

2018

Creating an Effective Writing Center: A Case Study on Improving Student Writing

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Kathryn Leber

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Walden University

2018

Abstract

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by

Kathryn Leber

MA, National University, 2013

BS, New York Institute of Technology, 2007

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

December 2018

Abstract

The writing skills of students in the United States have been declining, leaving many unprepared for the academic demands of college as well as for the current job market. There is a need to improve students' writing skills to bridge these gaps. The purpose of this case study was to examine students and instructors perceptions regarding the services provided by a college writing center.. Knowles's theory of andragogy was used to emphasize the importance of focusing on adult learners and the motivation behind adult learning with regard to students' decisions to visit campus resources such as the writing center. The key research questions concerned students' expectations of the writing center, why instructors required writing center visits, whether students voluntarily returned to the writing center, how instructors perceived student sessions as improving student papers/assignments, and suggestions for improving writing center services by means of student and instructor feedback. Qualitative data were collected via interviews with 10 faculty who were not involved in the writing program and 10 students who had visited the writing center recently. Results were analyzed and coded for themes and trends. The findings showed that although faculty and students were pleased with writing support services, steps could be taken to improve them. Recommendations include creating consistent hours for the writing center, implementing a training manual for writing center consultants, offering faculty professional development hours, and improving campus outreach. This doctoral project helped in understanding how the study site can use the writing center as a resource to improve students' writing abilities and thereby act as a bridge toward greater academic success for students in all college courses.

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Acknowledgments

I'd like to acknowledge my husband for supporting me through this process. He believed in me at times when I didn't believe in myself. I'd also like to recognize and formally thank my mother and father. Without them, this would not have been possible; they have always been my support and foundation. There aren't enough words to show my gratitude and appreciation. To my children, know that your dreams can take you anywhere. As George Lucas stated, "If you want to be successful in a particular field, perseverance is one of the key qualities."

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Section 1: The Problem

Introduction

Daily, writing center consultants across the United States spend their time working with college students to improve basic writing skills. In higher education systems where crowded classrooms and overworked teachers are the norm, effective writing centers may alleviate some of the miscommunication about writing that occurs in the classroom (Brickey, 2013). Generally, the best scenario in which a student uses a resource such as the writing center is one in which the teacher has provided explicit instructions and the student knows exactly where he or she needs assistance with writing (Brickey, 2013). However, this is not always the case. One of the challenges that a writing center faces is that students come from diverse backgrounds and have varying levels of English comprehension, so preparing writing center consultants for every scenario is impossible (Caswell, McKinney, & Jackson, 2014). Instead, the writing center should be a learning center where both faculty and students can work toward revision and collaboration to improve writing skills of all kinds (Grimm, 2009). Faculty members and administration at the community college and university level should encourage this perspective to strengthen students' writing skills, to help students interact with their texts in a more collaborative manner, and to improve students' education (Martinez, Kock, & Cass, 2011). Despite the challenges, instructors and writing center consultants in the United States still spend time focused on basic writing skills.

Writing-skill proficiency levels are low in U.S. high schoolers. Per Sacher (2016), on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2011 writing test, 73% of

12th grade students performed at average or below-average level, which indicated that students were unprepared for post-high-school writing requirements. At the college level, writing can take many different forms. Students need to understand a wide variety of technical terms and foreign concepts and must complete various writing assignments, which are ultimately used to gauge their comprehension of content (Achterman, 2014). In the United States, students go on to compete in the job market for positions and money; research has found that students are ill equipped for this role (Sacher, 2016). Sacher indicated that employees may be hired and promoted based on their writing skills and that writing is an important aspect of two-thirds of employees' jobs. Students who do not meet writing standards upon graduation from college negatively impact U.S. businesses both locally and at a global level (Sacher, 2016). Poor writing skills are affecting the economy in the United States.

Many students dislike writing. Brickey (2013) suggested that students who dislike writing generally struggle more than they should with writing, noting that a good portion are not able to perform basic writing skills. One contributing factor in writing-skill deficits may be decreased instructor interaction, in that researchers have found a connection between larger classroom sizes and diminished writing skills (Carter & Harper, 2013) at the college level. Other factors that may contribute to students' lack of enjoyment in writing include poor student engagement, course requirements, the difficulty level of assignments, and assignment requirements (Carter & Harper, 2013). Huskin (2016) suggested that by using writing activities in the classroom, instructors can help students develop critical thinking skills, can promote student learning and

engagement, and can help students achieve greater academic success. Writing skills continue to develop throughout a student's academic career, so one could conclude that increased expectations for reading and writing aptitude will lead to increased writing ability (Carter & Harper, 2013). The writing center may be the resource necessary to improve writing and provide a connection between instructor expectations, student perceptions, and decreased writing skills (Brickey, 2013).

The writing center that served as the site for this study began in 1993 as a small, meagerly staffed service; it has since grown to help students from all programs of study, according to student data from the study institution. Prior to this study, no one had conducted any study to examine student expectations or student perceptions about the effectiveness of the writing center since 2011. In 2011, faculty at the study site were surveyed about the writing center, but the questions asked were not related to the research questions of this doctoral project. There were no current data available regarding why students visit the writing center, why instructors require visits, or whether students find visits to be useful. At the study site, some instructors required visits to the writing center, but no current data were available about instructors' reasons for requiring such visits or what they hoped their students would gain from them. In addition, I was unable to find any insight into instructor perceptions on academic writing achievement or how instructors believed the writing center could maximize its effect on student writing. The purpose of this doctoral study, therefore, was to perform a case study designed to assist writing center's consultants and program lead in determining academic writing achievement success in preparing students for the rigors of college-level writing.

Definition of the Problem

Local Problem

At the study site, a learning opportunity center (LOC) houses several learning help centers, such as a foreign language lab, a math lab, and a science lab, as well as the writing center. Per the LOC director, the diminishing number of writing center visits has been a cause for alarm and addressing reasons for this decreased usage has been a priority for the college. The LOC director also indicated that because resources at the college level are low, providing purposeful services to students who intend to use them is an absolute necessity. The rhetoric, languages, and philosophy chair also had some concerns. The chair said that both professors and students hold misconceptions about the writing center, such as the belief that it is a “fix it” center where consultants fix problems for students. However, according to the chair, some faculty in other departments at the college deem the writing center to be indispensable to the college. Because minimal data from or about the writing center has been collected, the writing program administration was in support of the writing center and this doctoral project.

As shown in Table 1, the writing center had a significant decrease in student visits from the Fall 2015 to Spring 2016 semesters. In Fall 2015, 5,789 students attended, but only 268 visited the writing center. In the spring 2016 semester according to student data from the study institution, of the 6,278 total students, only 154 visited the writing center.

Table 1

Student Visits to Writing Center

Academic semester	Enrolled students	Writing center visitors
Fall 2013	5,851	8*
Spring 2014	6,295	242
Fall 2014	5,878	221
Spring 2015	6,009	238
Fall 2015	5,789	268
Spring 2016	6,278	154
Fall 2016	2,107	464
Spring 2017	6,458	553

Note. The study site provided enrollment data. Data on numbers of writing center visitors were provided by the writing program director and the writing center director.

* The reason for the low number has not been determined. Prior to this case study, data had not been collected at the writing center.

While college enrollment significantly increased, writing center visits decreased.

To improve the writing center and to decrease the gap in usage per enrollment, the college should establish parameters for the writing center's effectiveness. I addressed the problem of improving writing by collecting data about the writing center pertaining to areas such as students' expectations of the writing center, what instructors hope students get out of visits to the writing center, whether or not students return to the writing center voluntarily, how or whether instructors perceive that the writing center effectively improves students' writing skills, and how the instructors believe that the writing center can be organized to maximize its effect on student writing.

Gap in Practice

In this study, I addressed the local problem of lack of instructor and student feedback about the writing center. Addressing this problem and researching the needs of

struggling writers may help the writing center become more competent in helping students write more effectively. Prior to this doctoral project, no one had assessed the writing center for the perceived effectiveness of writing consultants or whether students found the writing center effective, and no one had ever collected such data from the writing center. A gap in practice existed because most college freshman come to college believing that their writing skills are fully formed (Berrett, 2014). In general, students' writing skills have been poor since at least the 1970s, and evidence suggests that they are getting worse (Carter & Harper, 2013). For college students, there is a lot of room to improve writing skills.

Students learn to write by actively continuing to write, but a gap exists between students' performance and what they know (Brickey, 2013). In the classroom, academic writing is what determines whether a student passes a class, so writing is important to all courses and disciplines (Arbee & Samuel, 2015). This is not to say that some students are not writing proficiently, but this finding suggests that most students are not enjoying basic composition, nor are they performing well when writing is a substantial part of a course (Brickey, 2013). Martinez et al. (2011) stated that a strong sense of self-efficacy could contribute to a stronger writing performance in students, which could lead to higher levels of academic success. If students' writing difficulties continue, they can suffer negative long-term effects (McMaster, Xiaoqing, Parker, & Pinto, 2011).

The Larger Population

For decades, instructors and administrators in the United States recognized that writing skills should be improved. Since the 1970s, improving writing skill levels in the

classroom has been a concern of instructors in higher education classrooms across the United States (Carter & Harper, 2013; National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.; Perin, 2013). It is estimated that college freshmen write at least 25 hours per week; this time spent writing may lead them to believe that their academic writing skills are fully established (Berrett, 2014). In a 2014 study with a sample of 2,200 students, Berrett found that about 15% of freshmen at the University of California at Los Angeles anticipated that they might need tutoring in writing, and about half of the students surveyed rated their writing skills as being above average. However, the National Center for Education Statistics has shown that 37% of 12th-grade students in the United States are reading and writing at a fourth- or fifth-grade level, which means that many students are far behind grade level upon entrance into college (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).

Writing centers have undergone a transformation since their inception. In the early 20th century, higher education facilities had hints of what would become writing centers, but no one officially labeled them as such until the 1970s (Waller, 2002). The term then became more common in the 1980s. Boquet (1999) indicated that when looking through the archives at Fairfield University, she came across an article written about the university from 1982 entitled “Students Get Help at Writing Center,” demonstrating that some universities and colleges have a long history of providing writing help through centers. The university administrators who initiated the earliest writing centers hoped to produce better writers and to help students work on the process of writing rather than focusing specifically on individual writers (Waller, 2002).

Writing centers are used for various types of writing. In general, writing centers are open to all categories of students with all types of writing levels, and students can work on any piece of writing, including assignments, essays, resumes, or cover letters (Boquet, 1999). The most important aspect of a writing center is that students work with *consultants* or *tutors* (the terms are interchangeable throughout this doctoral project); writing centers are sometimes misconstrued as places where consultants merely fix problems and send the writer on, but the goal of a writing center is to improve writing skills through collaboration (Bibb, 2012; Boquet, 1999). Unfortunately, throughout history, writing centers, which often stem from English departments, have been insufficiently staffed and minimally funded (Waller, 2002). To be effective, 21st century writing center staff must learn to embrace new perspectives and learn to engage with students on different levels than those typically used in the classroom (Blazer, 2015).

Rationale

Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level

At the study site, since its inception in 1993, no one has collected data on the students who visit the writing center or on the teachers who require visits from students. Per the writing program director, instructors frequently require visits from students when they request help during a consultation, but no current data are available about these teachers or why they require such visits. The study site is a traditional 2-year community college where students can receive associate's degrees and various professional certifications, and thus, the school offers basic courses in psychology, math, science, economics, geology, history, and humanities. Without the necessary data, however, there

has been no way to determine how many instructors from other disciplines send students to the writing center, and no data exist as to how many students from courses other than English and developmental English come to the writing center voluntarily.

The writing center administration has never asked teachers about their expectations for the center or sought feedback from other disciplines at the college. The writing program director remarked that instructors sometimes require students to visit the writing center. Data have never been collected on why instructors require this, and the director is unsure why instructors require this but provide little follow-up on writing skills. Most importantly, if instructors from disciplines other than English and College Composition and Reading (CCR) are comfortable with the resources available to students and if instructors can feel competent about grading writing assignments, they can effectively begin to help their students work toward being proficient writers (Bifuh-Ambe, 2013), which will improve their academic success.

The college system consists of online and ground-based programs located in several counties. In this doctoral project, I focused primarily on one specific campus. In the 2014–2015 academic year, as indicated in Table 2, the study site had 8,061 students in attendance. The median age of students was 21 years, with approximately even numbers of female and male students. Most students identified as White ethnicity, and the remaining students identified as American Indian, Asian, Black, Hispanic, Pacific, International, unknown, or multiethnic.

Table 2

Student Demographics

Demographics	Count	Percentage
Unduplicated headcount	8,061	28.9%
Sex		
Female	4,002	49.6%
Male	4,051	50.3%
Ethnicity		
White	6,287	78.0%
Hispanic	751	9.3%
Multiethnic	339	4.2%
Unknown	286	3.5%
Asian	135	1.7%
Black	115	1.4%
International	94	1.2%
Amer Indian	43	0.5%
Pacific	11	0.1%
Median age of students	21 (< 17 to > 40)	

Note. Data in Table 2 are from the 2014-2015 study institution academic year.

Of the 8,061 students who attended in the 2014–2015 academic year, 459 students visited the writing center at the study site, per the writing program director. The writing program director indicated that students who visited the writing center took courses from various disciplines, but many students came from English courses, also referred to as College Composition and Reading (CCR) or *developmental English*.

Acknowledging the problem. According to the writing program director, the writing center at the study site does have problems. No current data are available on how the instructors believe that the writing center affects student writing or why instructors require visits to the writing center, but the writing program director recognizes that there are areas to work on, such as improving student retention and seeking feedback from instructors about the writing center, per the writing program director. No one has

solicited feedback from instructors on how to improve the writing center, nor has anyone collected data to determine whether students return to the writing center voluntarily. No one has conducted current student surveys to determine what students expect from the writing center or to learn whether students receive the help they need. Additionally, the writing center has not collected demographic data on the population of students who frequently visit, but the system that students sign into does collect data on whether they are in-state residents, which learning center they are visiting, and in what course they are enrolled. The local problem, in part, was that even while college attendance had increased over the years, writing center visits continued to decrease, and no current data had been collected about why this pattern or decline was occurring.

Evidence of the Problem from the Professional Literature

It is well known that college-level writing includes writing for almost all the courses students take during their academic careers. College freshmen have estimated that they spend at least 25 hours per week writing (Berrett, 2014). Yet, surprisingly, most college freshmen also believe that they entered college with fully developed writing skills (Berrett, 2014). Carter and Harper (2013) traced a decline in writing skills to at least 1970 and noted that the decline is getting worse. To make writing more complicated, all writing processes are not linear and can vary over time or can change depending on the assignment (Berrett, 2014).

Researchers have found writing issues among students as early as elementary school. Parents and students tend to blame standardized testing, but students have claimed that their teachers are using writing in high school as preparation for

standardized testing (Berrett, 2014). Bifuh-Ambe (2013) stated that some of the issues with writing stem from instructors' beliefs, arguing that instructors do not realize how much their beliefs can affect their students' writing development. Additionally, the Internet is an integral resource for all levels of education—even the elementary level—but the Internet as a teaching tool has come with its own difficulties (Carter & Harper, 2013). The Internet is plagued with inconsistencies, opinion-based research, bias, and incorrect information, none of which support strong writing skills (Carter & Harper, 2013). Regardless, students at the elementary level require strong writing skills to be successful in future academic endeavors (Sharp, 2015).

Because writing issues occur as early as elementary school, the fact that deficits occur at the high school level is not surprising. Carter and Harper (2013) stated that studies have been done that indicated that writing abilities are declining—a trend that continues today. Several factors play into this decline, such as budget cuts in education, increasing average class sizes, essay-style tests, ever-increasing stress on national testing standards, and grade inflation (Carter & Harper, 2013). These challenges that present at the high school level demonstrate a need for higher levels of literacy, and these higher literacy levels should continue into college education and future workplaces (Miller & McCardle, 2010). If writing concerns are not addressed at the high school level, students entering college will not be successful because composition at the college level has a strong base in writing evaluations and assignments (Duncheon & Tierney, 2014). However, upon entering college, many advanced high school graduates feel that the

writing required at the college level may be overwhelming (McDaniel, 2014). Because of this, writing skills may not be a priority for students.

Because of the increased skill level required, many students are not prepared for college. College-level writing requires students to understand vast technical and rhetorical approaches, as well as deep critical thinking skills and awareness for writing assignments (Achterman, 2014). However, while high school graduates believe that they are ready for college, graduates do not realize that they will be doing a significant amount of writing (Berrett, 2014). Most college-level courses across multiple disciplines rely on composition and writing skills, and proficient writing skills are critical to a successful academic career (Duncheon & Tierney, 2014). College freshmen have indicated that they write about 25 hours each week for various purposes (Berrett, 2014), but most college students do not enjoy basic composition (Brickey, 2013). Numerous students struggle with writing and do not demonstrate a competent level of writing, even when they pass a course (Brickey, 2013). Approximately 44.5% of college students at the community college level require a minimum of one developmental course in any discipline; more specifically, about 20% of college students are required to take developmental English or reading courses (Perin, 2013). which indicated that a significant problem exists with reading and writing comprehension.

The prominence of technology has also contributed to a shift in writing skills. While one might expect technology to make writing easier, it is doing so at the expense of critical thinking skills (Carter & Harper, 2013). At the college level, students must be able to use critical thinking skills in their courses, so teachers need to expertly craft their

writing assignments (Piergiovanni, 2014). Critical thinking is a scaffolded process, which means that it occurs in stages and occurs best when teachers actively involve their students in courses (Piergiovanni, 2014), but courses and students' involvement therein do not always need to include technology. The results of Carter and Harper's 2010 survey indicated that students spent 42 hours less per week on academia than they did in previous generations, and quite a bit of that extra time was relegated to entertaining technology rather than to academic technology (Carter & Harper, 2013). Furthermore, students' overreliance on technology to help with academic work is leading to many of them needing to take remedial reading or writing courses. However, as students' attention spans are weakening, and brains are evolving so that they may not be able to listen to lectures for extended periods of time, high percentages of them end up dropping out of college (McDaniel, 2014).

Prominent connections exist between reading and writing. Carter and Harper's (2013) research showed that reading expands vocabulary and builds in readers an understanding of proper rhetorical strategies and structures. Reading provides inspiration to students and gives them informal lessons about syntax, diction, organization, and voice (Taiping, 2015). Even though their operations are dissimilar, both reading and writing share traits such as the need for students to plan and compose, which makes them more similar in nature (Perin, 2013). Reading skills are just as important to academic success as writing skills are (Perin, 2013). A study of 2,322 college students showed that standards for reading and writing had decreased, and that this reduction had potentially led to a decrease in college students' writing skill (Carter & Harper, 2013). Increasing

expectations for reading in college-level courses is a possible solution to significantly affect writing skills, but, unfortunately, because of the number of college students and the overall need for the research, the effects of reading on writing represent an underresearched area (Perin, 2013).

One possible reason that students do not like to write is writing anxiety. Quite often, students are resistant to writing across all disciplines. This resistance may be the result of unfamiliarity, anxiety, or decreased academic performance (Martinez et al., 2011). Numerous criteria potentially add to student anxiety, including higher instructor requirements for writing and unwillingness to take writing courses, which may contribute to poor performance in English courses, leading to trouble in future occupations (Martinez et al., 2011). As a part of anxiety, getting started is an obstacle for many struggling students as well (Lowe & Bormann, 2012). If a student has issues with areas such as handwriting, spelling, or grammar, the blank page does nothing to motivate the student to progress further (Lowe & Bormann, 2012). As anxiety increases, a physiological reaction from stress occurs that reduces self-confidence, thereby negatively affecting the student's writing skills and ability (Martinez et al., 2011).

