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## Getting the Writing Center into FYC Classrooms

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### Abstract

This article describes the implementation and evaluation of a writing center that assigned tutors to work with students in specific first-year composition (FYC) courses both in and out of the classroom. Student, tutor, and faculty satisfaction, as well as student learning, were evaluated. Findings indicate that a majority of those involved had a favorable view of the program, students were able to articulate how the program helped them achieve learning outcomes, and faculty and tutors enjoyed greater communication.

### Introduction

Supplemental writing tutoring takes many forms on college campuses. Writing centers are traditionally the most common places students turn for additional instruction. There, students commonly work one-on-one with generalist, non-discipline specific writing tutors who are trained to assist students by using a process-centered pedagogy. Additional forms of supplemental writing instruction include writing fellows and classroom-based tutoring programs. Writing fellows programs commonly provide students enrolled in a discipline-specific course with a discipline-trained writing tutor who assists them with assignments outside of class. Classroom-based tutoring programs, on the other hand, assign tutors to conference with students during writing classes.

Working one-to-one with writing center tutors helps students grow as writers and become more comfortable with academic expectations. However, writing centers that only employ generalist writing tutors may not always provide the strongest assistance to students who need guidance with specific disciplinary writing conventions (Kiedaisch & Dinitz, 2007). In addition, some students feel uncertain about sharing their writing with strangers in an unfamiliar space (Brauer, 2009; Bruce, 2009). To these ends, writing fellows and classroom-based tutoring programs can provide what traditional writing centers cannot. Both programs work to alleviate issues of

unfamiliarity because individual tutors are assigned to specific courses; this allows tutors to get to know the professor, course expectations, assignments, and students.

The purpose of this article is to share the results of a pilot program conducted at Nova Southeastern University during the spring 2012 semester. This program combined elements of writing center, writing fellow, and classroom-based tutoring models. Writing fellows were assigned to work in- and out-of-class with students enrolled in specific sections of a first-year required composition course: COMP 1500 – College Writing. Thus, these writing fellows were known as COMP Fellows. A combination of student surveys, fellow and faculty written reflections, and student writing samples were used to assess the program and answer the following.

### *Research Questions*

- 1) What percentage of students will view this program as favorable and will want a COMP Fellow in a future writing course?
- 2) What do students learn from in-class and out-of-class sessions with fellows, and does this align with course outcomes?
- 3) Do students who work more often with COMP Fellows produce better end-of-the-semester writing assignments than students who visit less often?
- 4) Will COMP Fellows and participating writing faculty view this program as favorable?

The first three questions measure student attitudes toward the program and student success based on their work with the program. The fourth question measures the attitudes that fellows and faculty have toward the program.

### **Review of Literature**

A review of literature shows how writing fellows and classroom-based writing tutoring programs can benefit student-writers, faculty, and tutors by increasing communication between all three parties. While writing center lore suggests that the traditional tutoring model—where a student works with a tutor in the center without the involvement of the faculty—is most effective, there have been challenges to that assumption (Thonus, 2001), ones that show how students prefer to work with tutors who have a heightened awareness of the students' subject matter and genre of writing (Thompson et al., 2009).

Over the course of the last three decades, writing fellows programs have been an increasingly popular method of providing assistance to students, faculty, writing centers, and writing across the curriculum programs (Hughes & Hall, 2008). Much of the literature on writing fellows programs shows how these programs assist writing across the curriculum programs (Haring-Smith, 2000; Soven, 1991, 2001; Zawacki, 2008) and writing centers (Leahy, 1999; DeCiccio, 2006; Severino & Knight, 2007) meet the demands of students writing in a number of disciplines. While the specifics of writing fellows programs vary from one institution to the next, one of the most common features is that fellows are assigned to a particular course, which means that they must work closely with both students and faculty (Hughes & Hall, 2008; Severino & Knight, 2007). A second common feature is that writing fellows work closely with “course instructors to become familiar with their goals for the course and how their writing assignments relate to these goals” (Severino & Knight 2007). These close working relationships have been

shown to not only help students and fellows, but also to help faculty better understand their own teaching of writing (Corroy, 2005). A third common feature is that writing fellows provide either written or oral feedback, sometimes both, to students outside of class. Thus, writing fellows are an integral part of a course because they actively engage the students and faculty in conversations about writing and writing instruction within a specific discipline (Severino & Traschel, 2008).

