moore, 2010). In one landmark study conducted in the early 1960s, Diederich, French, and Carlton (1961) tested rater reliability. They found that 53 raters scored 94% of 300 essays differently. Some of the raters focused on content, while others focused on grammar (Huot, 1990). Several years later, Godshalk, Swineford, and Coffman (1966) introduced the idea of training the raters over a period of time to ensure they agreed upon the criteria and the weight of the criteria, thus producing interrater reliability.

In light of those studies, composition experts have worked with research experts to determine the best method of assessment that meets reliability and validity requirements. Thus far, the scoring rubric has been the most successful method of assessing writing (Maki, 2004). Most large-scale writing assessments implement a direct assessment method with the use of a holistic writing rubric. Holistic grading is thought to be a fast and cost-efficient method of grading essays because a rater evaluates an essay in its entirety instead of evaluating each separate criterion within the essay (Huot, 1990).

Even though holistic grading is considered a reliable method, it does little to provide students with feedback on criteria that may need improvement; therefore, English

composition instructors do not favor it. Analytic rubrics, however, allow raters to evaluate separate parts of a paper (i.e. thesis, support, mechanics, grammar) (Finson & Ormsbff, 1998; Rezaei & Lovoron, 2010). Using an analytic rubric takes more time than using a holistic rubric, but it provides the student with a detailed account of his or her strengths and weaknesses on a paper and allows the rater to view the paper more critically (Maki, 2004).

The University of South Florida (USF), for example, uses an analytic writing rubric called the *First Year Composition (FYC) Rubric* (see Appendix A) to measure learning outcomes related to critical thinking and written language. The rubric originally designed for these assessments, the CLAQWA, was found to be too complex, so the English faculty worked together to design a user-friendly tool. The FYC Rubric has been in place since 2009 and is used by faculty members to measure student-learning outcomes written for their Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). USF's Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment accepts the FYC Rubric as a reliable instrument for measuring students' writing and cognitive skills. The writing rubric evaluates student writing based on the following criteria: 1) Focus, 2) Evidence, 3) Organization, 4) Style, and 5) Format. The criteria are rated on a scale of 0 to 4, with 0 labeled as "emerging" and 4 labeled as "mastering."

The first criterion, focus, relates to the essay's thesis. Focus also examines the level of critical thought put into the thesis and its support. The second criterion, evidence, relates to the integration of proper sources to support the thesis. Organization, the third criterion, refers to the method used to engage the audience, the construction of relevant topic sentences, the use of appropriate transitions, and the method used to conclude the

assignment. The next criterion is style. Style assesses grammar and punctuation, word choice, vocabulary, and point of view. The last criterion, format, refers to document design (i.e. MLA or APA format). The FYC Rubric addresses each of the areas identified by the AWC, ACT, NCTE, and CCCC, making it a useful and widely acceptable tool in assessing student writing in higher education.

Writing Center Assessment

Since college and university writing center standards and outcomes have not been established to provide guidelines for the assessment of student writing, scholars may use the research and standards set forth in writing assessment studies. These studies rely heavily on rubrics that measure student writing as described by the NCTE and CCCC. Furthermore, as evidenced by Pantoja's (2010) dissertation, collaboration and communication among regional writing centers could provide for writing center assessments that go beyond the confines of a single institution, and large scale studies could provide further evidence that the writing center does what North (1984) and other writing center scholars claim it does: produce better writers.

Lamb's (1981) survey of 56 writing centers confirmed that most writing center assessments were focused on usage of the center or questionnaires that sought to determine student or faculty satisfaction of the center. A small percentage of centers reported tracking students' grades as a method of assessment, and only four centers reported the use of a written pre- and post-test. Recognizing the need to conduct more robust studies, Lerner (2003) turned to Upcraft and Schuh (2000), who devised a plan of assessment for students' first year experience. Lerner concluded that a writing center assessment should do all of the following:

1. keep track of participants;

2. assess student needs;

3. assess student satisfaction;

4. assess campus environments;

5. assess outcomes;

6. find comparable institution assessment;

7. use nationally accepted standards to assess; and

8. assess cost-effectiveness. (Lerner, 2003, p. 205)

Many of these descriptive or qualitative assessment methods are already being used by writing centers in higher education (Jones, 2001).

However, two of these areas are considered weaknesses in measuring the success of the writing center: assessing outcomes and using nationally accepted standards (Lerner, 2003). As Jones (2001) stated, "writing centers and the programs and services which they provide display mind-boggling heterogeneity. No two writing centers are alike" (p. 6). For this reason, nationally accepted standards are still lacking and may never be achieved. Additionally, the "heterogeneity" has influenced many writing center directors and researchers to conduct studies that measure outcomes within the confines of their own institutions. Also, the directors are likely to seek out comparable program standards within their institutions because there are no national standards in place for writing centers (Schendel & Macauley, 2012).

Maki (2004) identifies several items that could assist researchers as they write program outcomes. They should be familiar with 1) mission statements, 2) professional organizations, 3) student work, 4) descriptive information, and 5) deep learning processes

(pp. 65-67). In a related field, Hendriksen, Yang, Love, and Hall (2005) developed learning outcomes for the tutoring center at a college in their area. Like writing centers, tutoring centers lack a set of national standards for measuring success. The researchers relied on criteria for measuring outcomes in a developmental program to conduct their study, and they compared those outcomes to the mission of the center. They found that the mission was an accurate reflection of what the center did, but it was not measurable.

The researchers identified three research questions that would help them as they established goals to reflect the success of the center: 1) Will students pass their tutored course at the same rate as non-tutored students? 2) Will students re-enroll at the same rate as students who were not tutored? 3) Did students learn to use a variety of learning strategies and self-report their success? (Hendriksen, Yang, Love, & Hall, 2005). Even though all of the researchers' goals were not measureable, it brought them a step closer to achieving their goal.

Other researchers have paved the way for conducting empirical studies within writing centers and have shared best practices for conducting meaningful research (Babcock & Thonus, 2012; Driscoll & Wynn-Perdue, 2012; Haswell, 2005; Liggett, Jordan & Price, 2011). Haswell (2005) recognized the need for "replicable, aggregable, and data-supported (RAD)" (p. 201) writing center research, and he developed a rubric that researchers could use as a guide. The criteria in this rubric included a) background and significance, b) study design and data collection, c) selection of participants and/or texts, d) method of analysis, and e) presentation of results (2005).

Using Haswell's formula for meaningful research, Driscoll and Wynn-Perdue (2012) added two additional criteria to the rubric (discussion and implications and

limitations and future work), and they used the new rubric to analyze 270 writing center research articles published in *The Writing Center Journal* from 1980 to 2009. As they expected, few studies scored high on the RAD rubric, especially in the replicable and aggregable areas, with the majority of the articles leaving out important information such as the number of participants involved in a study or a detailed methodology section.

Summary

In order to conduct a study regarding writing centers in higher education, one must first explore the history of English composition and writing centers in the college arena. A review of the history of each field reveals similarities in the common practices and research methods over a period of time. Compared to other fields in higher education, both are considered relatively young programs and both have been frequently overlooked in terms of higher education scholarship.

One reason for the oversight is that much of writing center scholarship is practical in nature. Studies reflect researchers' attempts to gather descriptive data regarding the number of student visits or the organizational structure of the writing center. Even though this information has been useful to writing center directors and administrators, it does not address the larger question of whether writing centers are effective. Likewise, it does not deal with issues in higher education related to how students learn, nor does it analyze writing improvement or learning within different demographics.

However, the theoretical framework of student-centered learning embraces the practicality of the writing center. It focuses on both the practical nature of the writing center and the theoretical aspect of the center. In higher education, research on student-centered learning related to curriculum development and interdisciplinary studies has

been the focal point of many publications and studies, but the focus of the value and effectiveness of student-centered learning in the writing center environment has largely been ignored or overlooked.

Another reason writing centers are often overlooked in higher education is that they lack a standard set of outcomes in which student achievement can be measured. At this point, accreditation agencies have not required such assessments. Even though that leaves the opportunity for research and assessment wide open for the writing center community, it also limits the potential for replicable studies that produce long-term data. Writing center scholars continue to search for the appropriate methods in which student success can be measured.