One way to boost students' confidence is to direct them toward tutoring, which can help them write, revise, and improve their overall academic skills (Martinez et al., 2011). Tutors can achieve the means to help these students by providing a comfortable, caring environment (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2013). To this end, writing center consultants must allow individual students to guide sessions to ease their fears and concerns (Raymond & Quinn, 2012). When administrations implement positive,

engaging resources such as writing centers, they contribute to resolving problems such as writing anxiety (Ryan & Kane, 2015).

A writing center is one resource available to students that helps with writing. The use of writing centers is a good method to handle students' writing needs (Brickey, 2013) because participation in a writing center's programs does not result in a grade, so consultants can more easily encourage the writing process without repercussions. Writing centers can also encourage a collaborative environment where students can go to a safe space to seek help with their writing; the foundation of a writing center is respect and communication (Brickey, 2013). Writing centers by nature involve skilled writers reading students' pieces of writing, critiquing them quickly and thoroughly, and then engaging students in constructive criticism (Grimm, 2009), which is not an easy process.

Motivation is essential for academic writing success (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2013). Despite the help that writing centers provide, they nonetheless have limited resources, and budget-minded decision makers often call their academic and/or financial benefits into question (Ryan & Kane, 2015). Throughout recent decades, universities and colleges have been subject to both budget cuts and increasing standards—factors that have led to writing centers being scrutinized (Carter & Harper, 2013). Because writing is a key to success in academia, effective writing centers are necessary (Arbee & Samuel, 2015), in that they increase student writing achievement, which supports overall academic success.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study was to gather the empirical data required to make informed decisions about a direction for the college in order to support students in

successful writing achievements and to prepare students for overall academic success. Arbee and Samuel (2015) stated that academic writing tasks constitute the determining factor in whether students pass or fail a course; therefore, writing is the foundation of all higher education courses. The purpose of this study was to examine students' expectations of the writing center and how they perceived the help they received, to examine why some instructors required visits to the writing center and what they hoped students would get out of their visits, and to seek feedback from instructors on how the writing center can maximize its effect on student writing. In addition, this doctoral project examined the nature and characteristics of student referral patterns in relation to faculty and student demographics.

Definitions

Academic success entails maintaining satisfactory progress toward a degree and achieving academic goals (University of California [UC] Santa Cruz, 2015). For some universities or colleges, this includes meeting the expectations set forth to earn a good GPA (UC Santa Cruz, 2015).

The *theory of andragogy* is defined as a set of core learning principles that focus on adult learners and can be applied to adult learning situations (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005; Morman, 2016). The andragogical model identifies six assumptions related to how adults learn: (a) whether students need to know the material, (b) how learners perceive their own beliefs, (c) how learners' experiences play a role, (d) willingness to learn, (e) how students acclimate to learning, and (f) enthusiasm and motivation to learn (Harwell, 2016; Knowles et al., 2005).

Writing centers are places where students come to workshop their writing and further understand how they write as individuals, and here, tutors encourage students to become genuine members of an academic community (Brickey, 2013). Each writing center is unique and possesses distinctive qualities dependent upon each attending and participating individual, the writing presented, the institution, and possibly even larger national issues (Denny, Messina, & Reich, 2015).

Writing center consultants are people who work with students to answer questions or assist with problems on writing assignments (Hefley, 2015). Writing center consultants guide students in the writing process in the hope of enabling students to write more effectively in the future (Hefley, 2015).

Significance

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study was that it addressed the local problem of how to make the writing center more effective for both students and professors. No one had collected data from the writing center prior to this doctoral project. Without proper data and a thorough examination of the perceived efficacy of the writing center, the writing center administration would have no way to determine how the writing center is meeting the needs of students or how it could improve. My goal for this doctoral project was to understand how the college can use its writing center as a resource to improve students' writing abilities and thereby act as a bridge toward academic success in all college courses. My purpose in conducting this study was to better understand the writing center so that instructors, program directors, and administrators could develop further

involvement and assistance for students, which would then improve students' academic writing achievement.

Usefulness to the Local Educational Setting

The goal of a writing consultant is to lead students toward a new level of understanding and awareness about their writing skills, resulting in independence and improved writing skills (Raymond & Quinn, 2012). However, as Raymond and Quinn pointed out, a mismatch often exists between consultants and students, and consultants often fail to allow students to guide writing center sessions. This doctoral project adds to the literature because writing remains key to academic success, in that students need strong writing skills in order to be successful in their future careers (Arbee & Samuel, 2015). Writing centers should help students navigate the writing process through skilled modeling. In doing so, they can help students achieve better grades—both presently and in the future (Brickey, 2013). For a writing center to be effective, the focus for consultations needs to remain on the student. Ultimately, a writing center is not about just producing writing; it is about producing students who are prepared to receive constructive criticism, acknowledge their writing flaws, improve their writing skills (Arbee & Samuel, 2015), prepare for graduation, and eventually enter the working world as well-rounded individuals.

Guiding Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to gain insight concerning the writing center that would lead administrators to form specific goals for the writing center. By evaluating the writing center's services and organization, it should be possible to improve students'

academic writing achievement. Specifically, in this doctoral project, I looked both at student data and instructor feedback about the writing center. College courses rely heavily on writing as a means of student evaluation, which pushes students toward the end goal of graduation, but many students do not possess adequate writing skills prior to college enrollment (Duncheon & Tierney, 2014).

The questions I posed in relation to this doctoral project's research problem were designed to address the writing center's processes as a means of increasing student academic achievement. The broad research questions pertained to three topics of concern: student expectations of the writing center, how instructors use the writing center, and potential development for the writing center.

The specific concern for the college was how to improve the writing skills of students and better support students who struggle with writing. This overall concern led to the development of four research questions to collect information that might assist the writing center in meeting its goals:

- RQ1: What are students' initial expectations of the writing center, and how do students perceive whether they received the help they needed?
- RQ2: Why do instructors require visits to the writing center, and what do they hope students will get out of the visits?
- RQ3: What suggestions do instructors and students have for improving writing support services for students?
- RQ4: What are the nature and characteristics of student referral patterns to the writing center?

Review of the Literature

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was Knowles's (as cited in Knowles et al., 2005) theory of andragogy. With this theory, Knowles et al. (2005) identified six assumptions about how adults learn:

- Before implementing the learning process, adults need to know why they should learn something.
- Adults take responsibility for their own decisions and, subsequently, for their own lives and are capable of self-direction.
- Adults have a vast array of educational and life experiences that should not be ignored in education.
- Adults are ready to learn the things needed to cope efficiently with their actual real-life situations.
- An adult's learning will be subject centered, life centered, or problem centered.
- The adult's motivation for learning stems from external motivators such as job satisfaction, quality of life, or self-esteem.

The term *andragogy* is defined as referring to core adult learning principles that apply to all types of adult learning situations (Knowles et al., 2005). Although adult learners have been studied since the 1920s, there is still no single answer or theory that fully captures the process of learning for adults (Merriam, 2001). In addition, the term *andragogy* is used throughout parts of Europe in adult education today to refer to a model

of the relationship between adult students and instructors (Merriam, 2001), so it would be natural to implement this concept at the community college level. The focus of andragogy is understanding the position of an adult learner during the process of education (Merriam, 2001). Knowles's theory of andragogy provides insight into why writing centers are necessary for adult learners at the community college level who may not have developed scholarly writing skills prior to entry into college.

Writing is not a superficial process, but students are embedding proper practices, discussing expectations and requirements for assignments, and working on their writing skills, all of which will help in negotiating future academic assignments (Grimm, 2009; Knowles et al., 2005). Two of the above assumptions from Knowles et al. (2005) regarding adult learning emphasize adult learners' need to understand why learning is important as well as adult learners' readiness to learn. Adult learners may not have prior scholarly writing experience upon entry into community college, so they may not have the necessary skills to be successful in their classes. Learning to accept constructive criticism and to navigate expectations from instructors will help students learn the practices of their future workplaces so that they can perform more quickly, manage time better, and attempt to incorporate their own identities into a workplace and a career (Grimm, 2009). Writing center consultants and directors do not guarantee better grades, but they should emphasize the writing process (Ryan & Kane, 2015) and how adult learners can adapt this to their learning styles (Knowles et al., 2005). After all, if consultants can introduce students to language and writing by means of conversation and opportunities to attempt new skills in a safe environment, students' writing and academic

performance may improve (Knowles et al., 2005; Welsh, 2015). One of Knowles's assumptions that pertains to the writing center is the adult's orientation to learning and motivation to learn (Knowles et al., 2005). Adult learners are different from younger learners in that they require a greater level of independence, and the andragogical model is based on the idea that adult learners need to understand why they are learning something before they commit it to memory (Morman, 2016). Merriam (2001) stated that education is fundamentally the same wherever it occurs because it deals with identifying the needs of the learner, what the educational goals are, and instruction and techniques that occur in the classroom. In college, most adult learners acquire new skills and knowledge that they have not encountered before, some of which will make a difference in real-life situations (Knowles et al., 2005). Simply put, adults are more likely to learn new skills or knowledge when they are motivated to do so. Adult students at the community college level will likely learn the intricacies of scholarly writing when they are required to produce scholarly writing or to reach a goal such as passing a class or earning a degree.

An additional andragogic assumption from Knowles et al. (2005) relates to the adult learner's self-concept. This assumption indicates that adult learners perceive that they are responsible for their own decisions (Harwell, 2016; Knowles et al., 2005). Consequently, as adults learn to accept responsibility for scholarly writing at the college level, they discover ways to develop their skills. On the other hand, if adult learners believe that they are incapable of learning the scholarly writing skills necessary to be

successful in college, they may not be inclined to seek further guidance from campus resources such as a writing center.

With consideration of Knowles's theory of andragogy, adults are most likely to benefit from easily accessible resources, such as an on-campus writing center, to assist them with self-directed development of scholarly writing skills (Knowles et al., 2005). This would logically apply to the college writing center, in that the student population consists entirely of adult learners and the resource has already been established on campus.

In coordination with the previous assumptions about how adults learn, Knowles et al. (2005) proposed that the experiences of adult learners play a vital role in their acquisition of new skills and knowledge. Presumably, an adult learner enters community college with considerable writing experiences and habits that are labeled as either scholarly or nonscholarly. As Knowles et al. indicated, adult learners will generally accept responsibility for what they need to know and can learn based on a task- or problem-focused approach. In addition, the motivation behind adult learning is based on the adult's assumed self-perceptions or ability to reach a goal or accomplishment (Harwell, 2016; Knowles et al., 2005; Morman, 2016). By this theory, it can be surmised that adults who are motivated and who have a problem or task that they need to accomplish will seek outside resources, such as a college writing center, to solicit help.

To be effective, writing center consultants must think about how they can get students the help they need with their writing. However, to do that, tutors may need to address issues beyond writing. As Grimm (2009) stated, writing centers are situated to

address problems that arise with students, but they can prove that they are able and willing to adopt new ideas and practices. One important aspect of consulting in a writing center is tutors' ability to read and engage students in their own writing whenever they discuss assignment sheets, instructors' comments, and what is happening in class. (Grimm, 2009), as well as tutors' ability to balance students' ideals and emotions. Most importantly, writing center consultants should not think about students as being inadequate, lazy, or underdeveloped writers; rather, they should provide students with information on rhetorical systems and how to make informed decisions to improve their writing (Grimm, 2009). The concept of andragogy allows students to take a problem or task to the writing center, and it helps writing center consultants assist adults in understanding the relevance of the subject matter before beginning the learning process (Harwell, 2016; Knowles et al., 2005).

School administrations, therefore, need to represent their writing centers as learning facilities for all students, and faculty should be constantly interested in developing new pedagogies and strategies to meet the needs of 21st-century students (Grimm, 2009; Knowles et al., 2005). The Knowles et al. conceptual framework connects to the research questions presented because writing center consultants should employ a framework ideal for tolerance when approaching adult learners. If tutors give students the proper tools to be successful with writing, going to the writing center will be a positive, effective experience for students. Outcomes from this study may assist the writing center and its administration in working toward implementing a conceptual framework and thus may promote students' writing success through the following means: (a) by examining

students' initial expectations of the writing center and how they perceived the instruction and approach they received as helpful or not, (b) by asking why instructors required visits to the writing center and looking at what they expected students to get out of these visits, (c) by inquiring about whether or not students returned to the writing center voluntarily after being required to visit, (d) by exploring the effect of the writing center on students' academic writing achievement, and (e) by investigating how instructors believe that the writing center can be organized to maximize its effect on student writing. Thus, students should receive the tools needed to be successful throughout their remaining academic careers and into their professional careers.

Research

In conducting research for this doctoral project and literature review, I used multiple databases and resources. Primarily, I used academic databases such as Education Research Complete and ERIC, but I also consulted various credible Internet webpages such as an online writing center journal. These websites were deemed credible because of their dates of publication, the use of credentialed authors in the articles, and the list of references used in each article. I used references from key publications and worked backwards in my research process. When researching, I used key terms such as *college writing issues*, *correlation between reading and writing*, *elementary writing issues*, *high school writing issues*, *history of writing centers*, *andragogy theory*, *technology and writing*, *writing anxiety*, *writing center*, *writing concerns*, *writing center history*, and *writing pedagogy*.

My research yielded results from several key authors, and though I attempted to conduct an author-name search to identify other publications that these authors might have written, this effort was unsuccessful, in that there was only one publication by some authors. Whenever possible, I used primary sources and peer-reviewed articles in my research. When selecting studies for review, I began by narrowing down the pool by using key terms and phrases that would support my research. To determine if a source was credible and reliable, I narrowed down my search criteria to within four previous years (2012–2016) to allow for the most current research possible. In addition, I made sure that all authors were affiliated with reliable universities or had similar associations.

Whenever possible, I used an index search engine such as Web of Knowledge, primarily in EBSCOhost but also in Sage, to determine whether other scholars had cited the research and to confirm that all research articles were relevant for my review. For most of my resources that came from academic databases, I could verify that others had cited sources in their articles, but this was not the case for any of the other Internet sources. However, the information for all noncited sources came from the college website, so although no one else had cited these sources, they were primary sources, so the data were accurate and reliable.

Writing Center History

Writing centers have a deeply rooted connection to American education. One of the earliest versions of a writing center existed in the early 20th century, but it was not known by that name (Waller, 2002). The term *writing center* was not officially coined until the 1970s in the United States (Waller, 2002). Quite often, students, not professors,

staffed the early writing centers, which were considered student-focused literary societies where students could work toward a higher level of intellectualism by engaging in literary exercises and debate (Waller, 2002). Modern writing centers take a different approach. Modern writing centers developed into workshops that occurred outside the classroom where instructors could focus more on their discipline and leave writing skills out of the main classroom (Boquet, 1999). Writing centers, in general, have improved tremendously over the decades.

Quite often, students expect too much from writing centers. The most common theme for both historical and contemporary writing centers has been that the focus is on the process of writing—not on creating perfect writers (Waller, 2002). Unfortunately, writing centers are often regarded as “fix-it” centers where grammar is corrected (Bibb, 2012). In truth, writing centers involve much more than just grammar (Bibb, 2012). Research has shown that writing centers provide students with opportunities outside the normal classroom to remediate their work and offer support for all types of writing assignments and all varieties of writers (Waller, 2002).

Currently, college instructors argued that student writing skills had diminished over the last 15-20 years (Bibb, 2012). Writing centers, in general, were birthed out of necessity for some colleges and universities because a disconnect between student writing and the instructor feedback had developed (Boquet, 1999). Boquet stated that if some method of instruction were equal and effective for all types of students—if there were a fail-proof method of instruction—universities and colleges would deem resources such as writing centers unnecessary. Unfortunately, because all students are unique, such

a method does not exist, which makes writing centers necessary for colleges and universities.

Writing can be a collaborative effort, however. Given adequate opportunities, most students' writing skills will grow exponentially, instructors will feel confident in their writing pedagogy, instructors' ability to teach writing skills to their students will increase, and academic success will surge (Bifuh-Ambe, 2013). In the pages that follow, I present several themes that I identified in the research/professional literature: elementary school writing deficiencies, high school writing deficiencies, college writing deficiencies, how technology affects writing skills, the correlation between reading skills and writing skills, writing anxiety, and how writing centers are improving student academic success.

Elementary School Writing Deficiencies

There is a vast history of writing deficiencies, and research has connected deficiencies in high schoolers back to elementary school. Miller and McCardle (2010) affirmed that students in kindergarten may already exhibit gaps in their preliteracy and early literacy skills due to a lack of speech development and reading skills connected to writing. Students at elementary age begin to acquire the necessary foundational writing skills that later develop into more sophisticated writing performance in high school and college (Sharp, 2015). The first few years in education are designed to teach the basics of the English language and provide a solid foundation for elementary students to develop into confident writers (Casey, Miller, Stockton, & Justice, 2016). Furthermore, Casey et al. suggested that how students approach writing, what they write about, and how they convey meaning are initially more important than focusing on mechanics of writing such

as spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Providing a solid foundation and encouraging elementary students to clearly articulate parts of the English language such as nouns, verbs, and adjectives allows students to build their skills and develop into confident writers (Casey et al., 2016), but these skills should not be all that students learn.

Elementary students are not showing the necessary writing skills to be successful. Very few elementary students can demonstrate comprehensive knowledge of various physical traits of texts, such as the direction in which readers read text, what happens at the end of a line of text, and how stories end (Miller & McCardle, 2010). In addition, most elementary students cannot yet segment beginning and ending sounds in words (Miller & McCardle, 2010). Sharp (2015) suggested that a great disparity exists between students' writing performance at the elementary level and their proficiency at the secondary level, yet data have suggested that writing proficiency at the secondary level is continuing to decline. Under George W. Bush, legislature such as the former No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act began a test-based accountability style of learning in the United States (Wilcox, Jeffery, & Gardner-Bixler, 2016). Following this, under the Obama administration, the national reform effort called Race to the Top was implemented. Both were test-based systems that encouraged students to accept responsibility for their education and were designed to bridge gaps in education among native-English-speaking elementary students, various ethnic groups, and even students of lower economic status (Wilcox et al., 2016). Patterns in the gaps as previously mentioned have been associated with learning at the elementary level, but furthermore, there is a direct connection

between success in high school and when preparing for college (Wilcox et al., 2016). Improving writing skills at an early age could benefit students in later education.

There is not one clear party to blame for these deficits. But authorities on the subject blame several different entities including the K-12 school system, parents, peer pressure, the pressure of limited time, or even environmental factors (Simkin, Crews, & Grove, 2012). Miller and McCardle (2010) suggest that schools in the United States face an ongoing need to improve writing skills in young children and youth through early interventions, but it is imperative to recognize the needs of struggling learners as early as elementary school and continuing through to the college level. Despite the information that students are lacking proficient writing skills, research has also shown that elementary instructors spend a significant portion of the day working on English Language Arts (Sharp, 2015). Elementary students require strong writing skills to sufficiently prepare them for future academic success (Sharp, 2015). Additionally, integrating effective writing practices as early as the elementary level will prepare students for writing itself in the future (Sharp, 2015). Techniques such as scaffolding, providing thorough instruction, implementing multiple types of writing, focusing on the writing process, and including more time to write in the classroom can further develop the quality of elementary students' writing (Wilcox et al., 2016; Sharp, 2015). Focusing on all aspects of writing at an early age can help students be prepared for high school and college.

High School Writing Deficiencies

As previously discussed, students' writing deficiencies begin before they enter college. Some post-high school students claim that writing during high school was often

used in preparation for testing, but their teachers never used the time to help the students develop ideas or in workshops for draft revision (Berrett, 2014). Even though students wrote quite a bit and for various purposes, in Berrett's study, 80% of faculty members explained that they believed most, some, or all their students were prepared for writing in college. Yet Duncheon and Tierney (2014) found that most graduating high school students did not possess the necessary writing skills to be successful in college. McDaniel (2014) found that even students who graduated at the top of their high school class felt very overwhelmed by the writing requirements for college coursework and a high percentage eventually dropped out of college. Regardless, scholars have identified a lack of writing preparation for high school students (Duncheon & Tierney, 2014). Students are not prepared for the writing requirements of high school.

