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Using Archival Data to Examine Mandatory Visits

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Abstract

Writing centers have long collected data, often by painstakingly counting things—e.g. how many engineering majors used the writing center last semester? This article gives an example of how such records can fuel empirical research: it analyzes mandatory and voluntary writing center visits in 83,045 writing center consultations, involving 44,465 writers, over an 11-year period. The findings suggest that required visits encourage writing center use without negative effects.

Introduction

Accurate record-keeping is critical (Geller et al.), and our record-keeping practices play an important educational role (LeCluyse); yet record-keeping can steal time from research. In 2012, Jackson and McKinney found that record-keeping was the most common administrative activity (93%), exceeding “the number of writing centers in which faculty (39%), graduate students (24%), or undergraduates (35%) conduct research on writing center theory, pedagogy, or administration” (2). Yet only eight respondents considered record-keeping important. Geller and Denny, after studying the career trajectories of 14 writing center professionals (WCPs) from a variety of institutional contexts, commented,

We wondered whether WCPs were aware of how their everyday labor diminished attention to research. . . . Attention to the local nitty-gritty can function at the peril, in almost every sense. Of the disciplinary, not just for individual WCPs, but also for the wider profession itself. (111)

In response to this peril, scholars increasingly call for more empirical research (Babcock and Thonus; Driscoll and Perdue). By providing the data for descriptive empirical inquiry (Liggett, Jordan, and Price), our records can help us answer that call.

Analyzing our records can advance our discipline by helping to resolve perennial debates. For example, a colleague recently recounted a *wcenter* discussion about mandatory writing center visits. I remembered debating the same topic, on the same listserv, at least twenty years earlier (Bell and Turner). (A *wcenter* archive search for "mandatory" and "required" found discussions in 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2013.) Additionally, recent published articles on this topic (e.g., Gordon; Whalen) still cite the same studies from decades ago (e.g., Bishop; Clark).

Typically, requirement opponents argue:

- Requirements violate our non-authoritarian ethos. Writers should be intrinsically motivated to come.
- Required writers resist revision, focus on “fixing” grammar, and thus are unlikely to benefit.
- Requirements cause a stampede of last-minute walk-ins who crowd out motivated writers.

For example, believing that a requirement inevitably fosters resentment, first-time director Whalen was willing to ban them even when usage numbers declined (62).

Others counter that a requirement recruits writers who might overlook the center and that potential crowding can be administratively managed.

I realized that my school’s archival data included required visit information that could illuminate this issue. When writers were required to use our writing center, were they in fact focused on grammar? Less likely to benefit? I decided to find out.

In this dataset, “required” is defined by the writer’s answer to the question, “Were you required to use the writing center?” If the writer answered “yes,” the visit was marked required, whether the requirement consisted of gentle encouragement or explicit assignment. However, the data do not include regularly scheduled remedial tutorials; those were discouraged by this writing center, which provided no mechanism for scheduling them.

When the data collection began in 1997, our public university had 27,000 students; by 2008, we had 50,000 students. Our center drew writers from every college, at every level from freshman to graduate student. This period spanned several university campuses, center locations, scheduling systems, administrators, and student numbering systems, so some records are incomplete, but overall, the dataset contains information about 83,045 writing center consultations, involving 44,465 writers.

This study is larger than previous empirical studies of required appointments, the largest of which is Clark’s 1985 survey of 329 writers. Also, where previous studies asked students whether they were likely to return (Bishop; Clark; Gordon; Runciman), the current study noted whether students did in fact return. Although this study was not experimental—students were not randomly sorted into treatment and control groups—there is no reason to suspect that the “required” writers differed significantly from the “voluntary” writers. During these 11 years, there were no course-wide or program-wide writing center requirements, and students could not have selected classes on that basis.

The perennial interest in mandatory visits reflects an ambivalent relationship between our philosophy and practice. Olson’s 1981 “Attitudinal Problems and the Writing Center” was possibly the first to imply that mandatory visits can harm tutors and writers. Although some have always defended mandatory visits (e.g., McCully), a need to oppose writing centers to classrooms (requirements, deadlines, etc.) permeates many landmark essays.