The literature clearly calls for writing center assessment methods that demonstrate an improvement in students' writing. By gaining a greater understanding of the relationship between composition and writing centers, as well as reliable methods of assessing student writing, the researcher aimed to conduct a writing center study that was grounded in theory and met the criteria set forth by Haswell (2005) and Driscoll and Wynn-Perdue (2012) for a RAD study. The researcher further aimed to follow Huot's (1996) "Principles for a New Theory and Practice of Writing Assessment" to design a broad-scale study with a group of college and university writing centers that share a common interest.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Overview

The purpose of this study was to determine whether a relationship exists between a change in students' writing performance and students' attendance in a writing center. Additionally, the study sought to determine whether a student's age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, or being a first-generation college student made a difference in his improvement of writing. The variables were selected based on writing center theory (situated in student-centered learning) and composition theory (specifically process theory) as well as the relevant literature on writing centers. Because this study focused on the individual writer and his/her change of scores on five writing criteria, the researcher used a writing rubric with a four-point scale and a pretest/posttest methodology.

Hypotheses

H1: There is a statistically significant relationship between English Composition I students' performance in writing a focused thesis statement and their attendance in their college's writing center.

H2: There is a statistically significant relationship between English Composition I students' performance in providing supporting details in their writing and their attendance in their college's writing center.

H3: There is a statistically significant relationship between English Composition I students' performance of writing a well-organized paper and their attendance in their college's writing center.

H4: There is a statistically significant relationship between English Composition I students' performance of writing style and their attendance in their college's writing center.

H5: There is a statistically significant relationship between English Composition I students' performance of writing a properly formatted paper and their attendance in their college's writing center.

RQ: What demographics are related to students' change in writing performance and their attendance in their college's writing center?

<center>Research Design and Procedures</center>

The research design was a correlational design including the following variables: a student's improvement in writing a focused thesis statement, providing supporting details of the thesis statement, writing a well-organized paper, using an appropriate writing style, formatting a paper properly, and the student's attendance at the student's college writing center. These criteria are in line with composition criteria from the AWC, ACT, NCTE, and CCCC. The researcher used a writing rubric to assess the aforementioned criteria on two sets of student essays (pre-test and post-test) and used tracking sheets maintained by the participants in order to measure student improvement of writing as related to student attendance in a writing center.

Identifying participants for this study was a multistep process. Because the field has no standardized assessments or outcomes, and the field encourages small-scale assessments focused on single institutions, large-scale studies must be guided by a set of standards that connect multiple institutions. Multiple writing centers that share a common mission provide an ideal venue for a large-scale study (Huot, 1996). Huot's (1996)

"Principles for a New Theory and Practice of Writing Assessment" were used to design this study in a broad-scale fashion with writing centers affiliated with the MSWCA. Even though other writing center organizations exist, the colleges affiliated with the MSWCA are connected through a shared mission for the writing centers and a similar format for teaching first-year composition as it is defined by the state's uniform course numbering system and the articulation agreements between the community colleges and the universities. These factors allow the researcher to conduct a broad-scale, multi-institutional study in a field characterized by diversity in writing-center missions related to institutional missions.

"Principles" and the MSWCA

Huot's (1996) "Principles" first calls for a site-based "assessment [of] writing. . . developed in response to a need that occurs at a specific site" (p. 171). It further stipulates that the site should include "procedures [that] are based upon the resources and concerns of an institution, department, program or agency and its administrators, faculty, students, or other constituents" (p. 171). The Mississippi Writing Center Association (MSWCA) meets the first criterion in that the members share a common mission, and they have an interest in showing collective data that support their mission. According to the Bylaws of the MSWCA, the association serves as a "forum for the writing concerns of students, faculty, staff, and writing professionals" (MSWCA Bylaws, p. 1, para. 2), and it holds annual meetings to discuss common issues faced by writing center professionals.

The second criterion, local control of the assessment, provides that an "agency [be] responsible for managing, revising, updating, and validating the assessment procedures that should be carefully reviewed according to clearly outlined goals and

guidelines on a regular basis to safeguard the concerns of all those affected by the assessment process" (p. 171). For the purpose of this study, the researcher satisfied the duty of the second criterion; however, the members of the MSWCA showed an interest in future collaboration during their 2013 spring meeting, and they would be responsible for the management of those collaborative efforts if the study were replicated.

The primary focus of the 2013 meeting, "Mapping Our Mississippi Writing Center Community," included sessions on writing center assessments and funding. Participants in the meeting discussed the need for collecting data, both individually and collectively, so they would have documentation to demonstrate that their writing centers are producing better writers. By doing so, they would be able to advocate for instructors or institutions that are interested in opening new writing centers in Mississippi's universities and community colleges, and they would be able to advocate for more supportive resources in all of the institutions. Additionally, they showed an interest in being better prepared to meet the demands of the local accrediting agency should they have to develop outcomes and assessments of their own writing centers (MSWCA Conference, March 2013).

The third criterion set forth by Huot (1996) calls for assessments that "honor the instructional goals of the institution or agency and its students, teachers, and other stakeholders" (p. 171). Like the first criterion, the shared mission statement and the Bylaws clearly state the goals of the participating writing centers and the institutions they serve. The MSWCA provides common ground for the centers and includes centers from two-year and four-year, public and private institutions, making it the most likely place to recruit participants. Additionally, the MSWCA members gather one to two times per year

to discuss issues and trends in the field, and several of the members have conducted writing center research and have published writing center articles. The members of the association have a genuine interest in the scholarship of the field; therefore, they are supportive of each other's research initiatives. As Pantoja (2010) demonstrated in her dissertation, collaboration among institutions is necessary if writing center research is going to be conducted on a broad scale. The MSWCA allows for such collaboration. Even though the mission statements among the individual writing centers affiliated with the MSWCA may vary, the writing centers are connected through a shared purpose of the association as stated in the Bylaws:

> to advocate and support the state's writing center community by promoting literacy, examining the theoretical, practical, and political concerns of writing center professionals, and serving as a forum for the writing concerns of students, faculty, staff, and writing professionals from both academic and nonacademic communities. (MSWCA Bylaws; p. 1, para. 2)

The fourth principle, rhetorically based, stipulates "all writing assignments, scoring criteria, writing environments, and reading procedures should adhere to recognizable and supportable rhetorical principles" (Huot, 1996, p. 171). To meet this criterion, the researcher chose to include only students from first-year composition classes and to use outside raters for evaluating the essays. Even though the writing environments were not exactly the same (i.e. some classes were taught in computer labs), all of the students' papers were typed, and their writing assignments were similar in nature (descriptive, narrative, reflective). Using outside raters who had completed rater

training and who employed a standard writing rubric further ensured this criterion was met.

The last of the principles, accessibility, relates to the availability of the procedures and the results of the procedures to "those whose work is being evaluated" (p.171). All of the parties involved gave consent to participate in the study, and all of the scoring rubrics are in the possession of the researcher and available for review.

Participants

Once the researcher identified a segment of writing centers that met the criteria set forth by Huot (1996) (the writing center members of the MSWCA), the second step of recruiting participants began. Through MSWCA meetings and email correspondence, the researcher connected with seven First Year Composition (FYC) instructors who were willing to ask their classes to participate in the study. The FYC course was chosen for the following reasons: 1) Most freshman students attending a Mississippi college are required to take the course (MBCC, 2014); 2) Writing instruction occurs in FYC classes; and 3) FYC courses usually require multiple writing assignments, allowing the researcher to compare student writing from the beginning of the semester to the end of the semester.

Five instructors agreed to participate in the study representing two public universities, one private university, and two community colleges. One of the community colleges chose to participate on two of its campuses. The researcher obtained IRB approval from each institution, and at the beginning of the fall 2014 term, students from one FYC class on each campus were asked for their consent to participate in the study. The 110 students who agreed to participate signed consent forms and completed a brief demographic questionnaire. They also agreed to keep track of their visits on a tracking

sheet provided by the researcher (See Appendix B). The tracking sheet provided a space for the students to record the date they attended the writing center, the reason for attending, the name of the tutor and the amount of time spent with him or her, and a reflection on the helpfulness of the session.

Instrument

Since improvement of writing is the focal point of this study, a rubric that was designed to assess student writing was chosen to assess the students' papers. The University of South Florida (USF) Academic Writing Scoring Criteria rubric (see Appendix A) was used for this study with the permission of USF's institutional research department (see Appendix C).

When USF first began its assessment of student writing as a part of its QEP self-study, it was using a rubric created by one of its own faculty members. The rubric, Cognitive Level and Quality of Writing Assessment (CLAQWA), assessed writing qualities and cognitive levels based on 16 criteria. Even though the rubric set out to measure what USF intended, USF's Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment (OIEA) questioned its validity. According to the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*, validity "refers to the degree to which evidence and theory support the interpretations of test scores entailed by the proposed uses of tests" (p. 9). The *Standards* further stipulates that "As validation proceeds, and new evidence about the meaning of the test's scores becomes available, revisions may be needed in the test" (p. 9). Due to the number of criteria listed in the CLAQWA, USF found the rubric to be "lacking in construct validity" (p. 3) and determined it should no longer be used as a written communication rubric for their institution.