There are several alarming statistics that support the idea that students are not prepared for college writing. Per the National Assessment of Educational Progress, 33% of eighth graders and 24% of 12th-graders met or exceeded the appropriate writing ability for their grade level (Surat, Rahman, Mahamod, & Kummin, 2014). In addition to this statistic, most students cannot meet basic writing requirements of coursework such as writing essays, developing paragraphs, or working through various topics (Surat et al., 2014). In 2012, the ACT Testing Service reported that 60% of high school graduates were at risk for failing academically in college courses, leading to less success in their future careers (McDaniel, 2014). Essay writing skills are diminishing with little to no improvement and critical thinking skills are weakening (Surat et al., 2014) which does not prepare students for college courses and future jobs and careers. In a survey of 17,000

adult American readers, the National Endowment for the Arts found that from 1982-2002, less than half of the surveyed adults read literature, the number of young adults ages 18-34 who read has dropped 18% (previously 48-57%), and individuals with some college education has declined 20% (previously 53-73%) (Simkin et al., 2012). Simkin et al. noted that diminished writing skills have been a weakness in graduating seniors for almost 50 years and there is evidence of this in college level students. Early preparation may be an important key to success.

Some say that standardized testing may be to blame. Berrett (2014) found that college professors have blamed standardized testing during elementary and secondary years and college professors are feeling frustrated by the lack of writing skills exhibited in the classroom. Miller and McCardle (2010) indicated that writing scores for students transitioning into high school reflect the fact that writers are performing below basic levels. In their study, Miller and McCardle found that 67% of eighth grade students performed at or below basic writing levels, and in twelfth grade, 76% of students were at or below basic writing levels. A study of 260 middle school and high school classrooms sought to understand how writing plays a role in the classroom (Gillespie, Graham, Kiuahara, & Hebert, 2014). The study found that 7.7% of classroom time was dedicated to student-driven writing, differentiating between tasks where students fill in the blanks versus actual writing done by the student (Gillespie et al., 2014). In addition, two national surveys indicated that middle and high school instructors reported that their students performed writing infrequently in class and there was little composition occurring (Gillespie et al., 2014). To further complicate the issue, Gillespie et al. reported that high

school teachers of various disciplines admit that their abilities to teach writing is insufficient and school districts need to recognize that providing writing training to instructors of all disciplines is uneven and inadequate. It would be a challenge to teach writing if the instructors are not comfortable with their own writing abilities.

Furthermore, while it might seem normal for college instructors to assume that students learned basic writing skills in high school (Sallee, Hallett, & Tierney, 2011), undergraduate instructors are not finding this to be true. Upon entry into college, some high school graduates are underprepared for the level of literacy required at the college level. (McDaniel, 2014). Per McDaniel, it is imperative to prepare college-bound students at the middle school and high school level to focus on their substantial reading and writing assignments, to help them learn to work both individually and as a group, to help them experience new educational methods and tools, and to work towards developing ingenuity and originality beyond the Internet or the classroom. But Bifuh-Ambe (2013) demonstrated that a combination of teachers' sharing of positive perceptions about students' abilities and the students' own self-confidence about their writing abilities will impact their instruction and the students' writing development. Sallee, Hallett, and Tierney found that students generally consider writing tasks to be final. That is, when completing an essay and meeting the required page limit, students consider it a complete paper.

Even though it is known that writing skills are critical for success, high school students do not possess the writing skills needed for college. To increase the level of student learning and success, learning to write is imperative to their educational

development (McMaster et al., 2011). Despite this fact, numerous students do not reach their full writing potential (McMaster et al., 2011). In 2011, McMaster et al. indicated that if students struggle with writing consistently, they face negative consequences such as decreased academic performance and limited employment opportunities, but schools also face negative outcomes in lower rates of college attendees. These catastrophic consequences progress with the students through all levels of education, but if teachers detect the struggles when writers are a young age, they can help prevent these effects (McMaster et al., 2011). At the college level, professors should encourage students to take risks, feed into motivations, and encourage failures (Berrett, 2014). By doing so, teachers will be better preparing students for the rigorous challenge of college coursework and for future success in their careers (McDaniel, 2014). Entry level college students have opportunities to improve their writing skills.

College-Level Writing Deficiencies

Not only do high school students face writing deficiencies, but the challenges continue through their college-level education. In college, students often feel overwhelmed with assignment requirements. Students entering college are not always prepared to perform the writing tasks required at the college level (Crank, 2012).

McDaniel asserted that some high schoolers have never written a long paper and they are overwhelmed with the idea of long research papers. Some high schoolers have expressed the belief that they will not have to write long papers in college, which is not true (McDaniel, 2014). A study in 2008 revealed that first-year college students wrote papers that were 2.5 times longer than students wrote in 1984 (McDaniel, 2014). Quite often,

students do not possess the critical thinking skills and reading or writing skills needed to be successful in college (McDaniel, 2014; Surat et al., 2014). Despite high school teachers' good intentions, students make it through to college without any preparation for college-level courses (McDaniel, 2014). There is still time to improve writing skills at the college level.

Critical thinking skills are also important. College is supposed to improve a student's critical thinking skills through course activities, writing, and class discussions (Piergiovanni, 2014). Merely exposing students to examples of critical thinking does not make students critical thinkers. To prepare college level students for the rigorous job market, American students need to possess stronger skills than currently (Sacher, 2016). Simkin et al. (2012) report that most employers seek new hires that possess good writing skills and they consider this an essential skill for all employees. Sacher (2016) reported that college students may be hired and/or promoted based on their writing skills; therefore, poor writing skills will negatively impact the American and global business market. A survey of 120 corporations performed by the National Commission on Writing found that a third of employees did not possess strong writing skills and employers were paying billions of dollars annually to train employees on writing (Simkin et al., 2012). This is a common pattern throughout the United States.

Preparing students for college level writing can be done before they graduate. Students need to actively practice this skill and to seek a variety of situations in which to apply critical thinking skills (Piergiovanni, 2014). Students should begin preparing for longer reading assignments and strenuous writing assignments, learning from diverse

teaching styles, practicing varied library methods and research, and working to exhibit subject mastery through individual creativity (McDaniel, 2014). Some of these skills can be learned prior to college.

If students are uncomfortable, writing may be a subject that students tend to shy away from. Brickey (2013) stated that college students do not always enjoy composition, they consistently struggle with writing, and they retain very little of the learned writing skills for the future. Even when passing a composition course, students retain little knowledge and rarely apply knowledge to future courses or writings (Brickey, 2013). In addition to that, graduate student writing was compared to the Scholastic Aptitude Test II Writing Test, Part B, where the study discovered that graduate students possess writing skills like a high school senior (Carter & Harper, 2013). ACT test scores point to the fact that students are simply not prepared for the writing requirements at the college level (Sacher, 2016). This has become an epidemic in the United States.

Unfortunately, the idea that writing skills are diminishing is not new to college educators. The National Center for Educational Statistics concluded that across the nation, our writing is not good; even the best student writers are mediocre (Carter & Harper, 2013). Furthermore, research has shown that student writing skills have been decreasing since at least 1970 and are currently getting worse (Carter & Harper, 2013). In fact, numerous students entering college are now needing remedial writing courses. Nationally, in the year 2000, 20% of students at four-year universities and 50% of students at 2-year colleges required remedial courses each year (Duncheon & Tierney,

2014; Perin, 2013). This shows there is a problem with writing skill levels in the United States.

College entrance requirement may be part of the problem. Per academic advisors, students are considered college-ready if they can enroll into a college-level English class for credit, but further research on student development and learning indicated that there are other factors affect cognitive thinking and learning (Duncheon & Tierney, 2014). Quite often, students enroll in courses that are writing-intensive, courses that require active reading and writing which improves their writing skills and to meet the colleges' or universities' student learning outcomes (Huskin, 2016). The struggle lies in reading comprehension, student reading abilities, and student writing skills, as well as in their individual abilities to perform well on college-level research assignments (Gruenbaum, 2012). The writing-intensive courses, however, have placed significant strain and demand on both students and faculty (Huskin, 2016). The irony is that, per Carter and Harper's (2013) findings, college students in the United States view themselves as academically above-average, and generally consider themselves to have high writing abilities.

A decline in academic standards could be the culprit, as per Carter and Harper (2013). Reading and writing standards have decreased significantly; students claim they read less than required and write less than 20 pages per course (Carter & Harper, 2013). This severe reduction has contributed to the reading and writing deficiencies (Carter & Harper, 2013). Furthermore, in 1961, college students averaged 24 hours per week studying, reading, and completing assignments, but in 2003, students only spent about 14 hours on the same activities (Carter & Harper, 2013). In addition, there is an overall lack

of writing education for instructors of all disciplines, which leads to uncertainty when instructing students (Gillespie et al., 2014; Sacher, 2016). Alarming, numerous high school English instructors report that they were taught how to navigate state standards rather than how to teach writing in their own college programs (Sacher, 2016). This could even stem from a lack of self-confidence in their own writing abilities (Sacher, 2016). Accumulatively, this is catastrophic for student learning, but more importantly, it affects their ability to succeed in college and in their future careers (McDaniel, 2014). Without this, college graduates go on to affect business in the United States.

College Professors and Student Writing Skills

Part of the concern with college-level writing skills is that instructors sometimes take a backseat when it comes to enforcing writing rules. Essential skills required in higher education is critical thinking and effective communication through writing, and through the process of writing, the student can reflect upon their writing which will encourage the student to examine multiple points of view (Varelas, Wolfe & Ialongo, 2015). There is a gap between what students learn in high school and in college; college instructors believe that students are given all the necessary tools to be successful at college-level writing, but college instructors only have a vague idea of what high school instructors are teaching (Crank, 2012). It has been implied that colleges do little to improve the writing skills of students and there are minimally significant improvements in writing skills between freshman and senior years (Simkin et al., 2012). Per Crank (2012), high school students follow specific rules in their classes, but college students quickly learn that there are no rules, or that they change regularly, and their education is

designed to be more theoretical. This can create difficulties with writing and critical thinking skills.

Some might argue that professors may hinder writing abilities. One concern at the college level is grade inflation which creates difficulties with grading poor writing because professors who use rubrics often appear stricter than other professors (Carter & Harper, 2013; Simkin et al., 2012). Considerable evidence proves that grade inflation has risen over time, especially in higher education. For example, the percentage of A's given from 1968 to 2002 increased from 22 to 47% which fact indicated that academic standards have decreased for college students (Carter & Harper, 2013). In addition, students are entering college with diminished writing levels and are underprepared in basic skills required to be successful academically (Crank, 2013; Simkin et al., 2012). But with assignments created for their varied abilities, student learning can be more effective (Varelas et al., 2015). There are solutions to help improve writing skills.

However, numerous strategies can improve college-level writing for all academic disciplines. Critical thinking skills are one of the essential skills required in college and in the job market; employers seek new hires that have exceptional critical thinking skills (Shao & Purpur, 2016). Shao and Purpur indicate that 93% of business leaders and employers want their future employees to possess and demonstrate critical thinking skills, excellent communication skills, and problem-solving skills above what they know from their degree-specific courses. To combat the lower critical thinking skills displayed by students, some colleges have developed specialized programs to address the needs of students who are struggling (Huskin, 2016). Even if a college professor is not a writing

instructor, their support of positive writing instruction is critical to the classroom and will result in a positive outcome (Huskin, 2016). It is possible for faculty to improve writing skills too.

Numerous strategies are available to improve student writing and to increase academic success. Huskin (2016) stated that instructors can encourage students to write, they can engage in active collaborative activities in class, and they can improve course design to focus on reading and writing skills. In a study conducted by Perin (2013), developmental education students who regularly practice and receive assistance with writing demonstrated increases in both self-efficacy and motivation in their education. Using workshops and providing quality student feedback, including marginal comments, end comments, and unique feedback for each student, will ultimately decrease the amount of time student spend commenting on student work, which will increase instructor and student productivity (Bastian, 2014). Regardless of the discipline, every college professor must be prepared to support writing activities in the classroom to promote student engagement, to improve student attitudes, and to make significant developments to student critical thinking skills, reading skills, and writing skills (Huskin, 2016). This will ensure student success.

Administration can be key to student success. Although constantly scrutinizing higher education for budget cuts and standardized testing procedures, administration should place a larger emphasis on reading and writing requirements in courses (Carter and Harper, 2013). The goal in college is to orient students to think about who they are as a person and to what communities they belong (Crank, 2012). But large class sizes may

help explain why college students are poor writers; faculty members may not have the time to focus on writing in classes so large which may lead to computer graded examinations and assignments (Simkin et al., 2012). Furthermore, Crank asserted that college instructors should begin to encourage students to not think like a student but think like a writer. But one interesting fact is that as the student's perceptions of the instructor became more constructive, writing anxiety levels diminished and competence improved (Martinez et al., 2011). Writing instructors should encourage risks and failures in the classroom (Berrett, 2014) rather than keeping writing skills safe.

Writing is not just about the outcome, however. Encouraging the writing process offers an improvement in instructional pedagogy and offers students the opportunity to reflect and change (Berrett, 2014). The process of learning is complex, and it is important for instructors of all levels to practice a developmental approach to the progression of writing, which can be done through coaching, reading, thinking, and continuous writing (Crank, 2012). Writing abilities do not ever reach a maximum; instead, these abilities continue to develop throughout a student's academic career and lifetime. Students cannot know exactly how to write because there is not a right or wrong way to do it and it is a process that is continuously developing (Crank, 2012). Despite all good intentions, students still arrive on college campuses ill-prepared for coursework and writing assignments (McDaniel, 2014) and that needs to change.

How Technology Affects Writing

Technology is one contributing factor to students' diminishing writing skills. Many developers have created technology that is supposed to make the writing process

easier, but unfortunately, they do not teach students writing skills (Carter & Harper, 2013). In general, when it comes to academic work, students are overly reliant upon technology (McDaniel, 2014), using such devices as spell check software, for example. As previously discussed, a study in 2010 revealed that students spent 42% less time on homework and assignments than students from earlier generations, the difference being time spent on technological entertainments (Carter & Harper, 2013). Students are exposed to vast technologies, but they presumably don't know how to use them to further their education.

Technology can make certain aspects of education easier. But the diminished writing skills of college students today can be blamed on the use of email and text messaging where speed and frankness take over grammatically correct language (Simkin et al., 2012). American culture emphasizes shortened versions of communication, such as Twitter's 140-character limit, or shortened words for texting (McDaniel, 2014). Even newspapers have fallen victim to shorter articles and titles, and many Internet writers use summaries and brief narratives instead of full stories (McDaniel, 2014). Due to being immersed in this culture, students are not seeing the benefits of good writing that would motivate them to complete longer reading or writing assignments in college (McDaniel, 2014). Berrett indicated students have reported spending a lot of time writing, but faculty members have indicated that students said they spent less than half of their writing time per week writing for informal purposes such as social media, online commentary, opinions, etc. (Berrett, 2014). Some correlations have arisen between diminished expectations in the composition classroom and the lack of writing skills and instincts due

to the large volumes of text messages, Facebook posts, Twitter tweets, and the Millennials' collective Internet-savvy skills (Brickey, 2013). The use of technology is not always beneficial to students.

The data on social media and writing is mixed. Social networking sites may have great possibility to impact language and writing as this type of media are important to young students (Dizon, 2016). A few research studies have shown that text messaging can improve reading and writing, but some evidence has also shown that students perform worse academically when texting is their main method of communication (Carter & Harper, 2013). One study showed that students do not see a connection between academic writing and informal writing and less than 20% of students felt that using informal social media could help them be better writers (Berrett, 2014). Truthfully, using social networking such as Facebook seems to promote a sense of community and collaboration amongst its young users (Dizon, 2016). Students are using abbreviated language in academic assignments, and as Carter and Harper stated, the trend will increase. Still, they acknowledge the need for more empirical research to determine whether technology produces specific effects on writing, but they assumed that some connection exists between writing skills and technology, such as instant messaging, text messaging, and social media despite character limits, the lack of grammar, and the incomplete grammatical nature of these technologies (Carter & Harper, 2013; Dizon, 2016). Students aren't learning writing skills, but a certain type of texting language or shorthand.

Since the inception of the Internet, it has had some value in an educational setting. Most grade level instructors, including college level, have been using the Internet as a pedagogical resource for approximately two decades, but the affect the Internet has had on students is quite difficult to measure (Carter & Harper, 2013). The Internet is considered a primary source for students when researching, but it demands a new type of skill (McDaniel, 2014). Carter and Harper stated that students must distinguish between credible academic sources, opinionated sources, and incorrect data and, generally, students are quite savvy when searching the Internet. Some instructors even rely on technology to assist with learning in the classroom (McDaniel, 2014). Data has shown that students who have low computer skills face additional barriers when it comes to writing because they are underprepared (Relles & Tierney, 2013). If students have low computer skills and weak writing skills, they have a significant decrease in academic achievement (Relles & Tierney, 2013). Using the Internet can help pedagogically if students still take the time to learn from it.

Correlation Between Reading and Writing

The direct correlation between successful writing skills and reading skills is evident. Just the act of putting words to paper is incredibly multifaceted and it requires a deep level of critical thinking and cognition (Kent & Wanzek, 2016). Research has shown that to write well, people must read prose to expand their vocabulary and they must integrate rhetorical strategies as well as a sense of writing style, both through conscious and subconscious means (Carter & Harper, 2013). Taiping (2015) stated that for students to be good readers, they must be good writers, and vice versa. Over time,

these techniques will improve academic standards and increase students' academic success (Carter & Harper, 2013). Martinez et al. indicated that evidence has linked reading and writing performance. The writing process begins in the early grades and focuses on basic formations, spelling, and composing simple sentences (Kent & Wanzek, 2016). As a student move through grades, writing becomes more complex and, in secondary grades, writing takes the shape of conveying arguments and integrating evidence (Kent & Wanzek, 2016). Among both high school and college students, research has shown that students who read tend to have a higher talent for writing (Martinez et al., 2011). The connection between reading and writing is palpable.

Furthermore, leisure reading can improve academic success. Martinez et al. (2011) indicated that students who participate in leisure reading in addition to academic reading have a higher writing proficiency and increased academic success. Taiping (2015) indicated reading and writing work best when they are working together and building on each other. Reading can offer inspiration to students' writing by introducing them to new ideas and forcing them to think critically about the texts they read (Taiping, 2015). Numerous researchers have discovered that reading and writing have a reciprocal relationship, meaning the cognition required for both is a similar process (Kent & Wanzek, 2016). Kent and Wanzek report that neuroimaging results demonstrate that during reading and writing, there is a significant overlap of brain activation and function. If students are going to develop their minds, they need to study how to read more complicated, longer texts and opportunities in secondary education can facilitate such development (McDaniel, 2014). Quite simply, if students write about what they read,

reading comprehension will improve which leads to increased writing skills, reading fluency, increased critical thinking skills, and word development and recognition (Kent & Wanzek, 2016). There are multiple connections amongst reading, writing, and critical thinking skills.

Unfortunately, students do not spend their time reading for pleasure. Carter and Harper indicated that numerous students have not been spending their leisure time reading for pleasure. Instead, they have been spending their free time with their smartphones, television programs, and focusing on entertainment news. Additionally, if teachers do not expect students to read and write extensively in their college courses, their students' writing skills will not improve during their academic careers (Carter & Harper, 2013). Because of the correlation between reading and writing, Martinez et al. (2011) suggested that professors incorporate more reading activities and motivate students to read for leisure outside of class hours. After reviewing the results from The National Survey of Student Engagement, Huskin suggested that if students are positively engaged in the classroom, instructors should increase the amount of writing during the course. The more students are engaged in collaborative learning, student-faculty interactions, student-student interactions, and active learning activities, the deeper learning will go (Huskin, 2016; Kent & Wanzek, 2016). This may help bridge the gap between being prepared for college and improving writing skills.