For example, Kail and Trimbur’s 1987 “The Politics of Peer Tutoring” defines mandatory visits as a “curriculum-based model,” then argues that a “writing center model”—“a voluntary association where students who want to improve their writing drop in or make an appointment”—is superior (Murphy and Law 29). Healy’s 1993 “A Defense of Dualism” concludes that writing centers must “remain free to provide students a place to come, not because they have to, but because they experience there the freedom to realize themselves as writers” (Murphy and Law 189). North’s 1984 “The Idea of a Writing Center” also insists that consultations should be the writer’s idea, not a “command performance” (Murphy and Law 80), and his 1994 “Revisiting ‘The Idea of a Writing Center’” reiterates it (though North acknowledges that the motivation might be a desire to earn a grade or avoid punishment) (10-11).

An entire subgenre explains how peer tutors overcome negative mandate effects, with titles like “So rudely forced” and “The Road to Hell Is Paved with Good Intentions” (Conway; Bell and Turner). Some apparently refer to the sort of remedial tutorial that this study excludes—but not all. Another subgenre provides strategies for directors to extinguish pre-existing mandate practices (Ryan; Whalen).

By contrast, empirical studies typically support mandatory visits. Many survey attitudes, concluding that a requirement results in improved awareness of the writing center and a willingness to return (Bishop; Clark; Gordon; Runciman).

Several studies correlate survey results with other data; these, too, find no association between mandatory visits and bad results. For example, Robinson noted that after three visits (mandatory or not), basic writers moved beyond sentence-level concerns to an “extrinsic” focus. Osman found that, although students worried that a requirement “stigmatized” them, their abilities and grades improved.

Quasi-experimental studies report similar results. Van Dam located freshmen required to use the writing center at least 3 times and those who had never used it. Required students improved at a higher rate, and more than 90% believed the requirement had helped. Smith compared two basic writing classes, one with a writing center requirement. Not only did most students not mind the requirement, but required writers produced more self-motivated writing, attended class more consistently, felt more connected to the college, and had a slightly higher “pass” rate “despite the fact that more ‘at-risk’ students were in the class” (90).

Some studies examined requirements along with related issues. While comparing procrastination tendency to procrastination behavior, Young and Fritzsche found that required writers were more likely to be procrastinators, while writing center use was associated with higher satisfaction and fewer procrastination behaviors. These results suggest that a requirement can help writing centers reach procrastinators.

Studying ESL writers, Enders found that a writing center requirement significantly increased the frequency of global tasks. Also, writers who completed the requirement earned higher grades. These results indicate that mandatory visits can benefit ESL writers.

The present correlational study examines both writer attitudes and behaviors. Did mandatory visits differ significantly from voluntary visits?

Method

I compiled our data archives, matched student records spanning multiple numbering systems, then removed identifying information before analyzing the data with SPSS. Not surprisingly, intermittent gaps cause the number of records (N) per analysis to vary. Overall, the resulting dataset contained 83,045 usable records, i.e., records that showed whether the consultation was required or voluntary, appointment or walk-in. About one-third of the consultations were required.

insert Figure 1

[Figure 1 – Byoung@ucf.edu]

Mostly the data was collected via “record of consultation” form [Appendix A – Byoung@ucf.edu]. From 2001-2007, the data also included a post-consultation survey administered online [Appendix B – Byoung@ucf.edu]. The survey asked writers to rate statements such as “My writing consultant listened carefully to what I said,” on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is “strongly disagree” and 5 is “strongly agree.” We

collected 6478 responses, a 27% return. The survey data helped illuminate how writers felt about their own preparedness, the help they received, and their inclination to return.