In an effort to make the rubric more user-friendly, the USF instructors within the English Department constructed a new rubric, the First-Year Composition (FYC) rubric, which evaluates students' writing based on the following criteria: 1) Focus, 2) Evidence, 3) Organization, 4) Style, and 5) Format. The OIEA found the new instrument to meet both validity and reliability standards. In terms of construct validity, the area in which the CLAQWA failed, the FYC Rubric "revealed a strong intra-correlation among the following three factors: Factor 1 [Critical Thinking, Focus and Organization, and Use and Integration of Sources]; Factor 2 [Style and Writing Conventions]; and Factor 3 [Format]" (RiCharde, Moore, & Wao, 2010, p. 11). The OIEA also found the instrument to be reliable. Internal consistency and interrater reliability were .91 and .93 respectively, using Cronbach's alpha coefficient ≥ 0.7 (p. 11).

The writing rubric criteria are rated on a scale of 0 to 4, ranging from 0 labeled as "emerging" to 4 labeled as "mastering." The purpose of the rubric is to evaluate student writing based on the following five criteria: 1) Focus, 2) Evidence, 3) Organization, 4) Style, and 5) Format. The first criterion, focus, assesses the thesis statement and the level of critical thought a student invested in the thesis and its support. A score of four, for instance, indicates that the student's paper had an "insightful/intriguing thesis; ideas [that] are convincing and compelling; and, a cogent analysis of [the] subject relevant to the thesis." A score of two reflects a "predictable or unoriginal thesis; ideas [that] are partially developed and related to thesis; and, inconsistent analysis of subject relevant to thesis." A score of zero signifies the thesis is "absent or weak thesis; ideas are underdeveloped, vague, or unrelated to the thesis; and, [there is] a poor analysis of ideas relevant to thesis" (See Appendix A). The other criteria are written in a similar manner.

Procedure

At the beginning of the semester, the researcher asked the English instructors to provide clean, unmarked copies of the students' first essay. The method of delivery varied for each instructor. Some were delivered electronically via email or Dropbox; others were delivered in hard copy. Likewise, at the end of the semester, the instructors were asked to provide the researcher with another essay from the participating students, specifically an essay written just prior to the final exam. Upon receipt of the students' papers, the researcher created folders for each student containing the student's consent forms, demographic questionnaire, and copies of both essays from the semester. The researcher then assigned random numbers to all of the papers, removing all identifying information (students' names, instructors' names, dates, college name). The corresponding numbers were written on the outside of the students' folders, entered into a chart created for each student, and entered into SPSS next to the students' names.

Three raters volunteered to grade the students' papers. According to Cherry and Meyer (1993), using three raters is ideal for conducting writing assessments, and they recommend averaging the raters' scores, rather than using the third rater for solving discrepancies. The literature provides little guidance in terms of rater selection. Most raters are instructors who are involved in evaluating their own programs or groups of instructors who are being paid to rate papers for large-scale studies like the ACT.

For this study, the raters met the qualifications to teach first-year composition in a college setting and each had expertise in grading essays. All of the raters met the requirements set forth by SACS to teach English Composition in higher education (a master's degree with at least 18 hours of graduate work in English), have more than 20

years of experience teaching writing in higher education, and have experience grading essays with a standardized rubric. Additionally, the raters taught together for a period of time and were trained to grade in a similar manner.

Before grading the students' essays, the raters participated in rubric-training sessions conducted by the researcher to ensure interrater agreement and interrater reliability. Interrater agreement insured that the raters agreed upon the terms of the rubric. For example, the first criterion on the rubric, *Focus,* relates to the thesis statement in an essay. As mentioned previously, a student can receive a score of 0 to 4 in this criterion. During the training, the raters and the researcher met to review the description of each category, and they agreed upon the meaning of each description. To test their agreement (interrater reliability), the raters graded 4 sample student essays using the FYC Rubric. After the grading, the raters compared each of their criterion scores on each paper. For scores on which their scores differed, they discussed why they chose their scores, and they reached an agreement on what the score should have been. Afterward, the raters repeated the process, grading an additional 6 papers and comparing their scores. Among the three raters, their evaluation of essays graded throughout the training consistently reflected similar scores with no more than a one point differential on any given criterion score.

At the end of the semester, following the rubric-training sessions, the researcher provided each of the graders with a complete set of coded, unmarked student essays that were collected from the participants during the semester. The raters were not provided with the writers' information, whether it was a first or last essay, or information that would identify the college or university. All three raters graded all of the student essays

using the FYC Rubric, providing individual criterion scores for each paper. In sum, data for this study consisted of first essay rubric scores, second essay rubric scores, as well as the number of times the students used the writing center during the semester. Additionally, demographic data collected consisted of gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, and whether the student was a first-generation student.

Data Analysis

The researcher used the IBM SSPS Statistics GradPak22 software to examine the consistent patterns of the raters on each criterion and essay. Next, the researcher determined the range and mean for the criteria. Finally, the researcher used the Pearson correlation coefficient to examine the relationship between an improvement in students' writing and frequency of the students' attendance in the writing center.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS OF DATA

The purpose of this study was to determine whether a relationship exists between

an improvement in students' writing and students' attendance in a writing center. The

student participants were first-year composition students from five colleges affiliated

with the MSWCA in Mississippi. Limiting the participants to members of the MSWCA

allowed the researcher to follow Huot's (1996) "Principles for a New Theory and

Practice of Writing Assessment" and conduct a broad-scale, multi-institutional study. The

students' instructors submitted unmarked copies of two of the students' essays during the

semester, the first essay submitted and an essay at the end of term. The papers were then

coded and graded by three trained raters. Additionally, the students were asked to keep

track of their writing center attendance and submit their tracking sheets at the end of the

semester.

The researcher entered three sources of information in an SPSS data file: the

demographic questionnaire, the tracking sheets, and the scoring rubrics from each rater.

The questionnaire asked students to provide information related to age, gender, ethnicity,

marital status, and whether they were first-generation college students. There were a total

of 110 student participants, mostly between the ages of 18 and 24.

There was a larger number of female participants, but only by a small margin,

with 63 female and 47 male participants, 57% and 43% respectively. Approximately half

of the participants were Caucasian (51.8%), with African American students accounting

for most of the remaining participants (38.2%). Of the participants, only 29 or 26.4%

considered themselves first-generation college students, and only 4 students were

married. Table 1 shows the distribution of age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, and whether the students considered themselves first-generation college students.

Table 1

Demographics

		n	Percentage
Age			
	18-24	105	95.5%
	25-34	4	3.6%
	35-44	1	.9%
	45+	0	0
Gender			
	Female	63	57.3%
	Male	47	42.7%
Ethnicity			
	Caucasian	57	51.8%
	African-American	42	38.2%
	Hispanic	5	4.5%
	Asian	2	1.8%
	Other	4	3.6%
Marital Status			
	Single	106	96.4%
	Married	4	3.6%

The participants were from five different colleges in Mississippi including three universities and two community colleges. Additionally, one of the colleges was a private institution and one was a historically black institution. Of the 110 original participants, 34 students (35.5%) reported they attended the writing center on their college campus at least once, while 28 students (36.4%) admittedly did not attend the writing center at all. The remaining 16 students (28.2%) did not submit a tracking sheet at the end of the semester, so whether they attended the writing center could not be determined. Therefore, these students' scores were omitted from analyses related to student writing performance and attendance in a writing center.

For assessment of the essays, the three graders completed interrater training before they began the grading process. The raters used the University of South Florida's First Year Composition (FYC) rubric (See Appendix A), which allowed them to assess the following five criteria: (1) Focus, (2) Evidence, (3) Organization, (4) Style, and (5) Format. All of the raters graded all of the students' papers, which were unmarked and coded to prevent the raters from knowing the names and locations of the students or the dates of the essay. The last criterion, Format, could not be assessed because it was related to the assessment of MLA documentation in a paper, including the proper documentation of sources. Most of the papers were written without the inclusion of outside sources, so the raters were not able to provide a rating on that criterion for those papers.

The researcher measured the interrater reliability among the three raters using Cronbach's alpha (Cherry & Meyer, 1993; Brown, Glasswell, & Harland, 2004; Jonsson & Svingby, 2007). Some controversy exists on how high the reliability coefficient should be, with recommendations ranging from .7 to .9. Most researchers suggest the required

coefficient should vary depending on the circumstance of the measurement. For instance, for purposes of promotion or placement, referred to as high-stakes testing, the higher coefficient should be used. For studies that have little to no impact on the future of a student, .7 is considered acceptable (Cherry & Meyer, 1993; Brown, Glasswell, & Harland, 2004; Jonsson & Svingby, 2007).