Writing Centers

Many colleges and universities have a walk-in style writing centers where students can find help with writing questions and with academic assignments. Writing

centers are comfortable places where students can receive tutoring and one-on-one assistance with writing (Denny et al., 2015). Arguably, writing centers have one of the most important functions when compared to other university and college organizations due to the potential for change that comes from empowering students with writing assistance (Arbee & Samuel, 2015). Students should use the resources available to them on campus, including the writing center.

Writing centers are the key to student success. Writing centers are not just about producing exceptional writing samples, but instead, they focus on encouraging students to expand their knowledge beyond the discipline of the course (Arbee & Samuel, 2015). Depending on the student population, writing center consultants could meet with students from all levels, including both undergraduate and graduate, and from different types of degree programs, which may include countless types of writing assignments and different levels of preparedness for the writing center consultant (Bastian, 2014). Tutors could encounter more than just essays and papers, but now, academic assignments could include things like blogs, portfolios, or any type of digital multimedia (Denny et al., 2015). Embracing this potential diversity is fundamental and provides a critical backbone to what students need in writing assistance (Blazer, 2015). Diversity in assignments means that students must adapt with various types of skills.

A writing center may offer students a safe place free of judgment. Students have reported spending a lot of time writing for many purposes at the university or college level (Berrett, 2014). But writing center consultants do not give students grades, so for student writing to improve, the primary focal point of a writing center session should not

be the piece of writing, but the student (Brickey, 2013). Since grades are not a concern for a writing center consultant, the purpose of the writing center is to create better writers, and not to produce “A” papers (Brickey, 2013). A common complaint among faculty and administration is the frustration with subpar student writing, but part of the frustration comes with the instructors being personally unprepared to handle students’ concerns with their writing (Bastian, 2014). Faculty instructors may benefit from improving writing skills too.

Again, instructors may be the bridge between student success and improved writing skills. Quite often, instructors will know something is wrong with the writing, but they lack understanding about the errors or how to fix them (Bastian, 2014). To some, “error” is defined by grammar, punctuation, or mechanical errors, but to others, it means a lack of focus, development, or clarity (Bastian, 2014). Many faculty and administrators have a preconceived notion that writing centers are the end-all solution for improving students’ basic English skills, and consultants are proofreaders rather than people who focus on writing content (Brickey, 2013). In addition to that, instructors should not expect writing center consultants to intuitively know the instructors’ desires, nor should they expect consultants to interpret scratches in the margins of student work (Brickey, 2013). But writing center consultants should evaluate each individual students’ writing skills (Gofine, 2012) and not just stick to a general process for all tutoring sessions. This mindset will help tutors understand and develop individual student writing practices and the general pedagogy of composition (Gofine, 2012). There should be cooperation between writing centers and instructors.

Even though cooperation is needed, it does not always happen. Writing center directors and administrators are continually having to justify their existence by explaining why they require funding, and why their operations are critical (Arbee & Samuel, 2015). School administrators must constantly assess their writing centers and sometimes they are required to provide evidence that the center is consistently helping students (Gofine, 2012). Writing center directors have admitted that they face pressure to justify centers and to prove that funding is a positive investment for the institution. Unfortunately, this is a part of the economic issues that educational institutions face, which often forces the institution to make budget decisions about writing centers (Gofine, 2012). Writing centers offer intensive one-on-one instruction and tutelage so budget-minded decision makers constantly call their accountability into question (Arbee & Samuel, 2015). Directors and administration consistently must justify the existence of the writing center.

Student impressions can determine the effectiveness of a writing center. When researchers explore their effectiveness and their users' perceptions of the writing center's services, they should focus on what students think about the writing center and how satisfied students are with their consultations rather than on their specific impact on academic performance (Arbee & Samuel, 2015). In Martinez et al.'s preliminary study involving 344 college students, a correlation was found between increased writing levels and the use of the writing center. Their outcomes showed that students who visited the writing center four or more times earned grades that were significantly higher than students who did not visit the writing center (Martinez et al., 2011). Irvin's (2014) study supports Martinez et al.'s finding, concluding that out of 123, 100% of students who have

three or more visits to the writing center earned a passing grade of C or better in the course where they received tutoring. Of those who only had one writing center visit, 80% of students earned a passing grade of C or better; furthermore, of those who had no writing center visits, 56% of students earned a passing grade of C or better (Irvin, 2014). Clearly, writing centers are improving student grades, and by extension, their overall writing skills.

A common misconception is that all writing is equal. But writing center administrators and consultants sometimes operate under the assumption that student writing is all the same and that all writing should be approached in the same way (Robinson & Hall, 2013). This should not be the approach because all writing is not the same. One of the biggest offenses a writing center tutor can make is to become overly directive with the student (Robinson & Hall, 2013). When writing center tutors balance the writer's goals with the tutor's goals, the student becomes self-sufficient; however, if writing center tutors fail to allow students to direct the session or if tutors push their own agenda, students become dependent upon the guidance and unable to manage their writing tasks and processes on their own (Raymond & Quinn, 2012). Managing individual writing tasks for students can increase comprehension.

Perhaps improving writing skills begins with the instructor. To show students that they care and to reduce students' anxiety, instructors need to demonstrate a caring, safe environment (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2013). Human beings want others to hear and understand them, but many instructors easily forget to empathize with overly-frustrated students and, in truth, when students are in such moods, they need the support the most

(Bastian, 2014). Writing center tutors should know that to improve writing skills, they need to motivate the student (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2013). The process of attempting to motivate and to engage the student is continuous during a writing center consultation (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2013). To do so, tutors should provide understanding and empathy to the students; additionally, acknowledging students' accomplishments is imperative to motivate them and create a more lasting impression about the means they are teaching the student in effort to perfect their writing skills (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2013). As previously stated, the writing center does not guarantee better grades, but it helps students write better (Ryan & Kane, 2015). Students who actively seek help from the writing center and understand the value of one-on-one consultations improve their self-confidence and, sometimes, earning higher grades (Ryan & Kane, 2015). To improve writing skills, students, faculty, and writing center consultants must work together.

Student Perceptions of Writing Centers

Examining student perceptions of writing centers may be the key. Because many community college students struggle with writing (Missakian, Olson, Black, & Matuchniak, 2016), it is important to examine how students perceive writing centers. It is natural for perceptions to vary amongst faculty, students, and even administration, but it is important to note that one method is not better than another; instead, varying viewpoints and perceptions are dependent upon institutions to determine the success of the writing center (Cheatle & Bullerjahn, 2015). Writing centers were initially developed as a response to writers with lower skills, but more recently, centers have adapted the

idea that all writers need feedback and no writer ever outgrows that need (Missakian et al., 2016). Some students may view the writing center as an editing service for grammar and punctuation checks, but others may use the writing center as an intervention between student and instructor (Missakian et al., 2016). These varying perceptions create varying expectations between writing center staff and students which may lead to incorrect perceptions of inefficiency (Missakian et al., 2016). Re-examining expectations may help with the success of a writing center.

With any writing center, there are generally numerous methods of student outreach which can include workshops, class visits, or even specific workshops for a specific population of student (Cheatle & Bullerjahn, 2015), but the goal is to provide students with a writing resource. Most students are found to value the interactions from writing center tutors and believe that writing is a valued collaborative process (Bromley, Shonberg, and Northway, 2015). Furthermore, if students feel engaged in the writing process with the writing center staff, rather than just coming in to just talk about writing, students will report productive sessions (Bromley et al., 2015). Students who place less value on the process of writing generally may not immerse themselves in the writing process (Missakian et al., 2016), which will not fully develop writing skills. In addition, students that focus on the final grade rather than the tutoring process may not value the overall goal of the writing center; writing center tutors are trained to help the writer/student develop their overall process thus developing the student's writing skills (Missakian et al., 2016). There is more to writing than final grades.

Nonetheless, writing centers should work in cooperation with faculty and students. In a study by Missakian et al., groups that included a total of 302 students, 36 instructors, and 20 tutors ranked their overall satisfaction with the writing center quite positively despite the differences between student and writing center staff goals. However, the goals of the writing center may not always align with what the student perceives their needs to be (Missakian et al., 2016). In a separate study performed by Cheatle and Bullerjahn, 80 students described their experiences with a specific writing center, how the center pertained to their major and overall education, why they do or do not use the center, and how the center can be more effective in their education. Students overwhelmingly believed and indicated that the writing center was meant for first year and international students (Cheatle & Bullerjahn, 2015) which is not always true for every writing center.

Writing centers are not created equally and they can vary in services. This point of view is potentially problematic because most writing centers advertise that they are a resource for students regardless of culture or year in their program (Cheatle & Bullerjahn, 2015). In addition, one important part of student perceptions was that students in this study felt that most instructors outside composition classes did not recommend the writing center (Cheatle & Bullerjahn, 2015) which demonstrates that some disciplines do not value the writing center nor assisting students with their writing skills. The good news is that the study found that if students used the writing center once, they were 75% more likely to use it at least one more time (Cheatle & Bullerjahn, 2015). This can improve student visits to writing centers easily.

Successful Writing Centers

Despite the varying nature, there are numerous methods for running a successful writing center. Writing centers are now considered to play a significant role in the pedagogy of the composition classroom (Clark, 2008). The goal of a writing center is to alleviate some of the burden from classroom instructors and to seek guidance from a third party (Brickey, 2013). Writing centers are comfortable places where students can go to get one-on-one assistance with their writing (Liggett, 2014). Writing centers are a direct approach to individualized writing instruction which more effectively facilitates student learning (Clark, 2008) and were never designed as a means of primary instruction nor should they be concerned with student grades (Brickey, 2013). Instead, writing centers should be used to teach, encourage, and model the writing process to students, and perhaps, an improved grade could be used as a measure of success (Brickey, 2013). In a cooperative effort, writing centers can focus on how the entire school community comes together to increase student confidence as writers (Oriani, 2012). Oriani reported that, in a successful writing center, the most prominent change noticed was the confidence in student writers after visiting the writing center. Student confidence can make the difference.

Current students learn in different ways given the integration of technology. For the 21st-century learner, writing center consultants must learn to evolve and engage students by using various styles and opportunities (Blazer, 2015). Writing center consultants are using instructor feedback, assignment details, and instruction interpretation to guide students (Grimm, 2009) which can be complicated. But an

effective writing center represents the connection between two important criteria in composition pedagogy: writing instruction should be student-centered and the process of writing is considered a process (Clark, 2008). Thinking of student writers as inadequate, flawed, or lazy would be inappropriate, but instead, students need information on rhetorical concepts or other complicated processes in which writing center consultants navigate during a tutoring session (Grimm, 2009). The kind of instruction presented by a successful writing center will accomplish three things: (a) in order to improve writing skills, one must dialogue with the reader; (b) in order to improve writing skills, one must understand the multifaceted nature of writing and be willing to participate in all processes; and (c) in order to improve writing skills, the writer must have a dialogue and reflection with the writing itself during revision and editing processes (Clark, 2008). Because these three rhetorical concepts have been identified, writing centers can easily implement these ideas, encourage writers through feedback and revision, and provide an environment free of evaluation and threat to the student (Clark, 2008). If students feel like the visit was productive and positive, they may be likely to return to the writing center.

Diverse staff ensure the success of the writing center. Writing centers are operated by a diverse set of individuals who all have varied backgrounds and work experiences (Caswell, McKinney, & Jackson, 2014). The one-on-one nature of a writing center lends itself well to revision and editing as well as taking the individual needs of students into consideration at each writing center visit (Isaacs & Kolba, 2009). It cannot be stressed enough that writing center consultants must listen carefully to the student and tend to

each student individually (Liggett, 2014). A successful writing center will consider the methodologies and best practices of the process approach to writing; this means that students will plan, draft, obtain feedback, then revise all writing assignments (Clark, 2008; Isaacs & Kolba, 2009). Writing centers can make a difference in student writing skills.

Establishing some groundwork may help improve writing support services. If applicable, documents such as mission statements or accreditation information should guide the practices of a successful writing center (Denny, Messina, & Reich, 2015). It may be required that administrators assess the centers as needed by use of annual reports and other types of feedback (Gofine, 2012). Whenever applicable, faculty should encourage students to take advantage of a writing center whenever possible (Martinez et al., 2011). Quite often, writing centers have limited resources and focusing on promotional efforts to achieve the goals set forth could prove extremely valuable to both the writing center and the administrators (Ryan & Kane, 2015). A persistent task includes organizing classroom visits to promote the services of the writing center (Ryan & Kane, 2015). Utilizing services such as writing centers encourages students to become active participants in their education (Martinez et al., 2011). In addition, the support of faculty in other disciplines should be solicited and encouraged; this will enhance rapport with students and will encourage students to have a sense of self-efficacy and self-improvement (Martinez et al., 2011). With the cooperation of students, faculty, writing consultants, and administration, writing centers can be successful.

Implications

The implications of this study were a hopeful improvement for the writing center as I assessed the student and faculty expectations and perceptions. Since little data have been collected from the writing center on frequency of use, satisfaction with visits, or grade improvement because of the visits, an exploration of this problem led to understanding both the instructors' and the students' expectations and will help develop the writing center to meet its full potential. As Huskin (2016) indicated, strategies such as practice writing, and scaffolding assignments help students strengthen their writing, think critically, learn to articulate their ideas, and communicate effectively all of which will build their confidence as writers.

This research study led to discoveries of the benefits and shortcomings of the writing center, but more importantly, this study may help students improve their writing skills and academic success through the continuous efforts of those working in and for the writing center. Since no one has collected any data prior to this doctoral study, I sought to understand student and instructor perceptions of the writing center and how the writing center could improve to meet the college's needs. Through this analysis of the writing center through the student and instructor perspective, the study site can work to aid students in improving their writing skills.

Summary

Writing skills in the United States have been declining since the 1970s and students are unable to pass basic writing proficiency exams (Carter & Harper, 2013). Students in graduate school do not even write at the level of a high school senior (Carter

& Harper, 2013). Overall, freshman college students believe that they are prepared for college-level writing, and only about 15% anticipate that they would need tutoring (Berrett, 2014). Yet, as Brickey (2013) stated, most college students have been struggling with basic composition and do not enjoy it. Numerous students simply have not had the desire to become competent writers, but they have been doing just enough to pass their courses. This obvious decline in writing skills has paved the way for writing centers to flourish.

In Section 1, I examined the decline of writing skills in the United States as well as provided the conceptual framework for this study. The questions posed for this doctoral project research problem are in effort to understand the writing center's processes as a means of increasing student academic achievement. The broad research questions address three topics of concerns in student writing: the student expectations of the writing center, how the instructors interpret/perceive the writing center, and the potential development of the writing center. In the next section, the methodology for this doctoral project will be discussed.

Section 2: The Methodology

Introduction

In this study, I addressed growing concerns about the effectiveness of the college writing center. By exploring the research questions, I sought to develop suggestions and feedback about the writing center that could be used to improve it. To strengthen students' writing skills and improve education, faculty and administrators should encourage students to use the services that a writing center can offer (Martinez et al., 2011). Writing center consultants across the United States frequently face challenges such as students' diverse backgrounds, varying levels of English language skills, and undefined levels of reading and writing comprehension (Caswell et al., 2014). A writing center can be the "missing link" in the effort to remedy students' deficiencies in writing skills to meet instructors' expectations (Brickey, 2013).

At the local level, both the LOC director and the rhetoric, languages, and philosophy chair at the study site had concerns about the writing center and its effectiveness. Opinions about the writing center vary across campus; some faculty deem it indispensable, whereas others do not encourage students to visit, as the rhetoric, language, and philosophy chair explained.

The purpose of this case study was to gather the empirical data required to make informed decisions about a direction for the writing center, which was designed to support students' success in writing and to prepare students for overall academic success. To prove that a student can pass a course, writing tasks are necessary; thus, writing is the foundation of most higher education courses (Arbee & Samuel, 2015). The purpose of

this study was (a) to examine students' initial expectations of the writing center and how they perceived the help they received, (b) to examine why some instructors required visits to the writing center and their expectations for the visit, (c) to determine the nature and characteristics of student referral patterns to the writing center, (d) to seek feedback from instructors on how the writing center can maximize its effect on student writing, and (e) to survey the nature and demographic characteristics of student visits to the writing center. I collected data from various sources, such as interviews with multiple subjects—both students and faculty—and demographic information from the LOC.

Qualitative Research Design and Approach

Understanding the perspectives of students and faculty was a key component of this qualitative research study. Interviewing faculty and students who had direct contact with the writing center helped me to understand their observations and interactions and assisted in providing the study site with the necessary data to improve the writing center. Qualitative research is descriptive and allows the researcher to understand the perspective of the participants in a study (Merriam, 2009). In qualitative studies, the researcher collects the data (Merriam, 2009), and that type of data collection lent itself well to this doctoral project. As Merriam explained, qualitative research involves an understanding that there are connections between social situations and how individuals interact with the world. The data collected during this research came from faculty who guided their students to the writing center, as well as from students who used the writing center's services. I interviewed faculty and students with the goal of gaining a greater understanding of how the writing center plays a role at the study site.

The research design that I used was a qualitative case study. Merriam and Creswell stated that a case study is an analysis of a system that is already in place in which the researcher investigates a real-life phenomenon. Case study knowledge has certain characteristics that set case study apart from other types of qualitative research; it is more concrete, more contextual, more focused on reader interpretation, and based on reference populations as determined by the reader (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). Other types of qualitative research include critical qualitative research, phenomenology, ethnography, and grounded theory (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). The boundaries for this qualitative case study encompassed student participants who had visited the writing center within the last month and faculty participants who might or might not have familiarity with writing support services and who were not part of the writing program. This qualitative case study did not use minors or protected populations for participants, nor did data collection occur outside the college. Because the writing center at the college was already established and the aim of this doctoral project was to evaluate and improve the writing center, a qualitative case study was the most appropriate option.

Participants

To answer the research questions, I collected data from both faculty and student participants. Faculty participants for this study were volunteers who were asked to participate via a campus-wide email invitation. Faculty were selected for interviews based on whether they had experience sending students to the writing center, but I did not interview composition instructors because they were presumed to possibly be biased in favor of the writing center. Student interviews were selected based on information

gathered from the writing center logbook that recorded who visited in the last month; this policy ensured that the visit to the writing center would be fresh in the students' minds. In addition, I placed a flyer in the writing center to solicit volunteers for the study. The first 10 faculty instructors and the first 10 students who responded to the invitation were selected. I requested and obtained permission to conduct interviews from the department chair and the dean of the college prior to the start of interviewing. I used purposeful sampling to select student participants for the study. Purposeful sampling is a type of sampling used in qualitative research in which the researcher seeks information via the most effective means and finds individuals who are qualified to discuss the phenomenon (Palinkas et al., 2015). Faculty participants were selected using convenience sampling, which involves the selection of participants based on factors such as time, money, availability, or location (Merriam, 2009).

The number of participants was chosen because the inquiry per individual was deeper and there was a higher likelihood for detailed responses. I interviewed 10 faculty and 10 students. Merriam (2009) stated that, with purposeful sampling, the goal is to maximize information so that information saturation is reached. For this qualitative case study, I chose participants who would provide enough information to assist the writing center with its provision of services, but I did not include too many questions so that the study would not consume an extensive amount of the participants' time. The questioning for each participant, based on the research questions, took a manageable time of 45-60 minutes.

To gain access to participants, I obtained email addresses of faculty from the department chair or the writing program lead at the study site, which was considered public information for full-time faculty. There were some inclusion criteria for both faculty and student participants. Faculty participants ideally needed to have experience with sending students to the writing center to get writing assistance on assignments, but faculty who did not have this experience were not excluded. I sought to ensure that faculty would be able to contribute enough information to be useful to this qualitative case study. I sent an email to all faculty, except for composition instructors, seeking volunteers who met the criteria for this qualitative case study. It was presumed that composition instructors understood the value of the writing center; therefore, their feedback was likely to be biased. When there was no response after 1 week, I sent an additional email to faculty. Student participants needed to have visited the writing center within the month prior to the interview and be able to reflect on that experience. This requirement was used to ensure that students' visit to the writing center would still be fresh in their minds. To find student participants, I gained access to the writing center logbook and emailed students who had visited within the last month. This logbook was available in the writing center, and I could examine it at my convenience.