In contrast to writing fellows programs and writing centers, which provide assistance to students outside of class, classroom-based writing tutoring programs provide students with assistance during regular class sessions. Spigelman and Grobman (2005) provide theoretical and pedagogical foundations for creating these “on-location” tutoring programs, explore methods for incorporating writing tutors into first-year writing classrooms, and address the politics and power dynamics of such programs. Classroom-based writing tutors are often able to work even more closely with faculty, as they can actually see what is happening within a classroom environment, but Spigelman and Grobman’s work does not thoroughly address how “on location” tutors can provide additional writing assistance to students outside of the classroom. Other research has shown how combining both classroom-based and out-of-class mentoring for FYC courses can provide students with support that helps them develop traits of successful college students; however, this research does not focus on the impact these programs can have on improving students’ writing skills (Henry, Bruland, & Sano-Franchini, 2011; Henry, Bruland, & Omizo, 2008).

### **How the COMP Fellows Program Worked**

The Nova Southeastern University COMP Fellows program combined classroom-based writing tutoring with writing tutoring that occurred outside of the classroom in a writing center environment. Five COMP Fellows were assigned to nine sections of COMP 1500 – College Writing taught by five full-time faculty. The fellows were undergraduate and graduate students hired and trained by the writing center/WAC coordinator; three fellows had previously worked as generalist writing tutors.

During the semester, COMP Fellows attended one class session per course per week to conference with students individually and in small groups during class. Outside of class, COMP Fellows conducted 426 individual tutoring sessions with the 125 students who participated in the program. This was an average of 3.4 sessions per student. Additionally, COMP Fellows met with faculty on a weekly basis to develop an understanding of the course outcomes and assignments and to discuss student progress.

Finally, COMP Fellows had weekly meetings with the writing center/WAC coordinator, individually and in groups, for on-going training and mentoring. The training focused on teaching COMP Fellows how to work with students on learning and achieving each of the five course learning outcomes: 1. Write recursively for a variety of purposes and audiences; 2. Use primary and secondary sources effectively; 3. Apply appropriate rhetorical conventions in multiple media; 4. Respond constructively to peer writers throughout the writing process; 5. Produce critical reflections on one’s writing and research processes.

### **Program Assessment Methods**

### *Student Surveys*

In an effort to answer Research Questions #1 and #2, all students enrolled in courses with COMP Fellows were asked to complete an anonymous, end-of-the semester survey about their experiences working with a fellow. The survey included both closed and open-ended questions that asked students about their views of the program and what they learned from being a part of it.

### *Student Writing Samples*

To address Research Question #3, a sampling of 10% of the final writing projects were assessed by writing faculty using a rubric that was developed to directly measure achievement of course outcomes. The number of times each student worked with a fellow was noted to determine whether students who met with fellows more often produced better writing.

### *Fellow and Faculty Written Reflections*

To answer Research Question #4, COMP Fellows and participating faculty were asked to write summative reflections at the end of the semester.

## **Results**

### *Student Surveys*

The end-of-the-semester survey was completed by 113 of the 125 students enrolled in courses with COMP Fellows. The students were first asked to indicate how many times they had worked with a COMP Fellow outside of class: 94% of the students reported working with a COMP Fellow 2 or more times; 56% reported working with a COMP Fellow 5 or more times.

Students were then asked if they had worked with a tutor other than their COMP Fellow outside of class. The students overwhelmingly reported not seeking additional assistance, with 81% reporting only choosing to work with their COMP Fellows outside of class.

Next, students were asked if they would like to have a COMP Fellow embedded in a future writing-intensive course in which they were enrolled. A strong majority, 83%, responded in the affirmative, 11% reported being undecided, and only 6% were not in favor.

The first open-ended question asked students to write about what they liked and disliked about their experiences working with their fellows. Students' number one response was that they liked having another person to work with on their assignments. Students said they liked "working with someone who is a student as well," "someone other than your professor, friends, or a family member." Many mentioned benefitting from having "a second opinion" and "an extra set of eyes." Some students appreciated the unique skills of their fellow. Responses included comments such as, "I liked getting an educated person's opinion," and "they know what we are writing about unlike most in tutoring."

Second only to students' comments about liking having someone to work with were comments about how "helpful" they found their COMP Fellows to be. Students mentioned getting help when they were struggling with assignments. One student said she "always learned something

new” during her meetings, and another commented on how the fellow would “read the whole paper” and give feedback. Overall, the responses to the closed questions and the first open-ended question show that students had a favorable impression of working with a COMP Fellow and a majority wanted a COMP Fellow in a future course.