According to Cherry and Meyer (1993), "In situations in which three ratings are obtained, statistical theory says that the best estimate of the true value (in this case, of writing ability) is the average of the three ratings" (p. 40). The individual raters' scores were examined and because the raters showed a consistent pattern of agreement on each criterion and each essay, the raters' scores for each criterion were averaged. Table 2 shows the interrater reliability coefficient for each criterion in essays one and two.

Table 2

Interrater Reliability

Criterion	Essay 1	Essay 2
1 - Focus	.733	.777
2 - Evidence	.766	.814
3 - Organization	.761	.735
4 - Style	.831	.799
5 - Format	-	-

[a]Format scores could not be calculated for all essays.

Findings

In order to determine whether writing center attendance made a difference in student writing, the researcher first examined the scores of the first and last essay of all students (N=110) involved in the study and conducted a series of statistical tests.

Overview of Scores

The first criterion, Focus, had ratings on the first essay that ranged from 0 to 4 for each rater, with most ratings indicating that students were still developing their skills of formulating a thesis statement. The rater average for Criterion 1 of Essay 1 was 2.4. Similarly, the first criterion on the second essay had ratings ranging from 0 to 4 for all raters, and the rater average for Criterion 1 of Essay 2 was 2.18, again reflective of a developing student.

The second criterion, Evidence, had ratings on the first essay that ranged from 0 to 4 for two of the raters and 1 to 4 for the third rater. Like the first criterion, most ratings indicated that students were still developing their skills of providing relevant details and support of the thesis statement. The rater average for Criterion 2 of Essay 1 was 2.54. The second criterion on the second essay had ratings ranging from 0 to 4 for all raters, and the rater average for Criterion 2 of Essay 2 was 2.30, again reflective of a developing student.

For the third criterion, Organization, ratings on the first essay ranged from 0 to 4 for all of the raters, with an average rating of 2.37. Like the first two criteria, these ratings indicated most students were still developing their organizational skills. Similarly, the scores on the third criterion on the second essay ranged from 0 to 4 for all raters, and the average rating was 2.15, also indicative of a developing student.

The fourth criterion, Style, had ratings on the first essay ranging from 0 to 3 for two of the raters and 0 to 4 for one of the raters, with an average rating of 1.34. Similarly, the scores on the fourth criterion ranged from 0 to 3 on the second essay with an average rating of 1.41. Scores on both of the essays indicate that students are still emerging in areas of grammar and punctuation.

Comparison of Means

As shown above, a comparison of the means from the averaged scores on each criterion from the first essay and the last essay was executed. This computation included all student participants (N=110), not just those who had attended the writing center. Table 3 shows the comparison of each criterion inclusive of all student participants.

Table 3

Comparison of Means

Criterion	Average of Essay 1	Average of Essay 2
1 - Focus	2.40	2.18
2 - Evidence	2.54	2.30
3 - Organization	2.37	2.15
4 - Style	1.34	1.41

[a] N=110

Including all students, whether they did or did not attend the writing centers, the results of the simple t-test revealed that overall there was no improvement from the first to the second essay, and in fact, on the first three criteria, there was a statistically significant decline in scores between the two essays. It should be noted, however, that of

the 110 total students who originally agreed to participate in the study, only 9 attended more than 3 times.

One-way ANOVA

A one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was then performed for each criterion to determine whether writing center attendance reflected a change in student writing performance (N=78). For this analysis, the total number of students was reduced from 110 to 78 because some students' essays were not submitted for one of the two collection points during the semester. Below are the results of the t-test and the one-way ANOVA for each criterion.

Focus

For the first criterion, *Focus*, there was no improvement from the first essay to the latter essay, with the scores being significantly higher on the first essay for all student participants t(77) = 2.66, *p* = .010. The one-way ANOVA showed that among students who reported attending the writing center, including all students who reported they did attend (N=34) and those who reported they did not attend (N=28), there was not a difference in the change from the first essay to the last. Therefore, the first hypothesis that there would be a statistically significant relationship between English Composition I students' performance in writing a focused thesis statement and their attendance in their college's writing center was not supported by the results, $F(1,60) = 2.685$, *p*= .107.

Evidence

The second criterion, *Evidence*, had similar results. There was no improvement from the first essay to the later essay. Like the first criterion, the scores were significantly higher on the first essay for all student participants t(77) = 2.88, *p* = .005. The one-way

ANOVA showed that among students who reported attending the writing center, including all students who reported they did attend (N=34) and those who reported they did not attend (N=28), there was not a difference in the change from the first essay to the last. Therefore, the second hypothesis that there would be a statistically significant relationship between English Composition I students' performance in providing supporting details in their writing and their attendance in their college's writing center was not supported by the results, $F(1, 60) = ..680$, $p = .413$.

Organization

   Organization was the third criterion on the rubric, and like the first two criteria, there was no improvement from the first to the latter essays, with the scores being significantly higher on the first essay for all student participants $t(77) = 2.61$, $p = .011$. Similarly, the one-way ANOVA showed that the students who reported writing center attendance, including students who attended (N=34) and those who did not attend (N=28), showed no difference in the change from the first essay to the last. Therefore, the third hypothesis that there would be a statistically significant relationship between English Composition I students' performance of writing a well-organized paper and their attendance in their college's writing center was not supported by the results, $F(1, 60) = .203$, $p = .654$.

Style

   For the fourth criterion, *Style*, the scores on the second essay were slightly higher than the scores on the first essay; however, the difference was not statistically significant $t(77) = -.3$, $p = .77$. The students who attended the writing center showed a slight improvement on their scores for this criterion, while the students who did not attend the writing center showed a slight decrease in their scores. Similarly, the one-way ANOVA

showed that the students who reported writing center attendance, including students who attended (N=34) and those who did not attend (N=28), showed no difference in the change from the first essay to the last. Therefore, the fourth hypothesis that there would be a statistically significant relationship between English Composition I students' performance of writing style and their attendance in their college's writing center, was not supported by the results, $F(1, 60) = 1.380$, $p = .245$.

Demographic Influences

Even though attendance in the writing center was not associated with significant differences in student improvement of writing, the researcher conducted a two-way ANOVA to determine whether any of the demographics (age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, first-generation college student) were related to students' improvement of writing and their attendance in their college's writing center. The researcher also conducted a two-way ANOVA to determine whether a student's college made a difference. Neither the demographics nor the location of the college was related to a statistically significant difference between the students' scores on their first essay and their scores on the last essay. However, African American students did show a slight improvement over the other ethnic groups. Figure 1 below shows the distribution of the ethnicities of the participants, and Figure 2 shows the change in student writing from the first essay to the last for each ethnicity.

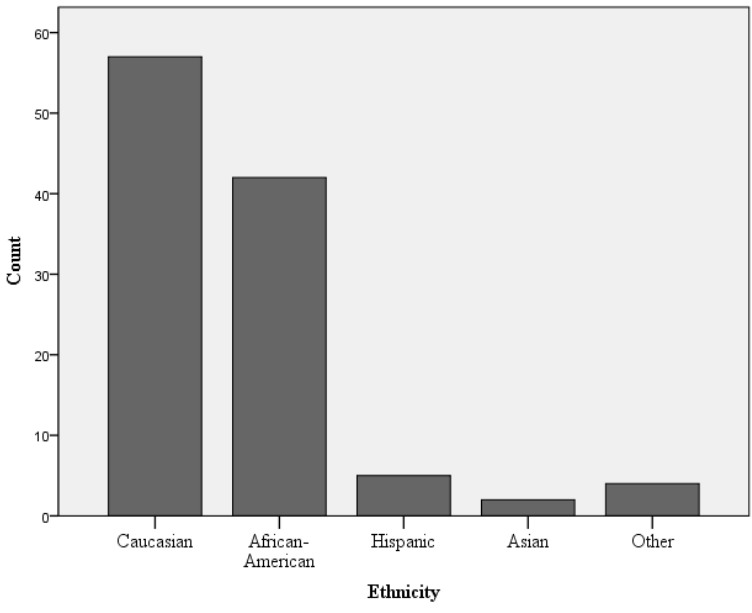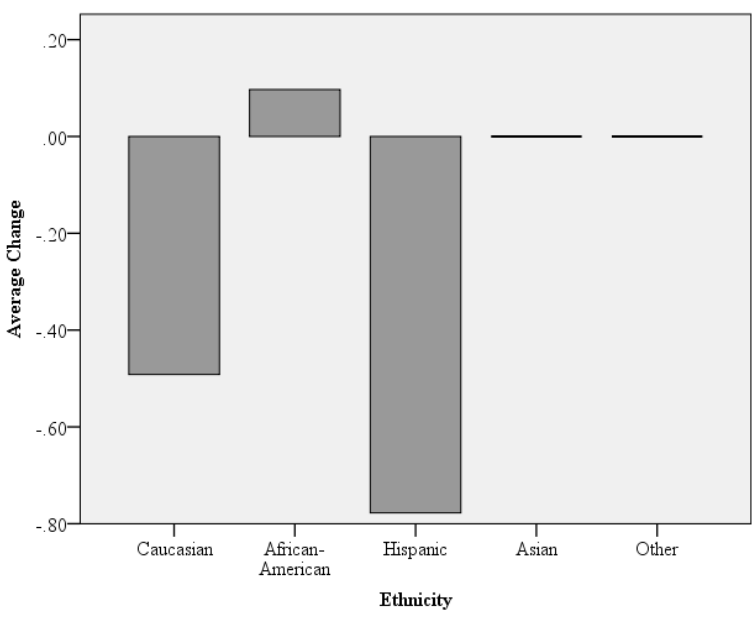*Figure 1*. Ethnicity of students participating in study.