Establishing researcher-participant working relationships was not an issue because I already had credibility on campus as a composition teacher and writing center consultant. This level of credibility allowed participants—both students and faculty—to establish trust in me. Because I was a consultant, I thought that some participants might

think that they should answer as an English instructor or writing center consultant would, but this problem was not an issue during interviews.

Formally, I used documented consent forms and codes of conduct to maintain confidentiality and anonymity in relation to the participants' involvement in this qualitative case study. Measures were taken to protect the participants' rights, including confidentiality, informed consent, and protection from harm. I maintained trusting relationships with all participants, and the faculty participants were reassured that their responses during the interviews would neither be shared with their supervisors nor threaten their job status. Ethical issues regarding the protection of the participants were of highest consideration for my study, as they are for qualitative case studies (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). One of the first steps was to ask faculty and students if they were willing to participate in the interview. Pressure to take part was not placed on the participants. Names of the participants were coded prior to the publication of the research. If participants were uncomfortable, they were not pressured to answer questions and could stop the interview at any time.

To fully protect the participants and the college, the proposal was reviewed and approved by the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB), which issued approval number 12-21-17-0190397. No research was conducted or data gathered prior to approval from the IRB.

Data Collection

Prior to this qualitative case study, the college writing center had been in operation for 23 years. Using a qualitative case study was the best option for this research

because qualitative data are more participant focused (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). Creswell (2012) stated that the qualitative method is an investigative method of research that is designed to help researchers understand a social group or interaction, such as a writing center. In addition, qualitative research occurs where human behavior and events happen (Creswell, 2012)—in this study, at a writing center. Qualitative case study was chosen because the feedback provided by faculty and student interviews could be descriptive and detailed. The collection of numerical data would have been insufficient for this case study; individual responses from survey participants served this case study best. This doctoral project was designed to solicit individual responses from participants, which was not conducive to quantitative research. Qualitative research allows for exploration through questioning and responses from participants, and it allows data to be collected where participants are most at ease (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009).

Data collection instruments and sources included a note-taking sheet and digital recording device used during the interview. Interviews followed a semistructured model as defined by Merriam (2009). Semistructured interviews use both guided and specific questions. Questions were written in the order in which they were asked; additionally, there was a list of topics to explore. This approach allowed for a more natural and informal interview process; this also helped to put participants at ease. Interviews took place on the study site property in the LOC area in a private room. Interviews were conducted on an individual rather than group basis to maintain confidentiality and privacy. Using a digital recording device allowed me to maintain eye contact with the participants, which put them at ease and allowed me to maintain focus (Jacob &

Furgerson, 2012). Upon completion, I transcribed the interviews. To ensure accuracy during the data collection process, I followed interview protocol guidelines as described by Jacob and Furgerson. Each interview was catalogued and labeled with the date, time, and participant. The participants' names were omitted from the transcripts, but I assigned a description for each participant such as "Faculty A" or "Student A" to ensure participant confidentiality. In addition to the data collection instruments above, I gained access to the LOC's login database to obtain demographic information about student referral patterns for the writing center for the 2015–2016 and 2016–2017 school years. This was done with the assistance of LOC employees who had direct access to this database.

Demographic information was also obtained from research participants during interviews.

Using the data collection instruments outlined above, I gathered information to answer the research questions sufficiently. Research Questions 1 through 4 were all open-ended, qualitative questions that allowed the participants to answer with detail and description. As Merriam (2009) stated, a qualitative case study needs to be full of description and analysis angled at a specific event or phenomenon, and the questions need to reflect a deeper understanding of that phenomenon or topic. By using interviews for the data collection in this qualitative case study, I received descriptive, detailed data from the participants. Questions for data collection were researcher produced, not published from other sources.

Data were generated, gathered, and recorded with the most efficient means possible. Interviews took place over 4 weeks. Each interview consisted of questions developed by me, and interviews were planned for approximately 45–60 minutes.

Interviews followed the semistructured model as described by Merriam (2009) and followed interview protocol guidelines as described by Jacob and Furgerson (2012). Participants agreed to meet me in the LOC. If participants did not agree and sign the consent form, there would be no pressure or backlash; they would be thanked for their time and the interview would conclude. If the participants agreed, the interview would continue. Questions were asked as per the list, but questioning was open ended and natural, which allowed the participants to deviate or elaborate as they saw fit.

Questioning began with easy-to-answer questions and moved on to ones that were more complex, as per interview protocol guidelines by Jacob and Furgerson (2012). At the end of the interview, the participant received my contact information for follow-up or further questions from the participant. The participants were emailed a copy of the transcript of the interview after it was available. If needed, I could have conducted a shorter follow-up interview with a participant to address any lingering questions or concerns, but this was not needed.

The system for keeping track of data and emerging understanding included keeping all transcripts of interviews, digital recordings, notes, and research logs safely on a cloud drive, flash drive, and computer file for at least 5 years. The digital recordings were transcribed quickly after the interview was completed to ensure a level of protection of the data. Each participant had a separate file on the media described above so that the data remained organized. Each file was named with the participant's identifying information, such as "Faculty A" or "Student A," to ensure participant confidentiality. Upon completion of the interviews, I wrote brief notes reflecting on the interviews and

behaviors of the participants. Doing this immediately after the interviews allowed me time to reflect on the moment and collate postinterview thoughts and feelings. These interview reflections were typed and filed with the rest of the data as described above.

I was an instructor and a writing center consultant at the study site. I taught on a part-time basis and worked in the writing center 2–3 hours per week during the fall and spring semesters. I had extremely limited contact with instructors outside the writing program, however, so my collaboration with participants did not affect the data. It was understood that my involvement at the study site might have led to a presumption of bias in this study; however, I did not recruit anyone whom I knew professionally or socially for this study. Maintaining a high level of ethics during this study with regard to human participants was critically important to me. There was a level of credibility I naturally maintained because of my involvement at the study site. This level of credibility allowed participants—both students and faculty—to establish trust.

Formally, I used documented consent forms and codes of conduct to maintain confidentiality and anonymity in relation to the participants' involvement in this qualitative case study. Measures were taken to protect the participants' rights, including confidentiality, informed consent, and protection from harm. Instructors who had knowledge of my courses, curriculum, or methods were not considered for this study given the obvious bias. There was a possibility that a previous student could be a study participant. For example, a student might have visited the writing center for a writing assignment in a history course, as evidenced by the writing center logbook. This might have been a student who was currently enrolled in a history course but could have

previously had me as a composition instructor. If this had occurred, I would have treated the student fairly and equally with other study participants. If the student had been uncomfortable participating, given the student's familiarity with my teaching, the student would not have been required to participate.

It is important to note that I did not have evaluation power or authority over the participants in any way. This was not a concern since none of the participants were directly affiliated with me or my courses. There was a slight bias on my part as I work closely in the writing program and I am a writing center consultant; however, the bias was more directed towards the desire to see the writing center flourish and not from a malicious or unethical standpoint. When performing interviews, I was fair, equal, and open to the feedback and data that was received.

Data Analysis

After the data were collected, I transcribed the digital recording. This was done as soon as possible after the interview and data were backed up. There were numerous steps to analyzing the information once the first step was complete, which included gathering raw data, organizing or preparing the data, analyzing the data, and coding the data based on themes developed throughout the literature review. Data was coded based on key words, concepts, phrases, or terms in the participants' responses. After this, it was organized by themes presented in the literature review and the conceptual framework. Per Hancock and Algozzine (2006), themes for research must precisely and comprehensively represent the data collected, but the themes must evolve as the research project progresses. Organization was accomplished by using an Excel Spreadsheet. The

organization and analyzation phases were done simultaneously while collecting data, which is best practice for qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). The goal was to discover the students' reactions to and expectations of the writing center, and to discover why instructors do or do not choose to use the writing center to help students. Furthermore, the research helped to discover suggestions both students and faculty have for improving the writing center's services and discover the nature and characteristics of student referral patterns.

There are several strategies that can ensure accuracy and credibility of the findings (Merriam, 2009). One strategy is triangulation (Creswell, 2012; Hancock & Algozzine, 2011; Merriam, 2009). Merriam stated that there are 4 identified methods of triangulation, including multiple theories, multiple sources of data, multiple investigators, and multiple methods. The data from this qualitative case study was triangulated through 1-on-1 interviews and discussions with faculty and students through multiple sources of data. I looked for fixed points in the data and sought themes in the data that may allow the writing center to act and bring about positive change. I also used member checks as they are another way of ensuring validity (Merriam, 2009). In this method, the findings were brought back to the participants, so they could comment on the data interpretation. This was a good way to identify areas of misinterpretation. For this study, I offered students and faculty the ability to review their transcripts prior to finishing the research which ensured I interpreted the individual's answers correctly. Data were organized and coded by themes based on the conceptual framework in the literature review, such as the six assumptions based on Knowles et al. (2005) or other themes that presented during the

interview process. I sent the transcripts to all faculty and student participants. Inherently, the challenges of assessing validity, accuracy, and credibility of the findings in a qualitative study are subjective to the nature of the data collection. By using the triangulation method and member checks, there was increased confidence in the data and deeper understanding of the problem.

Discrepant cases were not anticipated as the nature of questioning was open-ended and the opinions of the participants were being solicited. By nature, the responses to the questions vary because it is based on individual perspective. Conflicting data might be a possibility because of this, but the participant perspective was important to this doctoral project. In addition, responses were grouped by themes based on the conceptual framework which should eliminate discrepant cases because of the open-ended nature of the questioning. Participants were contacted in a professional manner and clarification was not needed.

Data Analysis Results

Data analysis in qualitative research offers a unique challenge; it was no exception in this research project. In this study, the basic steps outlined by Creswell (2012) and Merriam (2009) for analyzing qualitative data results were followed. This included data organization, data coding, identifying themes, reporting and interpreting all the findings, and demonstrating evidence of accuracy in the findings. As recommended by Creswell and Merriam, data analysis began as soon as the first data were received. To wait to analyze data until the end of data collection would risk losing valuable information and potential reliability and validity of the data (Merriam, 2009). For

qualitative data, Creswell recommended that researchers analyze their own data to gain more insight. I conducted all the data analysis for this research project myself. After interviews were complete and audio recordings were backed up to the Gmail Cloud and flash drive, I then transcribed all the interview recordings manually. In addition, I transcribed the research journal entries from each interview producing a digital trail of data. Next, I reviewed each participant's transcript for accuracy and patterns. Finally, I organized all the data by questions and pulled out key words and themes that corresponded with the literature review. For ease, the findings were placed in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet during this phase.

Merriam (2009) and Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, and Walter (2016) stated that one way to ensure the validity of qualitative research is to use member checks. When performing a member check, the researcher presents an interpretation of the data back to the participant, so they can comment. Member checks are a good way to identify areas of misunderstanding or misinterpretation by the researcher and it helps provide a unique perspective that is significant to qualitative research (Birt et al, 2016; Merriam, 2009). Because of this, each faculty and student participant were emailed copies of their interview transcript for review. Faculty and students were given 2 weeks to read the interview transcript and I instructed them to email me with questions or changes. All 10 students were sent their transcripts and zero sent back a response. Similarly, all 10 faculty were sent their transcripts, but three returned responses with comments. The three that responded requested minor changes to their responses for the interview questions. For

example, one faculty was not comfortable that they mentioned both disciplines they teach for. This faculty felt it would be identifying information.

As Creswell (2012) indicated, it is important for the researcher to get a full sense and realization of the data, which is also why it is important for the researcher to have a hand in data analysis. Data were gathered through interviews with 10 faculty and 10 students. Interviews were recorded on a digital recorder and transcribed later into Word documents. During interviews, I used a set of questions to help guide the interview with participants. Questioning pertained to initial expectations of the writing center, how students perceive whether they received the help they needed, if instructors require visits to the writing center, faculty expectations for student visits, referral patterns, and suggestions for improving services.

During the process of data analysis and organization, I read through transcripts completely and I read through my research journals corresponding to that participant. While reading, I did a preliminary analysis of codes and themes for future reference. If there were oddities or things I needed to investigate further, I made mention of it in my research notes. When transcribing the interviews, I edited each transcript by deleting any text that was irrelevant to the study. This included any personal identifiers too. Once this was complete, I uploaded the transcripts into an online data analysis program called Dedoose (“Dedoose: Great Research Made Easy,” n.d.). This program allowed me the freedom to code and organize in accordance with the participant responses. Once data was coded and themes were derived from participant responses, I transferred the reports to Microsoft Excel to begin working with the data.

I created two Microsoft Excel workbooks: one for faculty interviews and one for student interviews. Then on separate worksheets, I organized the data by possible codes that were related to the interview questions and/or the research questions. I noticed that for student interviews I had quite a few more codes than faculty interviews; this was due to the number of interview questions for students versus faculty. I continued with this process until all responses had codes and appropriate locations in my worksheets.

Findings

Data collection for this doctoral project involved interviewing 10 faculty and 10 students. Demographics are described in Table 3.

Table 3

Student and Faculty Demographics

Gender	Race/ethnicity	Ages for faculty	Ages for students	Faculty disciplines
11 female	18 White, non-Hispanic	Four were 35-44	Seven were 18-24	Chemistry
9 male	1 two or more races	Five were 45-54	Two were 25-34	Philosophy
	1 Indian	One was 55-64	One was 35-44	Communication
				Business
				Psychology
				Art education
				History
				Multimedia graphics

During the design of this study, there were no previous data, but after emailing with the writing program director, I discovered that there were things that the college did not know about the writing center. Instructor referrals and patterns were something that the college needed to know more about. In addition, the college wanted to know how student visits happened, whether they were planned or spontaneous, and if instructors had an influence on their visits. Lastly, the LOC Director asked about general suggestions for

writing support services. These results are presented with guarded caution as this is considered baseline data. Since data have not been collected previously in this manner, this research project could open doors for further research. This section includes faculty and student responses and positive, negative, and neutral views of the writing center.

RQ1: What are students' initial expectations of the writing center, and how do students perceive whether they received the help they needed? The students were asked, "What were your initial expectations of the writing center?" Ten students were interviewed. One theme that was prevalent in this data was that there were 4 students who either visited for their first time or they didn't know what to expect and were rather hesitant.

Table 4

Writing Center Student Initial Expectation

Themes	Frequency from participants	Cumulative percentage
This was the student's first time coming to visit the writing center, and the student was coming in to get help.	2 students (1 male, 1 female)	20%
Participant had no expectations or didn't know what to expect.	2 students (1 male, 1 female)	20%
Participant visited for a variety of reasons, which included getting small revisions for papers; getting grammar, sentence structure, and punctuation help; sentence fragmentation; guidance on a scholarship essay; working on an annotated bibliography; and general direction of ideas.	5 students (2 male, 3 female)	50%
The student expected more people to be present in the writing center and expected it to be bigger.	1 student (male)	10%

Student participants were then asked how their experience was at the writing center (Table 5). They were specifically asked if their experiences were positive or negative. Even though this presented as a dichotomy, students could respond with a neutral or specific answer if it was appropriate.

Table 5

Student Experiences

Themes	Frequency from participants	Cumulative percentage
The student had a positive experience(s) with the writing center.	8 students (3 male, 5 female)	80%
The student was intimidated by his or her visit(s) to the writing center.	1 student (male)	10%
The student had a neutral experience with the writing center.	1 student (male)	10%
The student had a negative experience with the writing center.	0 students	0%

Since responses were varied, there weren't any patterns identified. Student E said they received good feedback and they could work on their papers more efficiently. They didn't have to spend as much time in the writing center because they have learned how to improve their writing process. Student A enjoyed getting an outside perspective on their writing. On the other hand, Student I said their first visit was very intimidating. They admitted that they were a little socially awkward and anxious, so it was difficult to ask for help. A few subsequent visits after the initial consultation, Student I stated they could get more comfortable and the visits became easier. Student D said that their experience with the writing center was neutral. They claimed they learned something, but it wasn't

what they intended on visiting for. Student D claimed the consultant critiqued on punctuation rather than content which was not the student's purpose for visiting. Overall, student feedback about the writing center is positive. In the future, this could be an area where further data could be collected. Finding the students' impressions of the writing center on a larger scale could be valuable information for LOC and college administration.

The next interview question was, "Once a writing center session is complete, how do you perceive whether you received the help you needed?" "This question also supported one of Knowles theory's principles: Adults take responsibility for their own decisions and, subsequently, for their own lives and are capable of self-direction (Knowles et al., 2005).

Table 6

How Help Was Perceived

Themes	Frequency from participants	Cumulative percentage
The student perceived that his or her experience with the writing center depended on how he or she felt after he or she left.	5 students (3 male, 2 female)	50%
The student perceived that he or she got the help he or she needed from the writing center.	3 students (1 male, 2 female)	30%
The student perceived that he or she left the writing center less satisfied.	2 students (1 male, 1 female)	20%

One interesting pattern for this interview question is that less than half of the student participants were either satisfied or not satisfied with their sessions. This is conflicting because half of the students interviewed could not claim their session was

interpreted as positive or negative. If larger inferences are made, potentially 50% of students visiting the writing center are leaving either satisfied or unsatisfied, at either end of the spectrum. There are another 50% of students that fall in the middle of the spectrum that are indifferent or may not voice their satisfaction. This may be a cause for concern for the Writing Program Director and the LOC Director and something that could be investigated further.

Students were also asked why they were visiting the writing center and specifically, “What was the purpose of the assignment?” This question gauged the students’ understanding of the assignment and pertained to Knowles theory of andragogy. Knowles’ theory states that before implementing the learning process, adults need to know why they should learn something (Knowles et al., 2005). In addition, it also used Knowles’ theory when it stated that adults have a vast array of educational and life experiences which should not be ignored in education and before implementing the learning process, adults need to know why they should learn something (Knowles et al., 2005).

Table 7

Purpose of Assignments Brought to the Writing Center

Number of students	Types of assignments
3 students	Academic essays (various types)
2 students	Active reading strategies
2 students	Scholarship applications
1 student	Annotated bibliography
1 student	Formal lab report
1 student	N/A—visiting to see what the resource offered

Students were asked to talk about the assignment they brought to the writing center on the day of the interview. Specifically, “Why was it assigned to [the student]?” Two student participants were writing scholarship applications so there was no assignment from an instructor. Three students discussed how the assignment was building a foundation for the rest of the semester; this assignment would set them up for success for the remainder of the term, so it was important to understand what was being asked of them. Five students ascertained that this assignment was to familiarize them with a topic or process for the course, they were exploring a certain topic with this writing, this writing assignment was a requirement of the course, or they were meant to apply what was being learned to real-world situations and ideas.

Students were then asked, “How do you plan on applying the changes you discussed?” Responses to this question were quite varied. Students A and D said that the consultant made notes in their notebook to help them go back and rework a few things. Two other students commented on how they received more knowledge about sentence structure and grammar which helped them after-the-fact. Student I mentioned that this was their first visit to the writing center and had a little trouble answering the interview question. They indicated that the consultant showed them how writing was very similar to talking and then the whole assignment made sense. Other students consulted their instructors, utilized the online writing center, or talked it over with a friend.

An interesting finding came from a student who suggested that the writing center begin hours on Saturdays. They came on a Saturday during the term and no one was there when they could be there. This might be something for the Writing Center Director to

examine for the future. One interesting theme that emerged is that if the writing center is unable to help the student, the students found other resources to get their answers. Using the Online Writing Lab or asking their instructors were two resources students used after the face-to-face writing center so informing students of these additional resources might be beneficial.

Subsequently, “Please talk about your experiences with the writing center” was the next question for student participants. First time writing center visits became a recurring theme as two participants stated they were first time visitors and two more had no expectations of the writing center. Perhaps student outreach could be improved for this campus. Familiarizing the student population with the writing center would decrease the number of first time visitors and would increase writing support services.