Two statistical tests were used: chi square and T-tests. A chi square (signaled by χ^2) compares data to an expected distribution, answering the question, “Do these data fit what we expect to see?” A T-test (signaled by t) compares two means to see how different they are, answering the question “Do these two groups come from the same population—appearing different only through chance—or is there a statistically significant difference between them?” What I expected was the “null hypothesis”: no significant difference between mandatory and voluntary writing center visits.

Findings

These analyses did identify some differences between mandatory and voluntary visits that are statistically significant, unlikely to occur by chance. However, the differences were small. These findings should be viewed with the small effect size in mind.

Do required writers behave differently?

One concern is that mandatory visits motivate writers to show up unprepared, with little time to revise. That concern was not supported by the evidence. Compared to writers at voluntary consultations, required writers were:

- Significantly more likely to be there by appointment (χ^2 (1, N=45,424)=171.117, $p<.001$)
 - Required: 79.1% had appointments; Voluntary: 73.5% had appointments
- Significantly more likely to bring a written copy of their assignment (χ^2 (1, N=78,470) =41.164, $p<.001$)
 - Required: 30% brought a written assignment; Voluntary: 28% did so

Required visits happened slightly sooner (5.57 days before the deadline vs 5.26 days for voluntary visits), but the difference was small (about 7 hours), and it did not rise to the level of statistical significance (t (32670.957, N= 43,553) = 1.474, $p=.140$).

However, the required consultations were

- Significantly more likely to happen earlier in the writing process (χ^2 (3, N=54,606)=650.960, $p<.001$)

Every consultation record noted whether the writer had brought ideas/questions, notes/outlines, a partial draft, or a complete draft. Although any writer can rethink a full-length draft and start over, for this study, I assumed that students with a complete draft were farther along in the writing process than those with a partial draft, who were farther along than those with notes/outlines, and so on. Most writers brought complete drafts, but fewer required writers brought complete drafts, and more had ideas/questions

insert Table 1

[Table 1 – Byoung@ucf.edu].

Apparently, required writers were less likely to expect the writing center to “fix up” completed drafts at the last minute.

Do required writers have worse attitudes?

When I compared writer attitudes on post-consultation surveys, I noted some differences that were statistically significant, yet small. One reason for the small effect size may be that overall ratings were very high, consistent with similar studies (Bromley, Northway, and Schonberg; Carino and Enders; Gofine; Morrison and Nadeau). These differences partially support the belief that required writers are more difficult to work with.

On post-consultation surveys, required writers were more likely to agree that they could have been better prepared, rating themselves slightly lower than voluntary writers on two statements:

- “I was well-prepared to work.” (t (2796.649, N= 6034)=3.685, p <.001)
 - Required: 4.46, Voluntary: 4.55
- “I gave my writing consultant enough information.” (t (2840.185, N= 6034)=-3.956, p <.001)
 - Required: 4.48, Voluntary: 4.57

Required writers were about as likely to consider the consultation a success.

- “I achieved my goal for the consultation.” (t (3120.658, N= 6034)=2.154, p=.031)
 - Required: 4.60, Voluntary: 4.54

These differences are statistically significant, but very small.

Interestingly, required writers considered themselves slightly less likely to return.

- “I would come to the UWC again.” (t (2828.412, N=6034)=-3.955, p<.001)
 - Required: 4.67, Voluntary: 4.75

However, what required writers believed is not what they actually did.

To determine whether required writers actually returned, I sorted the groups by their first-visit status, reasoning that if, say, your 8th visit was required, the requirement probably wouldn’t influence your decision to return.

- Required first-visit writers were more likely to return. (χ^2 (1, N=17,084)=57.145, p<.000, ϕ =.058)
 - Required: 53.1% returned, Voluntary: 47.2% returned.

This effect is small (shown by ϕ , an effect-size measure that runs from 0 to 1). Still, it suggests that a requirement does not discourage repeat visits.

Do appointments matter?

Perhaps writers who make appointments are more likely to arrive prepared. Perhaps walk-in writers are more likely to arrive at the last minute and, since walk-ins often wait a long time, less likely to be satisfied. My null hypothesis was that appointment status would make no significant difference to writer behavior or attitudes.