Figure 2. Average change from the first essay to the later essay during the semester.

Another pattern that emerged, albeit not statistically significant, was that on three out of the four criteria (focus, evidence, and style), students who attended the writing center fared better than the students who did not attend in that their scores on the first two

criteria showed smaller losses from the first essay to the last essay than the non-attendees, and their scores on the last criterion (style) showed a slight improvement when compared to their first essay. Table 4 shows the difference between the two groups.

Table 4

Change from Essay 1 to Essay 2

Criterion	Focus	Evidence	Organization	Style
Students Attending Writing Center	-.1176	-.2157	-.3333	.1667
Students Not Attending Writing Center	-.4405	-.3810	-.2500	-.1071

Number of Times Attending the Writing Center

After analyzing whether attending the writing center made a difference in students' writing, the researcher ran a bivariate correlation to determine if the number of times a student attended the writing center made a difference in the scores on each criterion. For the students who reported going to the writing center (N=38), the average number of times they reportedly attended the writing center throughout the semester was 1.42. However, out of the 38 students who attended, 29 of those students only visited one to three times. The remaining 9 students visited between 4 and 10 times.

The results of the bivariate correlation indicate that the number of times students attended the writing center is associated with an improvement in students' writing. For example, for the first criterion, there is a small but significant relationship between students' change in writing a focused thesis statement and the number of times students attended the writing center $r(62) = .045$, $p < .05$. Specifically, greater improvement of

scores was associated with higher writing center attendance. Likewise, on the second criterion there is a small but significant relationship between students' change in writing and the number of times students attended the writing center $r(62) = .048$, $p < .05$. Unlike the first two criteria, for the third criterion there was no significant difference between students' change in writing organization and the number of times they attended the writing center $r(62) = .141$, $p > .05$. For the fourth criterion, there is a small but significant relationship between students' change in writing style and the number of times students attended the writing center $r(62) = .025$, $p < .05$.

Of the eight students for whom complete data were collected and who attended the writing center at least four times, only two students showed any declines on any criterion, and the other eight showed either no change or clear improvement on all criteria. Table 5 shows the pre- and post-scores for students who kept track of their writing center attendance.

Table 5

Writing Center Attendance Pre- and Post-scores

Number of Visits	E1C1	E2C1	Change	E1C2	E2C2	Change	E1C3	E2C3	Change	E1C4	E2C4	Change
1	3	2.67	-.33	3	2.33	-.67	2.67	2.33	-.33	2	1	-1
1	3.67	4	-.33	4	3.33	-.67	3	3	-.67	2.67	2.67	-.33
1	2	1.33	-.67	2	1.33	-.67	2.22	1.33	-1	1	.67	-.33
1	2.33	3	0	2.33	2.33	0	2.33	2.33	0	.67	.67	0
1	1.67	1.33	-.33	1.67	1.67	0	2	1.67	-.33	.33	2	1.67
1	2.67	1.	-1.67	2.67	1.	-1.67	3.33	.67	-2.67	1.33	2.33	1
1	1.67	2.33	.67	1.67	2.67	1	1.67	2.67	1	.33	1.33	1
1	3.33	-	-	3.67	-	-	3.33	-	-	3	-	-
1	2.67	3	.33	3.33	3.33	0	3	2.67	-.33	2.33	1.33	-1
1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1	2	1.67	-.33	2.67	2	-.67	2	1.67	-.33	.33	.67	.33
1	2.33	1	-1.33	3	1	-2	2.33	1	-1.33	1.67	0	-1.67
1	2.33	-	-	2.33	-	-	2	-	-	1	-	-
1	3.33	3	-.33	3.67	3	-.67	3.67	3	-.67	3.33	3	-.33
1	1.33	1	-.33	2	.67	-1.33	1.67	1	-.67	0	.33	.33
1	2.67	3	.33	3	3.33	.33	3.33	2.67	-.67	2.67	1	-1.67
1	2.33	2	-.33	1.67	2	.33	2	1.67	-.33	.67	1.67	1
2	3	3	0	3	2.67	-.33	2.67	2.33	-.34	2	2	0
2	2.33	1.67	-.66	2.33	1.67	-.66	2.33	1.33	-1	2.33	2.33	0
2	.67	2.67	2	.67	2.33	1.66	.67	1.67	1	0	1.33	1.33
2	2	3	1	2.33	3	.67	2.33	2.33	0	1	1	0
2	2.33	1.33	-1	2.67	1.33	-1.34	2.33	1.67	-.66	.33	.67	.34
2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
3	1	.67	-.33	1	.67	-.33	1	.67	-.33	.33	0	.33
3	3	2	-1	2.67	2	-.67	2.67	1.67	-1	2	.67	-1.33

Table 5 (continued).

3	3.33	3	-.33	3.33	3	-.33	3	2.67	-.33	.33	2	1.67
3	2.67	2	-.67	2.67	2	-.67	2.67	2.33	-.34	2	2	0
3	3.67	2.67	-1	3.33	3.33	0	3.67	2.67	-1	2.67	2.33	-.34
3	3	3	0	3.67	3	-.67	3.67	3	-.67	2.33	2	-.33
4	3	3.33	.33	3.	3.67	.67	2.67	3.67	1	.33	2.67	2.37
4	3	3	0	3.33	3	-.33	3	2.67	-.33	2.33	1	-1.33
4	2	2.33	.33	2	2.67	.67	2	2.33	.33	.67	1.67	1.
4	3.67	3.33	-.34	3.67	3.33	-.34	3	3.67	.67	2	2.67	.67
8	2.33	2.33	0	2.33	2.67	.34	2.33	2.67	.34	.33	2.0	1.67
9	-	2.67	-	-	2.33	-	-	2.33	-	-	1.67	-
10	3.33	3.33	0	3.33	3.33	0	2.67	3	.33	1.67	1.67	0
10	3.33	3.33	0	3.67	3.67	0	3.0	3.0	0	2.67	3.	.33
10	2.	3.33	1.33	2.33	3.33	1	2.67	3	.33	.67	2.33	1.66

[a] N=38

[b] E = Essay

[c] C = Criterion

Summary

Overall, the results of the study indicated that going to a writing center four or more times throughout a semester makes a difference in students' writing performance on each of the four criterion: focus, evidence, organization, and style. However, attending only three or fewer times is less likely to contribute to improvement of student writing. This study also brings the writing center community one step closer to having a replicable, aggregable, and data-supported (RAD) study as set forth by Haswell (2005) and Driscoll and Wynn-Perdue (2012).

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine whether a relationship exists between writing center attendance and a change in students' writing performance and whether demographic characteristics of the participants made a difference in students' writing. Writing center assessments have long been discussed within the writing center community in higher education, and many researchers have set out to conduct studies that focus primarily on the improvement of student writing, which is what Stephen North (1984) and others in the writing center field have encouraged.

To date, most of the studies have been limited to single institutions where the researcher could have tighter control of the study. However, Huot's (1996) "Principles for a New Theory and Practice of Writing," as well as Haswell's (2005) and Driscoll and Wynn-Perdue's (2012) recommendations for writing center studies that meet the RAD criteria (replicable, aggregable, and data-supported), provide a clear set of standards for conducting writing center studies that reach beyond a single institution, and this study attempted to meet those standards. This chapter provides an in-depth discussion of the findings and limitations, and it offers recommendations for future studies.