Table 8

Student Experiences with the Writing Center

Themes	Frequency from participants	Cumulative percentage
The student had only one visit to the writing center.	4 students	40%
The student had a positive experience with the writing center.	3 students	30%
No comment from the student.	3 students	30%

Student I indicated that all sessions have been helpful. There were only a couple times that they might consider the session not helpful, but it was because they didn’t understand what was being asked of them by the instructor. There was nothing ill-reflected on the

consultant. Overall, this student didn't find any shortcomings from the writing center. Student F specified that they got 100% on the paper they brought to the writing center.

A follow up question to this was, "Do you remember a writing assignment that you had an excellent consultation session?" During this question, several students mentioned that they got good grades after visiting the writing center. Student G stated they were writing an essay on a topic they were unfamiliar with then they had to give a speech over that topic too. They had a hard time finding the words needed to fulfill the assignment, so the writing center consultant helped them do that. Student J stated that their consultant was also their teacher. In the end, the student wanted to get a good grade on the assignment, so it was good to have their instructor's perspectives before the deadline. Their consultant (instructor) made a lot of suggestions to organize their writing and make it flow better. Getting good grades seems to be a common theme in student visits. Students associate positive visits to the writing center and receiving good grades on the assignment. There is no information on what happens if a student had a positive visit to the writing center but did not get a good grade on the assignment.

Lastly, students were asked, "Do you remember a writing assignment that you had a session that didn't help you?" Two students have not had a consultation session that did not help them; they were all helpful. Several students, as previously indicated, had visited the writing center for the first time on the day of data collection for this project study. Student J admitted that they didn't have the consultant read all their writing, so they were not clear on the consultant's expectations versus what they needed at that moment. They admitted that it may have been more effective if they came in with something like their

introduction and asked for specific feedback on that. Student D indicated that they brought in an annotated bibliography and wanted the consultant to see if they had synthesized their ideas appropriately. Unfortunately, the consultant only focused on punctuation and grammar which was frustrating to the student. Student D considered this an ineffective session. The consultant's focus is a recurrent theme amongst students. Students are finding that if a consultant doesn't focus on what they need, the session is considered ineffective by the student. This seems to be an error in consultant training and may need further follow up by the writing program director.

Students were then asked about their writing center session that occurred on the day of the interview. This also pertains to Knowles's theory because this question identifies exactly how the student interprets an education experience. The question they were asked was, "Did you feel the writing center consultant was effective?" All student participants indicated that their consultants were effective. A follow up question was, "Why or why not?" The overall response from students is that the consultants listened to the students and then helped with what they needed. Additionally, consultants provided specific feedback for students which helped them with their assignments. Specifically, a student said the consultant helped understand the teacher's notes and expectations. Another consultant for a different student helped with structure and flow of writing. A few students indicated that consultants helped with editing their writing as well.

RQ2: Instructors requiring visits and their expectations for their students.

This research question included both student and faculty participant responses. The first

faculty question was, “Why do instructors require visits to the writing center and what do they hope students will get out of the visits?”

Table 9

Instructors Requiring Visits and Their Expectations for Students

Themes	Frequency from participants	Cumulative percentage
Faculty do not require visits to the writing center.	5 faculty	50%
Faculty require students to visit the writing center.	3 faculty	30%
Faculty suggest visiting the writing center, but it is not required.	2 faculty	20%

Of the five faculty that require writing center visits, Faculty B stated that they had been teaching for over 10 years and they have never required visits. They used to recommend visiting the writing center, but students never reported that they were positive visits. After that, the instructor omitted the requirement from the course. Faculty B does not currently require visits but may suggest it in the future.

Two of the previously mentioned faculty participants indicated that the writing center is valuable, and they think that students should be aware of the resources available to them on campus. Faculty D stated that the college doesn't do a good job promoting the writing center and it seems like it is up to the instructors to endorse student visits.

Another faculty participant specified that their class required a certain type of writing and they would want the writing center to be a resource to help with that. One theme that emerged from the faculty responses is the lack of communication about the writing center at the college or the lack of investment from the college overall. The faculty suggested

one thing that might promote the writing center on campus is to thoroughly inform all faculty and students about it.

Faculty were then asked, “What do you hope students will get out of the visit?” Most faculty hoped that students would get basic written English help in the writing center such as grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, and foundational editing. An additional faculty stated that they expected students to get help with citation formatting in the writing center. One faculty wanted students to be sure they realized there are resources on campus to help them. An emerging theme is that faculty think the writing center is only good for basic English skills. While they are important, it is not the only thing the writing center is used for. Informing instructors of all the services of the writing center could be something useful for the LOC and the college.

In addition to faculty responses, students were asked questions about whether their instructors refer them to the writing center. The question, “Has an instructor referred you to the writing center for an assignment?” was asked to student participants. This question also refers to Knowles’s theory principle of adults take responsibility for their own decisions and, subsequently, for their own lives and are capable of self-direction (Knowles et al., 2005).

Table 10

Instructors Referring Students to the Writing Center

Themes	Frequency from participants	Cumulative percentage
An instructor suggested visiting the writing center, but it was directed at an entire class, not the student individually.	5 students	50%
An instructor did not refer the student to the writing center.	4 students	40%
The student learned about the writing center from a campus tour the took during class and decided to try it out on their own.	1 student	10%

The recurring theme of publicity for the writing center is evident in these responses.

Students aren't told the value of the writing center and instructors don't share how important writing services support is for students. There is a lack of knowledge about the writing center amongst faculty and students. Additionally, students were asked, "What did you hope to get out of the instructor-referred visit?" Few students had instructors refer them individually, so responses were limited. Student B mentioned that when they specifically were referred by an instructor to come visit the writing center to get feedback on an assignment, they didn't come. No further explanation was given.

Next, students were asked, "Would you heed an instructor's advice if they did suggest it? Why?" Student participants presumed that the instructor knew what was best for the student. When asked why they would heed the instructor's advice to visit the writing center, student participants indicated that if the instructor was suggesting it, they probably needed a little more help.

Table 11

Student Heed an Instructor's Advice About Visiting the Writing Center

Themes	Frequency from participants	Cumulative percentage
If an instructor suggested it, the student would go visit the writing center.	8 students	80%
Depending on the class, the student might go.	1 student	10%
Student did not comment.	1 students	10%

Student G stated that if there were issues with their writing, they understood that the instructor did not have time during class to work on minor things like grammar and punctuation. Furthermore, Student G indicated that every instructor needs to spend a certain amount of time with each student so there just wouldn't be time for minor writing concerns during class. Student C specified that they didn't believe anything negative could come from visiting the writing center; it would be a positive experience. A follow up question to this was, "Have you come to the writing center on your own accord (not instructor-referred)?" All student participants indicated that they came in on the day of data collection on their own accord. Student J further exclaimed that most of the times they've come to the writing center, it was on their own accord. This further indicates there is a pattern of a lack of instructor-to-student referrals, which could mean the writing center has a diminished presence on campus.

RQ3: Nature and characteristics of student referral patterns. This research question focused on both student and faculty participant responses. The faculty interview question was, "What is the nature and characteristics of student referral patterns to the

writing center?” Four of the five faculty answered that they do not refer students so there are no patterns. Faculty G stated that, initially, they referred all students to the writing center because it is such a valuable resource for students. This faculty also mentioned that they will refer students that they know are good thinkers but may have trouble getting the words out on the page. Faculty G will individually suggest the writing center when they feel that these individual cases are necessary.

Next, faculty were asked, “When do you feel the need to refer students to the writing center?” Five faculty participants mentioned that if they have a student who is struggling, they will look at a rough draft in class, but they only examine it for content. However, Faculty H and J stated that if there are grammar or punctuation issues, they will recommend a student visit the writing center. Faculty E had a slightly different response; when they encounter writing that is incoherent, and they can’t grade the paper, they sometimes send the student for help. Faculty D stated that they feel like they should refer students more often, but they don’t do it. They claimed that one obstacle in their discipline is that there is a lot of fear and apprehension due to the nature of the course. This furthers the pattern of faculty not referring students to the writing center and perhaps adds to why faculty don’t refer. This might assist the LOC with some insight into the instructor’s perspective, but a larger sampling population may be needed.

In conjunction with the previous question, faculty were asked, “Do you address those [writing] concerns during classroom hours?” Five faculty participants stated that they did address writing concerns during classroom hours. Several of those five went on to state that they may not hold formal English lessons, but they may address concerns in a

rough draft or to the whole class. Faculty D holds office hours in the library where they can sit down with students in a quiet environment and discuss concerns. From this information, it seems like some faculty are addressing some writing concerns in the classroom, but a larger sample may need to be taken to examine how far this extends amongst faculty.

Students were also interviewed for this research question. The first question they were asked was, “How many times have you visited the writing center during your time at [the college]?” Of these varied responses, it seems that a good portion of students are coming to the writing center, but only a third of them come often enough to resemble regularity. Similarly, about a third of them only visited one time; coincidentally, it happened to be the day of data collection for those students. The last third of students, technically most students interviewed, have been there a few times.

Table 12

Number of Student Visits to the Writing Center

Themes	Frequency from participants	Cumulative percentage
1 visit	3 students	30%
2-3 times	1 student	10%
4-5 visits	3 students	30%
10 times	1 student	10%
> 20 times	2 students	20%

This data shows that students may be coming for a few visits, but not regularly. It is possible that these numbers have changed based on the time of data collection; however, at this time, the numbers were equal amongst student participants.

The next question for student participants was, “When you plan on visiting the writing center, is it a spontaneous or planned visit?”

Table 13

Planning Visits to the Writing Center

Themes	Frequency from participants	Cumulative percentage
The student plans his or her visit prior to coming to the writing center.	6 students	60%
The student said that his or her visits are spontaneous.	3 students	30%
Student did some of both (spontaneous and planned).	1 student	10%

A pattern is that most students planned out their visits. This could include things like visiting the writing center website, investigating the hours of the writing center, or looking at the scheduled consultants. It means that students want to come visit the writing center, but they need the time in their own busy schedules to do so. One thing the writing center could investigate in the future is which hours work best for students. Currently, it is open during most business hours and some weekday evening hours, but the hours are not consistent every semester. Further investigating when students need the writing center could improve services.

The next question was, “Have you ever told another student about the writing center?” Six students have told another student about the writing center. Four students have not discussed the writing center with other students. As a follow up question, students were asked, “What was the outcome of this?” Of those 6 students who told others about the writing center, 3 student participants were unsure if their peers visited

the writing center after they suggested it. Three students either knew for certain that someone came to the writing center after they suggested it or heard other students talking about it to know that it was a good resource. This shows that some word-of-mouth is occurring, but it is on a small scale.

RQ4: Suggestions for improving writing support services. This research question focused on both student and faculty participant responses. Faculty participants were asked, “Have you overheard students talking about the writing center services and/or referring other students to the writing center?”

Table 14

Overheard Students Talking or Referring Others to the Writing Center

Themes	Frequency from participants	Cumulative percentage
The faculty had not overheard students talking about the writing center.	8 faculty	80%
The faculty heard students talking about the writing center.	2 faculty	20%

Two of the eight faculty who stated that they had not heard students talking about the writing center also indicated that students did come tell them they had a great experience at the writing center. There was no observed conversation with other students after that. Faculty G stated that students told them how helpful it was; there was one student who was forced to come from another class and they enjoyed the visit so much that they went back every week. As previously indicated by data collection, word of writing support services is not filtering from instructors to students. Based on this interview question, instructors do not overhear students talking about writing support services amongst their

classmates. Improving public relations of the writing center could increase writing support services.

An important faculty question during the interviews was, “What suggestions do you have for improving writing support services for students?” The responses from faculty varied based on familiarity with writing support services. Faculty G suggested that someone come from the writing center to classes and have a workshop time where the consultant sat in the classroom and offered individual help to the students. They suggested that it would be a way to connect with students during classroom work time. This could also be used to promote the writing center to other students who may not have heard of it. Faculty I suggested extended hours into the evening. They state that a lot of students pack their day with classes or worktime and may not have time to go. As previously indicated in this section, that may be something the writing center or LOC could investigate further.

Faculty H recommended that the writing center provide an excerpt for syllabi every semester that outlines their services. That would help get the word out amongst all students and instructors and it would be through a means that every student and faculty utilize (the syllabus). Faculty A suggested that the writing center publish a list of consultants who are more comfortable with certain areas of writing. For example, if a consultant is stronger with editing or proofreading, a student may want to visit them for editing help. Faculty F suggested giving students a pre-test to gauge where students’ writing skills are before they get into the classroom. Marketing and public relations was something brought up by a couple of faculty, Faculty E in particular. Faculty E thought

that students may not want to visit due to shame or hesitance. Making the writing center readily available as a place where students can get help and advertising throughout campus may help alleviate some of the fear in students, per Faculty E.

Faculty C suggested that the writing center provide professional development courses for faculty to help those who may not be comfortable with their own writing skills. They recommended professional developments such as improving the clarity of assignments and teaching students about the writing center. This could help faculty that are uncertain of writing support services or faculty who may not possess strong writing skills. Making the writing center a part of the college orientation should be mandatory according to Faculty D. This could include a 15-minute one-on-one informative session with the writing center and a tour of services, per Faculty D.

Faculty B suggests having information sheets ready for writing topics such as topic sentences, good transitions, paragraph structure, and then how the whole piece comes together. They state some faculty could use these suggestions with their students. Faculty B also recommends placing a larger emphasis on the connection between writing and logic. There were positive suggestions that could help improve writing support services. One common theme that emerged was that faculty may not be comfortable with their own writing but may be too self-conscious or ashamed to visit the writing center. Instead of asking faculty to come visit the writing center, as it currently does, faculty may just need resources available for their use. Another theme was the writing center hours. This is a concern brought up by both faculty and students and should be investigated further.

Students were also asked about their suggestions for the writing center. Answers from students varied based on student experiences. Student D suggested that the consultant asks the student what they want to take away from the session before it begins. Then the student suggested that the consultant follow that protocol strictly during the session. Student B stated, “For me personally, I don’t need a therapist as my teacher, but I need someone who is going to be supportive and be able to kind of take from my explanations that I might need a little bit more support.” This student also indicated that they realized that some students may need more support than they did so this may not apply to every consultation session. Student J recommended that the consultants should read as much as they can during the session and be very specific in their responses as it relates to the purpose of their assignment. Student H suggested that consultants focus on more of the specifics of writing such as grammar and punctuation. This student assumed that it’s the instructor’s job to get the content in the assignment correct.

Student G declared the writing center needed to have more consultants and more space. They compared the writing center space to the Math Lab space, which is much larger by comparison, and indicated that the writing center needed more. Student A suggested that there should be a dedicated outside waiting area for the writing center. As it is, the student said the writing center space is small and it was awkward for them to come in when the consultant was helping another student. Making sessions longer than 20 minutes was suggested by Student E. This student suggested that using an appointment-based system would allow students who needed more time to set that block of time aside.

Student C mentioned that perhaps the writing center could offer various intro to writing workshops for students. They suggested that this was an area they needed guidance in and it seemed obvious that the writing center might offer it. The hours the writing center was open was a concern for Student F. They indicated that there were some days with later hours and some days where the writing center closed earlier. Due to this student's work schedule, they may not be able to make it during the day, but they appreciated the later hours in the evening.

Student I said that they thought the writing center is good right now. However, they indicated it's as good as it can be given the hours open, the availability schedule, and space. This student was also a bit confused by the sign-in process. Students are required to sign in to the LOC via a computer then sign in at the writing center on a paper sign in sheet. This student mentioned that they felt followed and a bit anxious by providing so much information. The hours of the writing center is another theme that emerged during this section. Having dedicated hours for the writing center seems like it would help reach more of the student population. Some other patterns are the location of the writing center and appointment times. These things could be evaluated by the LOC Director and the Writing Program Director if space and availability are assessed.

Discrepant Cases and Results

To ensure the subject matter has been adequately saturated, sufficient time needs to be allotted towards data collection and validating the research. There are times that the researcher should deliberately seek out cases that challenge the expectations of the findings in the research (Merriam, 2009). The discovery of discrepancies in the

information may lead to the need for further investigation into the challenges. It could also be used to address deeper problems or topics where the discrepancies are found. Further investigating these challenges may avoid misinterpretations or may help identify unique situations occurring in the study.

One discrepant case arose during data analysis. Faculty J did not have similar answers to other faculty participants. They had no prior knowledge of the writing center, no idea one even existed on campus, they had never heard other students talking about the writing center, and their courses did not have writing assignments, so the participant could not imagine using the writing center. When asked about consistent writing concerns in their classroom, Faculty J responded with, “I don’t have enough written assignments to do that. I can tell that some students are proficient at writing and others aren’t just from little things that I’ve done.” Faculty J said that there is only one writing assignment in their course and the writing has always been terrible. If there were more writing assignments in their course, Faculty J might consider working on more writing in class and utilizing the writing center.

Faculty J offered some insights into using real world examples when teaching. Instead of reviewing slides, they like to bring a real-world outlook and examples of what happens to real people. When asked about what Faculty J does to be a positive in increasing academic achievement, they offered some interesting thoughts on students being good test-takers. They stated, “... you can become a great test-taker and you’re going to be more successful because you have to be judged in some way. The way that education judges you is through testing methodology ... But it’s good to see them

improving and adapting and trying to take lessons they've learned in the past and adapt to it." Faculty J's contributions to this doctoral project were valuable because it offered a perspective that wasn't expected.

In the future, I may add in some qualifying questions about if the faculty has familiarity with the writing center prior to beginning the interviews. For this doctoral project, it was important to get a baseline for data and to sample various faculty with varied experiences and disciplines. Results from all data will be shared with the LOE director, writing program director, and the director of rhetoric, languages, and philosophy. Considering various disciplines that may not utilize the writing center could be beneficial for program directors as it could provide further outreach for writing support services.

Evidence of Quality

To validate findings, I used two methods to ensure accuracy and credibility of the results (Creswell, 2012). Data collection was accomplished for this qualitative study through interviews. This design was selected to obtain confidential one-on-one feedback from faculty and student participants. The goal of this study was to obtain feedback about the efficacy of the writing center and to determine what might improve writing support services. Upon completion of the data collection, the interview recordings were transcribed along with field note data. After that, results were analyzed and coded for themes and trends.

Member checking was used in this doctoral project which contributed to validity to the results. After data collection, a copy of the interview transcript was sent to all

participants. Birt et al. stated that with qualitative research, because I am both the data collector and analysis, it can provide possibility for bias. Member checking is used to allow the participant the opportunity to validate and verify the qualitative results (Birt et al., 2016). Member checking increased the validity of the study. After the email was sent, students and faculty were given 2 weeks to review the transcript and reply with changes. Only three faculty participants responded to my email requesting minor changes to the transcript. Next, I used a method of peer review by having another researcher in the field read the study and provide critical feedback. In addition, I checked for development of themes and recommendations (Creswell, 2012). The peer reviewer had her M.A. in Creative Writing and is an instructor. She offered suggestions on wording and flow of the paper and helped me examine the connection to the theoretical framework. In addition, I have provided my email address in the event any researcher would want to replicate this study. Finally, discrepant cases were analyzed and reported to enhance the validity of the design (Creswell, 2012).

Outcomes of the Results

The primary stakeholder involved in this study is the LOC where the study took place. The analysis was sent to the writing program director and the LOC director. I wrote a white paper demonstrating the results and recommendations from the doctoral project. In addition, I made a presentation during a faculty in-service meeting at the start of the next semester which informed writing program faculty and writing center consultants the results from this project. This was a time when faculty can ask questions about the research and data collected. Because this research project was a case study, the

information obtained can provide deeper input on the larger problem of higher education writing centers. Furthermore, the research findings from this study can be transferred and used in other settings by other writing center directors and to improve writing centers across the United States.