Required appointments did not differ significantly from required walk-in consultations. Required appointments happened earlier relative to the deadline—with appointments averaging 6.12 days before the due date and walk-in visits averaging 5.10 days before the due date—but this difference was not statistically significant (t (10612, N= 36,437)=1.626, p=.104). Satisfaction ratings, also, were similar, except that walk-ins considered themselves more likely to return:

- “I would come to the UWC again” ($t(175.797, N=5631)=-2.998, p=.003$)
 - Appointments: 4.62; Walk-ins 4.82

Apparently, the walk-in experience was not so unpleasant that it turned writers off.

Are latecomers more likely to have been required?

The consultations that happened one day or less before the paper deadline (about 20% of the total) were sorted into four groups: required appointments, required walk-ins, voluntary appointments, and voluntary walk-ins. Because proportions were constrained by scheduling—usually only one peer tutor was dedicated to walk-ins, while others helped walk-ins only when appointments failed to show—I hypothesized that last-minute consultations would exhibit the same proportions of required/voluntary, appointment/walk-in, as all other consultations. However, that was decidedly not the case.

Fewer than expected required consultations took place right before the deadline: 12% fewer appointments and 54% fewer walk-ins. Voluntary consultations differed in opposite directions: 21% more appointments, 21% fewer walk-ins.

insert Figure 2

[Figure 2 – Byoung@ucf.edu]

These differences are statistically significant ($\chi^2(3, N=15,972)=850.845, p<.001$), and they confirm that last-minute consultations are not monopolized by required writers

When a first visit was required, the writers were still more likely to return than when it was not. Does appointment status affect this result? Using the same four groups, I hypothesized that each group would be equally likely to return. And again, that null hypothesis was rejected. Required-first-visit writers were more likely to return than voluntary-first-visit writers, regardless of appointment status ($\chi^2(3, N=17,084)=79.812, p<.001$).

insert Figure 1

[Figure 3 – Byoung@ucf.edu]

Each column in Figure 3 represents 100% of its category—the solid black bar on top did not return, the shaded/patterned bars did return. Although the differences are statistically significant, they are small; still, a requirement did not discourage return visits.

Discussion

Taken as a whole, these findings suggest that a mandatory writing center visit encourages writing center use without negative effects. The required consultations are no more likely to be last-minute, and no more likely to disappoint writers, than voluntary consultations. What’s more, writers whose first visit was required were more likely to return, even though writers themselves believed otherwise.

Based on these results, there is no pedagogical reason to discourage mandatory writing center visits (though this study does not address regularly-scheduled remedial tutorials).

When I’ve shared these findings, one common response has been, “How counterintuitive!” Well . . . not really.

For one thing, these results are consistent with the other empirical studies I located. Gordon notes, “The research studies about assigning students to go to a writing center have reached remarkably consistent conclusions over time, whether they were conducted at large public universities or at smaller private institutions,” and that is still the case, 6 years later.

For another thing, despite our liberatory ethos, there’s nothing especially authoritarian about a writing center requirement. Most of the papers we see have been assigned. Often, elements of the writing process—in-class workshops, draft deadlines, etc.—are also assigned. A writing center requirement is unlikely to faze anyone.

What’s counterintuitive is our belief that writers should want to use the writing center, which, though beneficial, requires effort. Nearly every writer shares drafts reluctantly, saying, “Well, it isn’t good yet, but . . .” When I required tutors to use our center, they were reluctant, too, and they know better than anyone how helpful it can be. So we should expect writers unfamiliar with us to have low expectations. Fortunately, lower expectations are easier to surpass.

Interestingly, although required writers rated themselves less prepared, they actually were more prepared. They came earlier (when the temptation to “just fix the grammar” is lower), with time to make use of our feedback. They were more likely to bring their written assignment, helping the tutor to understand what was needed.

Survey results won’t always tell the whole story. By drawing on archival data, this study was able to put those results in perspective.

So give your data another look! Our records are an important resource for empirical research.

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