Findings and Interpretations

The results of this study indicate that the number of times a student attends a writing center makes a difference in student writing performance. Specifically, while the overall results showed no statistically significant improvements on the four criteria measured, those who attended multiple times did tend to show improvements. The findings further show that neither demographics (age, gender, ethnicity, marital status,

and whether a student is a first generation student) nor college location is related to student improvement of writing and attendance in the writing center. The results of this study support the current writing center literature in that students benefit from the writing center if they attend multiple times during a semester.

Perhaps the most significant finding, however, is that most of the student participants either never attended the writing center or only attended one or two times during the semester. Of the 110 students who agreed to participate in the study, only 38 students reported that they attended their college writing center, and only 9 students went more than three times. Those students showed a positive change in their writing performance. Even though the sample size was small, the results suggest an issue worthy of discussion.

The larger matter at hand is determining why students choose to go or not go to the writing center and what might be done in the future to get them to use the writing center more frequently during a semester. College writing centers offer students individualized instruction in a student-centered learning environment. Higher education studies suggest that the student-centered approach is effective because the students are more involved in their learning process – they are not passive learners (Weimer, 2013). However, the low number of visits in this study indicates that students are not taking advantage of student-centered learning opportunities available to them outside the classroom. In this study, students went to the writing center voluntarily, and even though the students were not asked to comment on writing center attendance as a part of the study, a few of them mentioned in their reflective essays that they regretted not going,

and one student mentioned that he or she would attend the writing center in the future to learn more about revising and editing.

Robinson (2009) examined motivational factors that influence student writing-center attendance and found that extrinsic motivation often encouraged the first visit, but intrinsic motivation (derived from self-determination theory) was the reason for multiple visits. Robinson's (2009) study was limited to York College where developmental programs have been eliminated and writing across the curriculum has been employed. She found that the discipline-specific writing assignments prompted many of the students' visits, and once a student worked with a tutor on basic material, he or she felt more intrinsically motivated to come back. A similar study conducted by Bromley, Northway, and Schonberg (2013) found that students visited the writing center because an instructor encouraged them to do so, not necessarily because they wanted better grades. Their data were collected through exit surveys at three separate colleges. Even though the colleges were different in size and structure, the findings were consistent among the colleges.

Although an exit survey was not used as a part of this study, the low number of student visits to the writing center suggests the need for another study using the exit survey developed by Bromley, Northway, and Schonberg (2013).

Difficulties with Writing Center Assessments

One issue that has been discussed within the writing center community is the difficulty of conducting large-scale studies. Reasons for this range from the lack of pre- and post-tests associated with learning outcomes (Thompson, 2006) to the many differences among writing centers due to their responsibility to meet their institutions'

specific needs (Schendel & Macauley, 2012). A great deal of literature exists regarding both writing centers and writing assessments. However, very little literature exists about assessing writing centers based on student improvement of writing with a focus on writing assessment.

Two critical factors came to light during this study. First, creating or locating a standard rubric that measures student writing was a challenge because most writing rubrics are designed to assess particular criteria on an assignment or designed to work with a writing prompt (Maki, 2004). For this study, the researcher chose a first-year composition (FYC) rubric that was being used by the University of South Florida because it contained all of the criteria for an essay as defined by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the ACT. Additionally, the rubric had been used and tested by USF's Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment (OIEA) and was found to be a reliable instrument.

Five higher education institutions were involved in the study, and the instructors at each institution were encouraged to teach their FYC classes as they normally would. As Clark (2012) suggested, composition instructors often emphasize different areas of importance when it comes to written composition. Some focus on the process, others stress content and/or style. Likewise, some instructors allow students to be more creative and less formal in their writing. As a result, the FYC Rubric did not work well for all of the essays included in the study. For example, the fifth criterion of the rubric, format, called for the assessment of MLA format and proper documentation. Since the majority of the essays submitted did not include outside sources, this criterion had to be omitted from the raters' assessment. Similarly, many of the essays at the end of the term were

reflective essays. A reflective essay is usually an essay that allows a student to reflect on his or her experience in a class. Generally, these are written in a less formal manner, and are graded accordingly. For this study, however, the essays had to be rated with the same rubric as the other essays. This could account for some of the scores decreasing on the second essay.

Another factor that may have affected the outcomes was that many of the students, according to their instructors, had difficulty keeping track of their writing center attendance. A computerized scanning system would have been an ideal tool for keeping up with student visits, but at the time the study was conducted, few institutions had such systems in place. Another alternative would have been to ask the composition or writing center instructors to keep track of the students' visits. Because the results of the study indicated that the number of times a student visits the writing center makes a difference in his or her writing, a more accurate account of those visits is crucial.

Outcomes

Both sets of the students' papers were assessed on the following criteria: (1) Focus, (2) Evidence, (3) Organization, and (4) Style. The Analytic Writing Continuum (AWC), the NCTE, and the ACT recognize each of these criteria as important areas of assessment. For this study, the focus of an essay included the development of a thesis statement and the "analysis of the subject relevant to the thesis" (see Appendix A). A majority of the students scored an average of 2.18 on this criterion on the second essay, and the results showed that the student participants, whether they attended the writing center or not, did not improve in this area of assessment during the semester.

The second area of assessment, evidence, included the use of "supporting details" as well as the writer's ability to integrate examples, personal experiences, visuals, or other sources of evidence relevant to the thesis statement. The results were consistent with the assessment of the first criterion in that the students did not show improvement of writing on this criterion, even after attending the writing center. The average student score for this criterion on the second paper was 2.3. These results were not surprising given the relationship between the thesis statement and supporting details.

For the third criterion, organization, the students were rated on their ability to write strong introductions and conclusions and the incorporation of transitions throughout the paragraphs and the paper. The average score on the second essay was 2.15, again a slight decrease from the first paper. Due to the nature of some of the second assignments, it is understandable that this criterion showed a lower score. The assignments were less formal than the first assignments and allowed for more creativity on the part of the students. For instance, many students wrote in letter format with some chronological organization of information, but for the most part, the essays were written in a casual manner and presented as a list of memories from the semester, rather than a structured format.

The fourth criterion, style, refers to grammar, punctuation, word choice, and vocabulary. The scores for style were unique in that students who attended the writing center showed a slight increase in their score from the first essay to the last, and students who did not attend the writing center showed a slight decrease. However, the average final score on this essay was only 1.41, indicative of an emerging writer. Ironically, mastering these skills seems to be as difficult for students today as it was 150 years ago

when Hill (1879) administered his first writing assessment with only a 50% pass rate among Hill's 316 students.

The scores for this criterion also may have been lower than the others due to the similar backgrounds of the raters as well. The three raters worked for one institution at a time when grading emphasis was put on grammar and punctuation. Even though grammar and punctuation are still relevant in a college composition class, some instructors put more emphasis on the content. Therefore, their students are more likely to focus on the content rather than the style.

Limitations

There were several limitations associated with this study. First, the researcher had no control over the types of essays assigned by the composition instructors. The instructors were asked to teach the same material they would normally teach in first-year composition. For the first essay, this was not a problem because most of the essays were written in a similar manner with a sense of formality about them. The essay assignment at the end of the semester, however, differed greatly among the instructors. Some instructors assigned argumentative essays with outside sources, and others assigned reflective essays.

The reflective essays posed two problems. First, the graders could easily identify them as the later essay in the term, which may have influenced the grader's assessment of the paper. For instance, a grader might assume a paper written at the end of the semester would be better than one written at the beginning of the semester, so the rater would grade the later paper harder – hold it to a higher standard. Second, the reflective papers were written in a more casual manner, which may have lowered their scores on several

criteria. The graders reported that they might have assigned some grades differently if they had been provided with the instructors' instructions for the reflective essays.

Another limitation was related to the scoring rubric. The last criterion of the rubric, Format, required the raters to assess the proper use of Modern Language Association (MLA) documentation and the proper MLA design for formal writing. In the midst of grading, the raters conferred and decided to omit the last criterion unless a works cited page was included in the paper. Very few papers, however, contained a works cited page, so the last criterion, and hypothesis, could not be studied. Additionally, many of the instructors did not require MLA format (standard heading and header, Times New Roman 12 point font, double-spaced), making it difficult for the raters to grade that criterion consistently.

Asking students to keep track of their writing center attendance posed another limitation. Some students kept thorough records of their attendance, but most of them recorded only one visit, or did not keep track at all. Instructor influence seemed to play a role in students keeping track of their visits as well. For example, two of the instructors provided tracking sheets from all of their students, and the sheets appeared to have been filled out throughout the semester. They were worn, and the handwritten notes varied in form and ink color, signifying use over a period of time. Those particular classes also submitted tracking sheets that included documentation from students stating they had not attended the writing center at all. Two of the instructors also mentioned that they did not remind the students to keep track of visits, and the instructors felt the students either lost the sheets or kept poor records of attendance. Since writing center attendance was a

crucial part of this study, the distinction between students who had or had not attended was critical.