Conclusion

This doctoral research project was a qualitative case study where 10 faculty and 10 students from the writing center were interviewed. The faculty and students had varying demographics, but there were more females than males and more participants that identified as White, not Hispanic. The majority of faculty were ages 45-54 and students were 18-24. There were a variety of faculty disciplines represented in this research project. Interviews were chosen because they are the best way to solicit individualized feedback from participants. Most student participants appeared to be familiar with writing support services, but closely following that were students who either had no expectations, didn't know what to expect, or students who were visiting for the first time.

Eight out of 10 student participants had a positive experience with the writing center. Most of the student participants had only one visit to the writing center, so patterns could not be identified. Out of all the students, only one student had a frustrating experience where they came in to get help with their ideas on an assignment, as the consultant only focused on grammar and punctuation. Consultants were a recurring theme mentioned by student participants that may need further follow up or training from the

writing program director. Overall, however, all students felt that consultants were effective.

It was discovered that 70% of the faculty participants do not require visits or may suggest it but not require it. Only two of those participants indicated that the writing center is valuable, which is something that will need follow up from the writing center director. Similarly, five student participants indicated that an instructor recommended visiting the writing center to the entire class which may have prompted their visit. Furthermore, 80% of student participants specified that if an instructor suggested it directly to them, they would go visit the writing center.

There were numerous suggestions for the writing center from both faculty and student participants. Some suggestions included extending the hours, including weekend hours, providing writing center information on the syllabi, providing professional development courses for faculty to improve their own writing skills, including the writing center on the college orientation, increasing the number of consultants and space for the writing center, and making consultation sessions longer or adding an appointment-based system to allow students to reserve a block of time.

Given the nature of the study, a white paper is the best means to communicate the results of the project to the rhetoric, languages, and philosophy chair, the LOC director, and the writing program director. In addition, I presented my findings to the writing center in-service meeting. The audience for this presentation was the writing program director and writing center consultants. Section 3 will present a brief description of the proposed project and will describe the goals of the research project.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

Understanding how the writing center is a valuable resource will assist instructors, program directors, and administrators in developing the support needed for students to improve their academic writing achievement. The foundation for this project stemmed from research findings in the professional literature regarding writing skills and successful writing centers. This section includes a description of the project, the rationale for the project, a review of literature, a description of the implementation of the project, an evaluation of the project, and social change implications.

Description and Goals

The goal for this qualitative study was to discover how students and faculty perceive the writing center, and, more broadly, to support the use of the writing center as a bridge for improving academic success in all courses. During the interviews, student and faculty participants discussed writing center services, utilization of the writing center, and suggestions for improvement. The questions posed to both students and faculty were constructed to understand the writing center's processes and how those processes affect student writing and faculty-student interactions. The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the writing center that will assist administrators in making decisions and goals for the center. Because of this, a white paper was the best choice for the project. When receiving the analysis of this study, administrators will evaluate the services provided by the writing center and use the data to improve students' overall academic writing achievement. Providing qualitative data on student and faculty perceptions will

assist the writing program and the LOC directors in determining how to proceed with writing center services in the future.

My primary goal in presenting my findings as a white paper is to inform the college administrators about the faculty and student responses and provide the data necessary to improve writing support services. Furthermore, this white paper will open dialogue between administrators and writing center consultants to work toward improving services for students and faculty. In the white paper, I (a) communicate the findings obtained from data collection and analysis, (b) convey best practices for writing pedagogy and connecting to adult learners, and (c) present recommendations to effect change in the writing center protocol as a means of improving writing support services.

I chose to focus this project on the writing center and improving the efficacy of the writing center because as a composition instructor, I had noticed that writing skills were diminishing in the classroom. The literature review previously completed demonstrates that writing skills in the United States have been declining for decades. To improve writing at the study site, I devised this doctoral project. The recommendations presented in the white paper are based on the perceptions of the faculty and students whom I interviewed—10 faculty and 10 students who may or may not have experiences with the college writing center.

Rationale

A writing center functions as a bridge between the classroom and student comprehension and can encourage collaboration when a student seeks a safe space to get help (Brickey, 2013). By nature, writing centers work through several stages of the

writing process, such as drafting, critiquing, and soliciting constructive criticism (Grimm, 2009). Writing is a cornerstone in academia and is an integral part of almost every class at the college level (Arbee & Samuel, 2015). The purpose of this study was to examine (a) students' initial expectations of the writing center and how they perceived the help they received there, and (b) why some instructors require visits to the writing center and what expectations they have for students' writing center visits. I conducted this inquiry to determine the nature and characteristics of student referral patterns to the writing center, to seek feedback from instructors on how the writing center can maximize its effect on student writing, and to survey the nature and demographic characteristics of student visits to the writing center. Data were collected from various sources, such as interviews with multiple subjects—both student and faculty—and collection of demographic information from the LOC.

Based on information found in the professional literature and the research findings in this study, I determined that a white paper would most accurately and effectively portray the findings and recommendations. A white paper is designed to educate and persuade its audience (Mattern, 2013), which is exactly what this doctoral project is designed to do. Because a white paper is not lengthy, recommendations and solutions can be demonstrated easily in this format (Mattern, 2013). This was a potentially efficacious choice with a qualitative case study because a key component of this study was the effort to understand and communicate the perspectives of students and faculty. Qualitative research allows the researcher to understand the perspectives of participants individually (Merriam, 2009). Hoffman (2006) stated that white papers

generate new ideas and reach a wide audience with the goal of education. Because of this, a white paper is a unique asset that allows me to present the qualitative findings in an organized, coherent fashion.

Reaching an intended audience is an important aspect of a white paper (Hoffman, 2006). To this end, I will be presenting the white paper in an academic setting to the rhetoric, languages, and philosophy chair, the writing program director, and the writing center director to explain the perspectives of student and faculty. Another goal of this white paper is to develop recommendations for how to improve the writing center, which may, in turn, improve student academic success.

Review of the Literature

The literature review presented in this section was conducted and centered around the white paper being the most suitable genre for the presentation of this doctoral project's findings and recommendations. For this review of literature, I searched multiple research databases, including Academic Search Complete, ERIC, JSTOR, EBSCOhost, and Google Scholar. There were limited results in the academic databases on the formatting of white papers. It was not possible to find the required number of academic articles for this review. I ultimately decided to use credible web-based sources to supplement this information. Key search terms included *white papers*, *how to write a white paper*, *history of white papers*, *purpose of white papers*, and *education-based white papers*. Unfortunately, some of the web-based sources had been published more than 5 years ago, but information was similar between older and more recent sources.

Information from the sources found in the academic databases was limited, but web-based sources strengthened my understanding of white papers.

History of White Papers

In the white paper developed for this doctoral study, I make recommendations on how to improve writing support services to address the gap in writing skills in the United States. Historically, white papers were used as official government documents as they were more authoritative in nature, but today, white papers are used in business, specifically for corporations (Purdue Online Writing Lab [OWL], 2018). A white paper is designed for two things specifically: to persuade and to educate (Mattern, 2013). A white paper is meant to reach a larger number of clientele and is designed to meet the needs of clients (Purdue OWL, 2018). It is used to make the writer look credible and aid in the application of recommendations (KnowledgeStorm & Content Factor, 2005). White papers are generally aimed at people who make decisions for a company, and managers or directors are familiar with the white paper genre (KnowledgeStorm & Content Factor, 2005). If a white paper is properly executed, a decision maker may be influenced to buy a product after reading it (KnowledgeStorm & Content Factor, 2005). Based on these characteristics, a white paper is a multifunctional tool that can benefit a college or academic setting. In the context of this doctoral project, it was the best choice for the discussion of findings and recommendations.

Developing the White Paper

Graham (2013) demonstrated that a white paper is adaptable and can be used in presenting evidence and beginning the process of decision making. The audience for a

white paper should be specific to the content (KnowledgeStorm & Content Factor, 2005). If there are multiple audiences, creating white papers to address each audience is recommended (KnowledgeStorm & Content Factor, 2005). Most generally, a white paper includes sections addressing topics such as what the problem is, evidence of the problem, sample solutions, and recommendations (Mattern, 2013). Sometimes, the writer of a white paper does not know the audience personally, but if the writer focuses on addressing a problem, a reader also invested in that problem may be interested in the white paper (Purdue OWL, 2018).

There are multiple ways to present a white paper; an author can choose whichever design fits the content best. Mattern (2013) suggested that a white paper should contain five sections addressing the problem, proof of the problem, additional problems, the basic solution, and the author's solution or message. Regardless of the formatting, a white paper should be presented in the language and format appropriate for the audience. White papers should be objective, should be written with a persuasive or convincing stance, should use the proper tone for the audience (generally formal), and should be written with a specific audience in mind (Hoffman, 2006).

Using the White Paper to Address the Problem

In this white paper, I convey the experiences of faculty and students at the writing center at the study site and their suggestions for improving writing support services. The recommendations provided in the white paper were formed from the insights of study participants and are supported by the literature. Using a white paper to convey findings and recommendations was a cost-effective way to synthesize ideas from participants and

provide background data on existing writing concerns in the United States. White papers are meant to be primarily persuasive (Hoffman, 2006).

Executing the recommendations made in the white paper I am presenting will require some changes in the writing center for consultants, faculty, and students. Hoffman (2006) stated that white papers may aid in decision making. A white paper can be an efficient educational tool (Graham, 2013; Hoffman, 2006; Mattern, 2013). In the context of my project, this genre was most appropriate for presenting data, educating faculty and students, and implementing the changes needed for the writing center. A white paper is a tool used for marketing products or ideas that provides information on specific problems and then delineates potential solutions. This structure supports my intent to inform the audience about the problem, educate the audience, and discuss potential solutions.

Connecting the Theory and Research

I chose a white paper to elaborate on the findings. In the white paper, I present my overall findings for the research questions about student expectations, faculty requirements and expectations, suggestions from students and faculty for writing support services, and student referral patterns to the writing center. The recommendations were based on data collected for the case study and are supported by extensive data from the literature review.

Knowles's theory of andragogy. Adult learners are the fastest growing population in the higher education system in the United States (Rabourn, BrckaLorenz, & Shoup, 2018). Knowles's theory of andragogy refers to adult learners' ability to guide

their own learning and maintain an independent awareness of who they are as learners (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2013; Coberly-Holt & Walton, 2017; Knowles et al., 2005; Morman, 2016; Rabourn et al., 2018; Sato et al., 2017). Applying the theory of andragogy, instructors can use the curriculum to meet the needs of adult learners by planning activities around real-world situations and ideas (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2013; Knowles et al., 2005; Sato et al., 2017). Adult educators are encouraged to use an andragogic model to encourage a learner-focused teaching environment (Sharp, 2018). The foundation of andragogy is that adult learners take responsibility for their learning by connecting their life and professional experiences to what is going on in the classroom (Coberly-Holt & Walton, 2017; Knowles et al., 2005; Sato et al., 2017, Sharp, 2018). In this way, learners gain new knowledge, and the relationship between their experiences and course materials is seamless (Sato et al., 2017). The andragogical model incorporates students' real-life experiences as they focus on problem-solving tasks in the curriculum (Sharp, 2018).

Another key component of andragogy is a concept called *self-directed learning* (Sato et al., 2017). Self-directed learning includes taking feedback and using it in a constructive fashion, which helps students make sense of what they are learning (Sato et al., 2017). To reach their full potential, students in the 2010s must be motivated to move forward from traditional learner roles to an active learner style (Coberly-Holt & Walton, 2017). In active learning, adult learners take initiative to guide their own learning experiences (Sato et al., 2017); this is an especially important concept with regard to writing centers. According to Hudd, Sardi, and Lopriore (2013), writing deficits can

derive from cognitive deficits, which may occur because students do not use writing as a process. When writing, students simultaneously work through comprehending material, adapting to new knowledge, and being aware of new forms for expressing what they have learned (Hudd et al., 2013).

The white paper for this doctoral project connects the gap between the writing deficit recognized nationwide and the decreased use of writing support services at the college. By recognizing how adult learners think and write, the administration and other decision makers can implement positive changes at the writing center. This would benefit both students and faculty and would improve students' writing, reading, critical thinking, and logic skills.

The continued need for writing development. For decades, the need to improve writing skills has been on the minds of higher education instructors. As early as a century ago, instructors from the engineering industry recognized that students did not have adequate English skills to do their jobs (Liu & Murphy, 2012). Today, written communication is listed as a skill that employers specifically seek in potential employees; however, employers also prefer prospective employees to have strong critical thinking, oral communication, and problem-solving skills (Liu & Murphy, 2012). Writing remains the primary method of communication in higher education (duPreez & Fossey, 2012; Willis, Wilkie & Gracey, 2012). The importance of writing has been widely recognized by numerous authors who agree that students continue to find writing difficult regardless of their instructors' efforts (duPreez & Fossey, 2012). Clear thinking is intertwined with clear writing (Nicolini, 2006). The goal of an educational program is to develop students'

critical thinking skills, instill knowledge, and allow students to master effective communication skills such as writing and reading (Gibbons, 2012).

Writing skills in the United States have been decreasing to a point that deficits in these skills are affecting the job market. As Willis et al. stated, a study by Motorola indicated that 80% of applicants screened nationwide failed a test designed for seventh-grade English. The College Board's recent inclusion of an essay section in its SAT I test indicates increased concern for diminishing writing skills in high school students (McNair & Curry, 2013). In a 2005 U.S. survey, just 11% of college seniors were proficient writers (Nelson, Range & Ross, 2012). Despite widespread writing deficits, two-thirds of salaried employees' job descriptions specifically mention that the employee should be able to write clearly (Willis et al., 2012). The Bureau of Labor Statistics projected that from 2014 to 2024, professions requiring more than a high school diploma would increase by as much as 14% (Kallison, 2017). With proper writing skills, college graduates can be better prepared for the job market.

There are still barriers to academic success for adult learners, and many in this demographic do not possess the necessary academic skills to succeed at the college level (Kallison, 2017). According to Willis et al., over 95.2% of employers consider various aspects of writing—such as punctuation, spelling, and grammar—to be important in business communication. In fact, in 2004, employers in the United States reported spending over \$3 billion annually on improving employees' written communication skills (Willis et al., 2012). Furthermore, as many as 50% of American companies consider writing skills when offering promotions to salaried employees (Willis et al., 2012), which

proves that having strong writing skills is imperative in the job market today. New hires are being sent to training to improve their written and oral communication skills prior to being integrated into companies (Willis et al., 2012).

Worldwide, there is an increased value placed on new graduates and what they contribute to employers (duPreez & Fossey, 2012). Employers are looking for a well-rounded graduate possessing skills not limited to social skills, communication skills, problem solving, and critical thinking (duPreez & Fossey, 2012; Liu & Murphy, 2012; Willis et al., 2012); however, employers indicate that the development of these skills is constantly changing, and students need to be able to adapt (duPreez & Fossey, 2012). Communication skills, including writing capabilities, are among the most important skills identified by employers for new graduates to possess (duPreez & Fossey, 2012; Willis et al., 2012).

Using this theory in the writing center. Adapting an adult learner's theory of andragogy to the writing center would allow consultants to approach students in the manner directed by Knowles (Knowles et al., 2005). As previously stated, Knowles's theory of andragogy refers to the adult learner's ability to guide their own learning and maintain an independent awareness of who they are as learners (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2013; Coberly-Holt & Walton, 2017; Knowles et al.; Morman, 2016; Rabourn et al., 2018; Sato et al., 2017). Consultants can use the curriculum to meet the needs of adult learners by planning activities around real-world situations and ideas (Knowles et al.). These ideas should ground writing center sessions and connect the consultant to the student and their writing assignment. The white paper will bridge the gap between

student writing skill deficits, the lack of faculty knowledge about the writing center, and the importance of the writing center consultation sessions.

Project Description

The goal of this study was to discover student and faculty expectations for the writing center, to discover why instructors do or do not choose to use the writing center to help students, to gather suggestions on how to improve writing support services for both students and faculty, and to discover the nature and characteristics of student referral patterns. In addition, this study examined the needs of adult learners in the classroom and how faculty take these needs into consideration. Upon completion of this study, steps will be taken to share the data with college decision-makers. The writing program director, the LOC director, and college administrators are interested in the analysis of the data from this study. With this information, decision-makers can improve writing support services for students and make the writing center more effective.

An implementation plan for the writing center must identify the following: (a) the existing supports and writing resources that exist for both students and faculty, (b) resolution to potential barriers, (c) an implementation timetable, and (d) the roles and responsibilities of students and faculty.

Potential Resources and Existing Supports

The writing center currently offers multiple resources and supports. These supports include the following:

- The writing center consultants assist students with any part of the writing process (brainstorming to final drafts, etc.).

- The writing center consultants provide extensive feedback on any written assignment.
- The writing center consultants are generally writing instructors on staff at the college.
- The writing center is also available to faculty who may need help with writing assignment sheets or other miscellaneous writing tasks.

In addition to supports located on campus, there are online support services such as the online writing lab. A plethora of resources are available via the Internet including writing tutorials, sample APA and MLA essay templates available for download, and free access to multiple university writing centers' online resources.

Potential Barriers

As this is a case study and the goal was to gather baseline data for the writing center, the data collected was informative and the feedback provided is meant to mold and shape the future of writing support services for the study site. One pattern identified from data collection is that faculty are rarely recommending the writing center to students. Out of 10 student participants, six of them were not referred to the writing center specifically by an instructor. However, 10 out of 10 student participants indicated that they would go to the writing center if the instructor suggested it. Based on the data above, one potential barrier might be that instructors are not supportive of the writing center and do not see the value in its services; thus, faculty do not recommend its services to students. A potential solution to this problem would be faculty education on the services of the writing center. One faculty participant suggested employing faculty

professional development (PD) seminars to educate faculty on the services provided. Faculty could earn PD hours which is a way to professionally expand their experiences as instructors and they would understand the services provided by the writing center, which would improve student academic success.

The hours of the writing center were also identified as a potential barrier to success by student participants. One student indicated that the hours are varied, and they had difficulty finding a time that fit their schedule. They would find benefit in hours later in the evening but could see how perhaps some students would want hours earlier in the day too. Another student participant thought the writing center was open on Saturdays, so they came by for a consultation session and no one was there. The writing center schedule varies from semester to semester depending on the availability of the consultants, so this could be a barrier to student success. A potential solution to this problem would be to maintain a set schedule for writing support services. This could easily include early or late hours various days of the week. The writing program director may consider implementing weekend hours as well, depending on consultant availability, student interest, and available funds. Further research may be necessary with regards to weekend hours.

Proposal for Implementation and Timetable

Upon completion of this doctoral project, the analysis will be sent to the writing program lead and the LOC director. I will write a white paper demonstrating the background data, design, implementation, and results of the doctoral project. In addition, I made a presentation during a faculty in-service meeting at the start of the semester

which will inform writing program faculty and writing center consultants the results from this project. This was a time when faculty could ask questions about the research and data collected. Furthermore, the writing center may need 6 months to 1 year to establish goals and implement an action plan to improve writing support services.

Roles and Responsibilities of Students and Faculty

The research demonstrated the effectiveness and shortcomings of the writing center based on student and faculty perceptions. In this study, faculty expressed that students should accept responsibility for their learning. One faculty pointed out that it is the student's responsibility to ask questions. The students' role in the classroom is to be prepared to receive instruction. Alternatively, one student indicated that they did not need the instructor to be a therapist, but they need an instructor who can interpret from their assignments and writing that they may need support. Naturally, students and faculty will each have individual interpretations of roles and responsibilities, but it is the responsibility of both to be empathetic towards one another. Education is a collaborative effort. In the writing center, consultants have the responsibility to effectively meet the needs of students. By doing so, consultants will be able to facilitate student writing skill development, provide resources to encourage further writing skill development, and guide students towards completing their writing assignment.