The second open-ended survey question asked students what they learned from working with a COMP Fellow. The number one response was that they learned the value of working with another person on their writing; this closely aligns with course outcome 4. Students mentioned appreciating having “another pair of eyes” and “an outside perspective.” Some said they “learned that a teacher is not the only one you can learn from” and that “it really does help to have someone review your ideas and work.” Others mentioned becoming “more open to suggestions,” learning “to collaborate,” and to “let someone else critique me.” Some realized that a second reader “benefits you because they may see mistakes that you as the writer did not.” Another commented on how the process helped her to learn to “decipher peer and professors’ comments and incorporate them into final work.”

The second most popular response to what they learned from working with a COMP Fellow included specific writing skills, such as grammar, punctuation, clarity, APA and MLA formatting, “hooking in my reader,” and “how to properly cite” references. These responses addressed course outcomes 2 and 3. Some students mentioned learning “brainstorming techniques,” “comma and tense use,” and how to understand different assignments. Others said “structure and organization,” “word choice,” “proofreading,” “transitions,” “how to write an introduction and conclusion,” and “some tricks on Microsoft word.”

Many students mentioned learning the value of revising their writing, and numerous comments pointed to students learning about themselves as a writer. These responses address course outcomes #1 and #5. For example, one student said, “I learned how to look back in my writing and ask myself questions,” and another said, “I also learned how to go over my own papers looking for mistakes or things that need to be edited.” One said, “I learned not to assume everybody thinks like me and knows as much about the topic as I do,” and another mentioned learning to “have an open mind and perspective on my writing.”

### *Student Writing Samples*

Ten percent of participating students’ final writings were collected and assessed at the conclusion of the spring 2012 semester. The samples were selected from seven courses taught by three different full-time faculty members and were selected based on the number of times the student-writers worked with COMP Fellows outside of the classroom. The number of times students worked with COMP Fellows was divided into two categories: low (0-1 visit) and high (4+).

Each essay was assigned a number, 1-12, and then blind-reviewed by full-time writing faculty members using a rubric that included five categories: 1. Content, 2. Organization, 3. Paragraphing, 4. Style, 5. Grammar, Spelling, Mechanics. Each category was rated on a 1-5 scale, 5 being the highest. Thus, the highest score an essay could earn was 25. Total scores were tallied and averaged.

Seven students reported a high number of visits. The average score for essays written by these students was 21.5. Five students reported a low number of visits. The average score for essays written by these students was 12.1. No student who recorded a low number of sessions outperformed any student who recorded a high number of sessions.

These results show that students who had a high number of sessions with COMP Fellows consistently earned higher scores than students who had a low number of sessions. On average, students who had a high number of sessions scored 9.4 points higher on the 25-point scale.

### *Fellow and Faculty Written Reflections*

#### *Fellows*

All of the fellows' reflections included favorable comments. One mentioned how the "opportunity to interact and advise other students was truly rewarding" and that she "especially liked getting the opportunity to know a majority of the students [she] worked with on a personal level." Another compared it to her experiences working as a generalist writing center tutor: "Working as a COMP Fellow gave me new insights to helping students with assignments that I did not have when I worked as a [generalist] tutor. There is an open line of communication with the professor and the student. When I was not sure of something, I was able to ask the professor, and when I noticed that some students were having a hard time grasping a concept or understanding the objective of the assignment, I was able to tell [the professor] so that she could better assist the students."

#### *Faculty*

Reflections from the faculty showed they appreciated the one-on-one attention the program provided to students. They also mentioned the fellows' "abilities to understand COMP learning outcomes" and how their "students have tremendously benefited from this experience as reflected through their grades and understandings of course materials." One faculty member said, "My students' writing and attitudes about the writing process improved dramatically as a result of the fellow. They revised more and made more careful revisions. Students told me that the COMP Fellows appointments were the most helpful component of the course."

### **Conclusion**

The results of this pilot program show that a strong majority of students enrolled in courses with a COMP Fellow had a favorable view of the program and hoped to have a COMP Fellow in a future writing course. These students expressed an appreciation of many aspects of the program and were able to articulate how the program helped them achieve course learning outcomes. A review of students' final writing projects showed that students who worked more often with COMP Fellows produced significantly stronger writings at the end of the semester. This reinforces the students' comments about having learned a lot from working closely with their COMP Fellows.

The three COMP Fellows who had previously worked as generalist writing tutors expressed that they felt more prepared to work with students in their roles as COMP Fellows. Writing faculty also stated that they felt the increased amount of communication between students, fellows, and faculty helped the students achieve course learning outcomes at a higher level.

These findings show that a writing fellow, as defined by this program, can have a positive impact on the learning environment within a FYC course. These findings are critical to the understanding of writing center pedagogy because they suggest that student learning may improve when writing centers get into FYC classrooms.

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