Because few writing centers maintain electronic records of student attendance, the researcher was limited in gathering attendance information. The tracking sheets provided the researcher with some information regarding student attendance, but accurate information regarding the nature of the students' visits and the number of visits throughout the semester would have provided the researcher with a clearer picture of the relationship between writing center attendance and student improvement of writing.

In addition to the aforementioned limitations, the researcher also had no control over students withdrawing from their classes or not submitting assigned essays. In some instances, students submitted the first essay, but not the second, and in two instances, the students submitted the second essay, but not the first. Even though the sample size remained large enough to complete the study, this limitation is important to note for future studies.

<center>Recommendations for Further Studies</center>

In light of the findings of this study, the Mississippi Writing Center Association (MSWCA) members, or all writing centers in the state, should consider using the exit survey developed by Bromley, Northway, and Schonberg (2013) to provide insight as to why students choose to attend a writing center initially and what motivates them to attend multiple times throughout a semester. This information could be useful to writing center administrators and other administrators in higher education as discussions of eliminating developmental programs persist. The elimination of developmental studies is a growing

trend, and writing centers are gaining attention. An exit survey conducted now could help

higher education administrators make important decisions as they move forward.

This study can also be used as a template for others who are interested in

conducting large-scale studies on the impact of writing centers on students' writing.

Huot's (1996) "Principles" were applied in this study due to the shared mission of the

writing centers associated with the MSWCA. Future studies using the same methodology

should consider opening the study up to more composition classes and students. Even

though the initial sample size of this study seemed appropriate, the number of students

who go to the writing center determined the true sample size, and it needs to be larger

than the 38 students who reportedly attended in this study. One way to accomplish this is

to ask the participating instructors to include all of their composition classes. Another

method would be to invite multiple instructors from each institution. In this study, doing

so would have doubled or tripled the overall number of students. Additionally, a larger

sample size would have allowed for stronger comparisons between the attendees and the

non-attendees in terms of changes in their writing.

Although large-scale studies are favorable, they may not be necessary to show the

value of the writing center or to measure whether students improve their writing skills

after seeking assistance in the writing center. Multiple institutions could conduct

individual studies simultaneously and combine their results. Also, as Lerner (2003) and

Niiler (2003) discovered in their studies, a longitudinal approach within a single

institution could be an effective methodology in measuring the impact of a writing center

on student writing. Confining the study to a single institution would also allow the

researcher to control for many limitations found in a large-scale study. As noted by

Thompson (2006), the ability to measure a "change" (p. 47) in students' writing is necessary for a well-developed study. In instances where formal writing is required for one essay and informal for a subsequent essay, measuring the "change" can be problematic.

Regardless of the size of the study, assigning writing prompts for both sets of essays would most likely produce more valid results. It would also allow for more control in terms of types of essays included in the study and perhaps more anecdotal feedback from the instructors, the writing center tutors, and the students. Likewise, those replicating the study should consider using one rubric, but providing the rubric and writing prompt to the instructors prior to the beginning of the study. This would provide the composition instructors with more insight regarding what criteria would be used for judging their students' essays.

<div align="center">Recommendations for Policy and Practice</div>

The results of this study are far reaching and could be useful to students, instructors, writing center directors, and other higher education administrators. Students can use the information to become better informed of the benefits of attending a writing center throughout a semester, not just on one occasion. Because many students in higher education work, they are often limited in the time they can invest (Weimer, 2013); however, they may be more inclined to attend a center on multiple occasions if they see or understand the benefit. Attending a writing center can be empowering to students, and it could contribute to an improvement in their GPA and their ability to complete college (Schendel & Macauley, 2012). Further, in a learner-centered environment, students tend

to have a deeper understanding of what they learned, and they retain the information for a much longer time (Weimer, 2013).

First-year composition instructors, and instructors in other disciplines, can use the results in a similar manner. If higher education faculty members recognize the benefits of multiple visits, they may put into practice methods that encourage student attendance. For instance, they may invite writing center instructors to their classrooms to introduce themselves and share information about the writing center. Some instructors may choose to take their students to the writing center during class time. In both instances, the students would become more comfortable with the idea of the center after being introduced to it.

Additionally, instructors could decide to use some of the methods employed in the writing center setting that encourage student-centered learning. Even though student-centered learning has been shown to be an effective method, most instructors still choose to use a lecture-based approach (Fernsten & Reda, 2011; Weimer, 2013). In higher education, where students are expected to think more critically, lecture can be stifling and can prohibit growth (Weimer, 2013), so student-centered learning is a more favorable methodology to encourage analysis and synthesis, especially in writing.

Administrators in higher education can use the results of the study in several ways. First of all, writing center directors may use the study as a model for the assessment of their own writing centers. In a smaller-scale study, the writing center director could have more control over the tracking of the students, which would produce more accurate results for the improvement of student writing. Likewise, the director could repeat the study over a period of time to get a long-term picture of success. The

director and the writing tutors could also use the results of the study to strengthen their

relationship with the faculty.

Higher education administrators could use the study to help them make decisions

regarding allocation of resources. In Bromley, Northway, and Schonberg's (2013) study,

they found that advertising the writing center had the second largest impact on student

attendance in a writing center, behind instructor influence. Advertising in those

institutions included producing brochures, holding resource fairs, and creating Websites.

Administrators face tough decisions when it comes to college finances. Due to shrinking

budgets over the years, programs have had to prove their worth and their value in order to

be funded (Dvorak & Bruce, 2012). This study shows not only the value of the writing

center, but also the importance of assessing the college writing center. Through the

assessments, the writing centers and the institutions they serve can continue to measure

student success and align their missions. Collectively, leaders of the MSWCA can gather

data from individual institutions that can be compiled over a period of time to show

trends in writing center use throughout the organization's higher education institutions.

Writing is a critical issue in today's society as reflected by the numerous

programs and courses aimed to help students improve. In higher education, the trend has

been to provide opportunities for students to improve their writing through the use of

writing centers. However, very little quantitative data exist to show whether student

writing actually improves after the student attends the writing center. Qualitative studies

and student anecdotes have indicated such improvement, but academia is calling for a

more systematic approach in studying writing centers. This study aimed to answer the

call of North (1984), Huot (1996), Haswell (2005), and Driscoll and Wynn-Perdue (2012)

to demonstrate whether writing center attendance helps students become better writers. Acquiring this kind of data is a large undertaking, but the results studied over a period of time could prove to be beneficial to all involved: students, instructors, the writing center, the institution, and on a greater scale, higher education.

APPENDIX A

WRITING SCORING RUBRIC

		Emerging - 0	1	Developing - 2	3	Mastering - 4	Total
Focus	*Basics*	Does not meet assignment requirements		Partially meets assignment requirements		Meets assignment requirements	
	Critical Thinking	Absent or weak thesis; ideas are underdeveloped, vague or unrelated to thesis; poor analysis of subject relevant to thesis.		Predictable or unoriginal thesis; ideas are partially developed and related to thesis; inconsistent analysis of subject relevant to thesis		Insightful/intriguing thesis; ideas are convincing and compelling; cogent analysis of subject relevant to thesis	
Evidence	*Critical Thinking*	Sources and supporting details lack credibility; poor synthesis of primary and secondary sources/evidence relevant to thesis; poor synthesis of visuals/personal experience/anecdotes relevant to thesis; rarely distinguishes between writer's ideas and source's ideas		Fair selection of credible sources and supporting details; unclear relationship between thesis and primary and secondary sources/evidence; ineffective synthesis of sources/evidence relevant to thesis; occasionally effective synthesis of visuals/personal experience/anecdotes relevant to thesis; inconsistently distinguishes between writer's ideas and source's ideas		Credible and useful sources and supporting details; cogent synthesis of primary and secondary sources/evidence relevant to thesis; clever synthesis of visuals/personal experience/anecdotes relevant to thesis; distinguishes between writer's ideas and source's ideas	
Organization	*Basics*	Confusing opening; absent, inconsistent, or non-relevant topic sentences; few transitions and absent or unsatisfying conclusion		Uninteresting or somewhat trite introduction, inconsistent use of topic sentences, segues, transitions, and mediocre conclusion		Engaging introduction, relevant topic sentences, good segues, appropriate transitions, and compelling conclusion	
	Critical Thinking	Illogical progression of supporting points; lacks cohesiveness		Supporting points follow a somewhat logical progression; occasional wandering of ideas; some interruption of cohesiveness		Logical progression of supporting points; very cohesive	

Style	*Basics* *Critical Thinking*	Frequent grammar/ punctuation errors; inconsistent point of view Significant problems with syntax, diction, word choice, and vocabulary		Some grammar/punctuation errors occur in some places; somewhat consistent point of view Occasional problems with syntax, diction, word choice, and vocabulary		Correct grammar and punctuation; consistent point of view Rhetorically-sound syntax, diction, word choice, and vocabulary; effective use of figurative language	
Format	*Basics*	Little compliance with accepted documentation style (i.e., MLA, APA) for paper formatting, in-text citations, annotated bibliographies, and works cited; minimal attention to document design		Inconsistent compliance with accepted documentation (i.e., MLA, APA) for paper formatting, in-text citations, annotated bibliographies, and works cited; some attention to document design		Consistent compliance with accepted documentation (i.e., MLA, APA) for paper formatting, in-text citations, annotated bibliographies, and works cited; strong attention to document design	

APPENDIX B

TRACKING SHEET

Name:_____

Institution:_____

Tracking Sheet for Visits to the Writing Center/Lab

Date of Visit	Reason for Visit: (Ex. – Work on grammar. Work on writing paragraphs. Help with Psychology paper.)	Amount of Time Spent with Tutor	Name of Tutor	Was the session helpful?

APPENDIX C

PERMISSION TO USE WRITING RUBRIC

Brown, Suzana

From:	Moxley, Joseph <moxley@usf.edu>
Sent:	Wednesday, May 28, 2014 1:26 PM
To:	Richarde, R. Stephen; Brown, Suzana
Subject:	RE: Permission to use FYC rubric

Sure, you are welcome to that rubric.

See http://myreviewers.com for more details

joe

From: Richarde, R. Stephen
Sent: Wednesday, May 28, 2014 12:44 PM
To: Brown, Suzana
Cc: Moxley, Joseph
Subject: Re: Permission to use FYC rubric

Suzana, we always help where we can, but I'm copying Dr. Joe Moxley on you request as he is primarily responsible for development and validation of the rubric.

Sent from my iPhone

On May 28, 2014, at 12:34 PM, "Brown, Suzana" <suzana.brown@mgccc.edu> wrote:

> Dr. RiCharde,
>
> I am working on a dissertation study that involves grading students' Comp I essays from multiple institutions in our state. USF's rubric for First Year Comp is one of the best I have been able to find, and I would like to use it for my study. I have read through the QEP documents on USF's Website, and it seems that your department has found the rubric to be a valid and reliable tool for assessing student writing, a rare find for written communication rubrics.
>
> Please let me know if I have permission to use the rubric or if I need to request permission through some other means.
>
> Thank you for your time and consideration.
>
> All the best,
>
> **Suzi Brown**
> Language Arts
> Jackson County Campus
> P.O. Box 100
> Gautier, MS 39553
> 228.497.7746
> suzana.brown@mgccc.edu
> <image001.jpg>

APPENDIX D

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

THE UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
118 College Drive #5147 | Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001
Phone: 601.266.5997 | Fax: 601.266.4377 | www.usm.edu/research/institutional.review.board

NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the "Adverse Effect Report Form".
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months.
  Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 14072102
PROJECT TITLE: Student's Improvement of Writing and their Attendance in a Writing Center
PROJECT TYPE: New Project
RESEARCHER(S): Suzana Brown
COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Education and Psychology
DEPARTMENT: Educational Studies and Research
FUNDING AGENCY/SPONSOR: N/A
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Expedited Review Approval
PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 07/30/2014 to 07/29/2015

Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board

APPENDIX E

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

2300 Hwy 90
Gautier, MS 39553

August 1, 2014

Dear Student:

The general purpose of this research study is to gather data regarding first-year-composition students' usage of the college writing center and their improvement of writing. This study is being conducted as a partial fulfillment of my Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration at The University of Southern Mississippi.

Completion of this questionnaire should take no more than ten minutes, and total participation throughout the semester should take no more than thirty minutes. There are no known or anticipated risks from participating in this study. All data collected will be kept confidential, and any information obtained inadvertently during the course of the study will remain completely confidential. Participation in this project is completely voluntary. You may decline participation or discontinue your participation at any point without concern over penalty, prejudice, or any other negative consequence.

Results of this study may be shared with college instructors and administrators who have a vested interest in college writing centers. Further, participants in this study will have the opportunity to reflect on their own attitudes toward the use of the writing center and their improvement of writing.

This project has been reviewed by the Human Subjects Protection Review Committee, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Any questions or concerns about rights as a research subject may be directed to the Institutional Review Board, The University of Southern Mississippi, Box 5147, Hattiesburg, MS 39406, (601) 266-6820. You may also contact me directly at 228-497-7746 or via email at suzana.brown@mgccc.edu if you have questions regarding the study.

By completing and returning the attached questionnaire, you are giving permission for this confidential data to be used for the purposes described above.

Thank you for your consideration and help with this project.

Sincerely,

Suzi Brown
Doctoral Candidate

APPENDIX F

LONG CONSENT FORM

Project Title: Students' Improvement of Writing and Their Attendance in a Writing Center
College: College of Educational Psychology
Department: Educational Studies and Research RESEARCH DESCRIPTION

1.   **Purpose:**
      The purpose of this study is to determine whether a relationship exists between a student's improvement of writing and his or her attendance in the college writing center.

2.   **Description of Study:**
      The researcher has invited English instructors from six Mississippi colleges and universities to participate in a research study related to improvement of student writing, and your English Composition class has been selected. If you choose to participate in the study, you will be given an informed consent form which will allow the researcher to have access to ungraded copies of your first papers and ungraded copies of a designated paper at the end of the semester. You will also be asked to provide demographic and descriptive data at the beginning of the semester.
      During the course of the semester, you will be asked to turn in two copies of your first essay and two copies of a later essay. One copy will be for your instructor to use as he or she normally would for grading purposes, and the second copy will be designated for the researcher. All information that could identify you will be removed. The researcher will have three independent reviewers use a rubric to assess the first and second essay that you provide. Additionally, you will be provided with a tracking sheet and asked to keep track of your writing center attendance throughout the semester.

3.   **Benefits**:
      Students and faculty may benefit from this study. Students, you may benefit from reflecting on your own experiences of attending or not attending a writing center during your first-year composition class. Your instructor may benefit from the result of the study, as it may give him or her a greater understanding of the role of the writing center in a composition class.

4.   **Risks:**
      Your choice of whether to participate in this study will not affect your course grade, positively or negatively. Your participation is completely voluntary and you can choose to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

5.   **Confidentiality:**
      All personally identifying information will be removed before the independent reviews of your essays are performed. A code will be used to

match your first and second essay so that they can be compared while maintaining your anonymity and confidentiality. Any information obtained inadvertently during the course of the study will remain completely confidential. Data submitted from questionnaires will be used for analysis. All databases will be protected with passwords, and hard copies of papers will be locked in a secure cabinet for the period of two years. At the end of the two-year period, all databases and all of your papers will be destroyed.

6.   **Alternative Procedures**:
     None.
7.   **Participant's Assurance:**
     This project has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations.

     Any questions or concerns about rights as a research participant should be directed to the Manager of the IRB at 601-266-5997.Participation in this project is completely voluntary, and participants may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty, prejudice, or loss of benefits.

     Any questions about the research should be directed to the Principal Investigator using the contact information provided in Project Information Section above.

     CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

     Participant's Name:

     Consent is hereby given to participate in this research project. All procedures and/or investigations to be followed and their purpose, including any experimental procedures, were explained to me. Information was given about all benefits, risks, inconveniences, or discomforts that might be expected.

     The opportunity to ask questions regarding the research and procedures was given. Participation in the project is completely voluntary, and participants may withdraw at any time without penalty, prejudice, or loss of benefits. All personal information is strictly confidential, and no names will be disclosed. Any new information that develops during the project will be provided if that information may affect the willingness to continue participation in the project.

     Questions concerning the research, at any time during or after the project, should be directed to the Principal Investigator with the contact information provided above. This project and this consent form have been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Any questions or concerns about rights as a research participant should be directed to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, The University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Drive #5147, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001, (601) 266-5997.

     Include the following information only if applicable. Otherwise delete this entire paragraph before submitting for IRB approval: The University of Southern Mississippi has no mechanism to provide compensation for

participants who may incur injuries as a result of participation in research projects. However, efforts will be made to
make available the facilities and professional skills at the University. Participants may incur charges as a result of treatment related to research injuries. Information regarding treatment or the absence of treatment has been given above.

_____ _____
Research Participant Person Explaining the Study

_____ _____

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