Project Evaluation Plan

The evaluation plan for the white paper was a summative design which involved data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Creswell (2012) indicated that research involves methodically collecting and analyzing data then creating and implementing an

action plan, which is the most like this white paper and overall research design. In addition, Creswell described two different types of action research: practical action research and participatory action research. Participatory action research takes place outside of educational settings in the community (Creswell, 2012), which is not applicable to this white paper. Practical action research takes place in an educational setting where teachers conduct the research (Creswell, 2012) which is the most applicable to this white paper. This type of evaluation is suitable for this white paper because I am an instructor at the study site, where the research was conducted. Data interpretation and recommendations in the white paper will include where the writing center excels and where there are areas of improvement, suggestions for improvement, and student and faculty feedback. Following the data interpretation, the white paper will be taken to the writing program director, the writing center director, the LOC director, and college administration.

The goal of this doctoral project was to gain insight into student and faculty perceptions about the writing center and to discover ways to improve writing support services for students which will, in turn, improve academic success for students in all college courses. The white paper provided insights into the perceptions from both students and faculty about the writing center, but I fully expect this project will open the door for conversation amongst writing center consultants and decision-makers at the college, which will improve writing support services for students. The key stakeholders for this white paper are the writing program director, the writing center director, the LOC director, and administration at the college.

Project Implications

Above all else, implementing a positive social change was a priority in this doctoral study. Locally, this study may help improve student writing skills and faculty interactions with the writing center. At a global level, writing skills are continually diminishing and critical thinking skills in students graduating college are lacking. The writing center has the potential to significantly improve writing skills for college students, which will improve graduating seniors' entry into the current job market.

Local Community

The implications of this study are for hopeful improvement of student writing skills through enhancement of writing support services. Since recent data have not been collected from the writing center, understanding faculty and student perceptions and expectations will help bring the writing center to its full potential; furthermore, this will help students improve their writing skills and academic success through the tireless efforts of those connected to the writing center. The significance of the study is to address the local problem of how to make the writing center more effective for both students and faculty. Without this study, decision-makers and college administration have no way to determine how the writing center can improve services which will aid in improving student writing abilities; in addition, improving writing skills will lead to improved academic success in all college courses.

For a writing center to be effective, the focus for consultations should remain on the student, not the consultant. A writing center is not just about producing superior writing, but it is also about teaching students to accept constructive criticism,

acknowledge their writing flaws, and improve from where they began (Arbee & Samuel, 2015). Furthermore, this will encourage greater academic success in all courses which will prepare students for graduation and entry into a competitive job market. According to Sacher (2016), students who are below writing standards right out of college have a negative impact on businesses, both locally and at the global level.

Far-Reaching

On a larger scale, writing skills are not improving in the United States and haven't been since the 1970s (Carter & Harper, 2013). In 2011, 73% of twelfth grade student performed average or below average on the NAEP writing test (Sacher, 2016).

Furthermore, Sacher indicated that employees may be hired and promoted based on their writing skills; this skill encompasses about two-thirds of an employee's job. Writing activities in the classroom are designed to develop critical thinking skills, improve student learning and engagement, and increase academic success (Huskin, 2016). Since writing skills progress and develop throughout students' academic career, one may conclude that increased expectations in the job market will lead to the need for increased writing ability (Carter & Harper, 2013). Utilizing a writing center could be the resource needed to bridge the gap between student writing skills, instructor expectations, decreased writing skills, and the high expectations of future employers (Brickey, 2013).

Opportunities for social change are vast due to the implications to both the local community at the study site and the broader community of educators and administration nationwide. Those who possess the necessary ability, knowledge, and motivation serve as social change agents. Improving writing skills has a far-reaching contribution to higher

education and, by extension, all employers nationwide. Although this qualitative study has a small sample population of faculty and students in a single higher education facility which may or may not be generalizable to similar populations, the study design and doctoral project examines one method for determining the needs of a writing center within a single educational facility. The findings from this study may be used to develop strategies for improving writing support services for students.

Conclusion

The study findings and professional literature demonstrate clear evidence of a continuing need for writing development and support for students and faculty. The writing center needs a clear direction to meet the needs of all students and faculty. Graduating students should be able to integrate into the job market with more skills – especially writing skills. The writing program director, the LOC director, and the college administration will be able to make informed decisions about the effectiveness and the future of the writing center. In the future, the writing center will have a baseline with which to gather data and implement change. Full implementation and discussion of the results from this study will take place in 6 months to 1 year.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Introduction

This qualitative case study explored a college writing center and how faculty and students interacted with writing support services. The project was rewarding for me and for the college, but it was challenging as well. There was a high level of enthusiasm during my interviews with faculty and students. It was interesting to gain the perspectives of faculty from various disciplines and demographics; it was also fascinating to hear student perspectives on the writing center. After data collection, a huge weight was lifted off my shoulders, and I continued to work on drafting this project, but life events and professional responsibilities required my attention. That made completion extremely difficult. In this section, I present my reflections on the study, how this study will promote positive social change, and how I have grown as a scholar.

Project Strengths and Limitations

The goal of this doctoral project was to understand how the college that served as the study site used its writing center as a resource. The interview questions were designed to better understand the writing center so that instructors, program directors, and administrators can effectively meet the needs of students and faculty on campus. This project was designed to support the use of the writing center as a resource to improve student writing abilities and thus act as a bridge toward academic success in all college courses.

The strengths of the white paper center on providing the information needed to bridge gaps between students, faculty, writing center consultants, and the administration.

Some valuable data were collected from students and faculty. Both students and faculty provided thorough feedback, which satisfied the research questions. The faculty participants provided honest feedback that guided the white paper and will help program leads and administration direct the writing center and improve writing support services for students. Some of the faculty responses were not positive, but this constructive feedback will be valuable to efforts to improve the writing center and thus represents a very important strength of this doctoral project. Constructive feedback came from students as well, constituting an additional strength of this project. Students were honest and quite candidly discussed their experiences with the writing center, which formed an important part of the white paper. In examining the needs of the student population in relation to the writing center, the white paper offers feedback to program leads and administrators. It has broader implications for creating a model for successful writing centers at community colleges across the country.

Possible limitations to this doctoral project include the financial means necessary to make the changes required for the writing center. Professional development for instructors was one area of need that was highlighted by several faculty participants; however, having instructors attend workshops, taking time away from classes, and/or hiring substitutes would be expensive for the college. Another concern noted by several participants, availability of funding, is something that should be considered by the college. An additional limitation is the writing center's hours of operation. At present, the writing center is open during various hours throughout the day; its schedule is not consistent. Maintaining consistent hours for the writing center each semester and possibly

having the writing center open later or earlier in the day might be beneficial. A student participant recommended weekend hours; this option might be worth examining. Again, however, expanded hours would create financial concerns. Further research is needed on this issue, but it should be noted that consistency in hours was a topic that emerged in multiple interviews.

Establishing a successful writing center at the study site is feasible if the limitations are addressed. Administrators and program leads should consider the recommendations from faculty and students outlined in the white paper and provide some additional budget for these changes. Greater awareness of the writing center is needed throughout the college. Faculty awareness and involvement will increase students' visits to the writing center and ultimately improve students' writing skills and overall academic performance. The research showed that writing center consultants need to be supportive and work as guides through the writing process for students. For example, several student participants mentioned that when they came to the writing center seeking advice about a specific issue, the consultant focused only on punctuation or grammar instead. Listening to students and allowing sessions to revolve around the writing will make the writing center more successful. These recommendations are thoroughly outlined in the white paper that will be distributed to directors and administrators to aid in decision making for the writing center.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

There is one alternative approach that may be effective if the LOC director, the writing program director, and the director of rhetoric, languages, and philosophy do not

choose to follow my recommendations. Because this was a qualitative case study and a primary objective was to gather data and create a baseline for the writing center, I did not develop many alternatives. If data are collected in the future, alternatives may be discovered. For this study, the alternative approach would be to do nothing. The writing center is functioning at peak level, and it has been successful in helping some students, but it is not flourishing. Furthermore, faculty are unaware of writing support services. Unfortunately, if nothing is done, the college may determine that the writing center is not worth the time and money invested. However, at its current pace, the writing center could continue operating. Students are still visiting the writing center, and consultants are helping students who visit. If nothing is done, the voices of the faculty and student participants will go unheard, and the writing center may not thrive as it could.

Scholarship, Project Development, and Leadership and Change

Designing this research project and conducting the research expanded my knowledge of academic research. I had never conducted qualitative research prior to enrolling in this program. I originally began this doctoral process in 2012, but I was unsuccessful at that time. I began this doctoral process again in 2015.

In addition, I teach a research methods course for a university, and conducting the research for this doctoral project afforded me firsthand information to deliver to my students. When we are discussing data collection and types of research methods, students appreciate that I have intimate knowledge of the subject.

This was the first time that I designed a research project and followed it through to fruition. After completing this research project, I understand how important qualitative

research is to solicit in-depth responses from participants. In this project study, qualitative research allowed me to gather detailed responses from the faculty and student participants to improve writing services at the study site.

Project Development and Evaluation

After completing the data collection portion of this research project, I began to consider how I might implement the changes needed in the writing center. There are obstacles to implementing changes, such as financial constraints, worker availability, and the rate of change in the community college setting. But there is hope that these results will be helpful in implementing the changes needed for the writing center. This project is a starting point for research, and further data collection may be needed. However, this research may make a difference by informing efforts to improve student writing skills and overall academic achievement.

Reflecting on this project allowed me to consider my progress along the journey to completion. In the first year of this doctoral project process, I lost both my first and second chairs at Walden University and had to start over with new faculty. When that happened, I also lost a flash drive that contained my entire project. Unfortunately at the time, but fortunately overall, I had to start over. Eventually, I was able to provide greater focus to my studies that ultimately led me to this doctoral project. I was eager to finish the project and found it difficult to focus my efforts and get to a feasible research path. I had to manage my expectations and focus on just one task at a time while completing this project. I expect a similar concept will be at play with the writing center. Changes will

not happen overnight, but with slow, steady work, the writing center can reach a point where it is meeting the needs of the entire student and faculty population.

Leadership and Change

Overall, this project taught me a lot about leadership and change. Change is something that does not happen overnight. At the community college level, change is something that can move slowly, but I am confident that the writing center will make the necessary changes to be successful and to help students learn and grow. Proper leadership will help the writing center flourish. As a researcher, I demonstrated leadership to my fellow colleagues and to my students. This research project gave me a level of credibility with the students in my research methods class. Because I had personal experience with the topics we were discussing in class, I could offer my students insight and advice on what we discussed in lecture. At the study site, it was natural for me to assume a leadership role because I was seeking data to advance the mission of the writing center. The goal of this doctoral project was to understand how the college can use the writing center as a resource to improve students' writing skills and promote students' academic success in all college courses. The data collected for this doctoral project will give decision makers enough information to initiate the positive changes needed to make the writing center successful.

Reflection on the Importance of the Work

Analysis of Self as Scholar

After looking back on this project and the journey to its completion, I am amazed at how far I have come as a person, student, researcher, and instructor. This doctoral

project has improved my own writing abilities, thereby making me a better instructor. In addition, by gaining experience as a student and researcher, I have increased my ability to empathize with my students. Before I completed this project, I was familiar with the concepts of academic writing and research but lacked practical application experience. I currently teach composition courses and research methods courses, and concepts and skills covered in those courses are similar to what I needed to accomplish this doctoral project. The difference is that the courses I teach just brush the surface of concepts and skills, whereas this doctoral project involved the concepts and skills in much more depth.

Above all, this doctoral project has fueled my passion for education and lifelong learning. It is with a clear mind that I believe that education and teaching are my future. I want to inspire students to accomplish their goals as I did, and I want to assist them with both their writing skills and overall academic achievement in their college careers. With my own writing development, I can see dramatic changes in my thought process and in my language use from the beginning to the end of this project. My writing skills have continued to strengthen throughout this doctoral project, and I suspect that they will further improve in the future.

Analysis of Self as Practitioner

My experience in the education field is vast. I have taught courses in a wide variety of subjects, including medical transcription, composition, literature, developmental English, and research methods. This doctoral project related to all those courses. In the research methods course, lectures are based on topics of data collection, research practices, credibility, and performing a research project. This doctoral project

involved more in-depth analysis of similar topics. Completing this study has given me the credibility needed to guide my students through unfamiliar concepts. In relation to my writing courses, completing a doctoral project of this size has afforded me credibility to show that students can accomplish their writing goals. When I offer lectures on how to perform credible research or complete a references page, students understand that I have firsthand knowledge on this topic. As a practitioner, I believe that this doctoral project has a direct link to my teaching style and has allowed me to be more empathetic and patient with my students. In addition, my writing skills have continued to grow and develop throughout this project. Improving my writing skills has fostered my ability to guide my students in proper academic writing.

Analysis of Self as Project Developer

Developing this project was one of the hardest things I ever had to do in my academic career. I needed a doctoral project that was not too overwhelming but remained attainable and met the criteria to complete this degree. In the beginning, a project this elaborate seemed beyond my capabilities. However, after breaking down the pieces and discovering that what I was trying to accomplish was achievable, I found that it all came together. A qualitative case study made sense for me, given my background in English; a quantitative study would not have played to my strengths. I appreciated qualitative data because of the ability to work with the verbal responses of participants. It was a natural fit, given my professional history as an English instructor. Ultimately, although this doctoral project was one of the hardest things I have ever accomplished, it was one of the most rewarding achievements of my academic and professional career.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

The social significance of this doctoral project resides in the information it offers on how the study site can use its writing center as a resource to improve students' writing abilities. For students, improved writing skills act as a bridge to greater academic achievement in all college courses. By implementing the changes suggested by student and faculty participants, students visiting the writing center will receive more attentive consultation sessions. Strong writing skills are conducive to a successful academic career and transition into the job market. Extensive improvements and transformations at the higher education level for writing centers across the country could promote positive social change through the support of students' writing skills.

This study's implications for change involve the potential improvement of the writing center. Collecting data on the writing center was a positive first step toward such change, as data had not been collected prior to this doctoral project. Without a baseline of data, the study site had no way to discern which direction the writing center should go. The data collected were not all positive; some shortcomings need to be addressed upon completion of this study, but the overall goal remains constant. The goal of this doctoral project was to understand student and instructor perceptions of the writing center and to discover how the writing center could improve to meet the college's needs. With the data collected, the college can work toward improving writing center services and aid students in improving their writing skills. Future research may be needed to determine how effective the changes made might be or to determine what else the writing center can do

to improve services. That research can be performed on a smaller scale, such as through the administration of writing center or faculty surveys.

In the future, faculty and students may wish to expand upon this research project by determining the current state of efficiency of the writing center. I recommend following up with students and faculty in approximately 6 months to 1 year to determine how effective the writing center is and what can be done to improve services. In the field of education, this doctoral project may apply to other writing centers. The data collected represent a baseline and foundation for research that can be improved upon in the future. Other writing centers nationwide may find application for some of the changes presented.

Conclusion

This doctoral project had many strengths, such as discovering the perceptions of faculty and students about the writing center. While some perceptions of the writing center were positive, some negative aspects of the writing center also emerged, and I recommend that these be addressed. Some possible limitations of my recommendations could be financial, in that some of the changes could cost professional development money, instructor time, and/or substitute pay. Future research may be warranted after some changes are made at the writing center.

While this doctoral project was an overwhelming challenge at times, the overall benefits far outweighed the difficulties. The goal of the writing center is to improve students' writing skills, which will improve overall academic achievement. Creating an effective writing center and implementing the changes needed will require an enthusiastic, hard-working instructor. As a scholar, project developer, and leader in

education, I found that this study pushed every boundary I had prior to completion; however, because of this project, I have become a better instructor, writer, and leader.

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Appendix A: The White Paper

Creating an Effective Writing Center: A Case Study on Improving Student Writing

White Paper

Katie Leber

December 2018

Background

Larger Population

Writing issues have existed in the United States for decades. Since the 1970s, improving writing skill levels in the classroom is something that has been a concern of higher education classrooms across the United States (Carter & Harper, 2013; National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.; Perin, 2013). It is estimated that college freshmen write at least 25 hours per week, which has led to freshmen students believing that their academic writing skills are fully established (Berrett, 2014). To combat the diminishing writing skills of college age students, writing centers were established. In the early twentieth century, higher education facilities had hints of what would become writing centers, but no one officially labeled them as such until the 1970s (Waller, 2002). The term then became more common in the 1980s. The university administrators who initiated the earliest writing centers hoped to produce better writers and to help students work on the process of writing rather than focusing specifically on the individual writer (Waller, 2002). Unfortunately, throughout history, writing centers, which often stem from the English Department, have been insufficiently staffed and minimally funded (Waller, 2002). This can make writing center underutilized resources for students.

Local Level

At the study site, the Learning Opportunity Center (LOC) houses several different learning help centers such as a foreign language lab, math lab, and the science lab as well as the writing center. Per the LOC director, the diminishing number of writing center visits and the cause for the decreased usage of this service is a cause for alarm and this

has been made a priority for the college. The LOC director also indicated that because resources at the college level are low, providing purposeful services to students who intend to use them is an absolute necessity. The rhetoric, languages, and philosophy chair said that both professors and students hold misconceptions about the writing center, such as the way it is believed to be a “fix it” center, meaning students expect consultants to fix the problems for them. However, some faculty in other departments deem the writing center as indispensable to the college, per the rhetoric, languages, and philosophy chair. Because of these criteria, the writing center was an excellent subject for a doctoral project.

As shown in Table A1 below, the writing center had a significant decrease in student visits from the Fall 2015 to Spring 2016 semesters. In Fall 2015, student data showed 5,789 students attended the college, but only 268 visited the writing center. In the Spring 2016 semester, of the 6,278 students who attended, only 154 visited the writing center.

Table A1

Student Visits to Writing Center

Academic year	Enrolled students	Writing center visitors
Fall 2013	5,851	8*
Spring 2014	6,295	242
Fall 2014	5,878	221
Spring 2015	6,009	238
Fall 2015	5,789	268
Spring 2016	6,278	154
Fall 2016	2,107	464
Spring 2017	6,458	553

Note. The “enrolled students” information was provided by the study site. The “writing center visitors” data are from the writing program director and the writing center director.

* The reason for the low number has not been determined. Prior to this case study, data had not been collected at the writing center.

While college enrollment significantly increased, writing center visits decreased. To improve the writing center and to decrease the gap in usage per enrollment, the college should establish parameters discerning the writing center’s effectiveness.

Summary of Findings

During the design of this study, there were no previous data, but after emailing with the writing program director, I discovered that there were things the study site did not know about the writing center. Instructor referrals and patterns were something that the college needed to know more about. In addition, the college wanted to know how student visits happened, whether they were planned or spontaneous, and if instructors had an influence on their visits. Lastly, the LOC director asked about general suggestions for writing support services. These results are presented with guarded caution as this is considered baseline data. Since data have not been collected previously in this manner,

this research project could open doors for further research. This section includes faculty and student responses and positive, negative, and neutral views of the writing center.

For the first research question, students were asked about their initial expectations of the writing center. One theme that was prevalent in this data was that there were four students who either visited for their first time or they didn't know what to expect and were rather hesitant. Five students visited for a variety of reasons and it was presumed that they were familiar with writing support services. Students who visited for the first time during data collection was a prominent theme. Additionally, eight of the 10 student participants had a positive experience with the writing center. Overall, student feedback about the writing center is positive. In the future, this could be an area where further data could be collected. Finding the students' impressions of the writing center on a larger scale could be valuable information for the writing center.

For the second research question, students and faculty were asked about instructors requiring visits to the writing center. Five of the 10 faculty do not require visits to the writing center, three faculty require students to visit the writing center, and two faculty suggest visiting the writing center, but it is not required. One theme that emerged from the faculty responses is the lack of communication about the writing center at the college or the lack of investment from the college overall. The faculty suggested that one thing that might promote the writing center on campus is to thoroughly inform all faculty and students about it.

Faculty were then asked, "What do you hope students will get out of the visit?" Most faculty hoped that students would get basic written English help in the writing

center such as grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, and foundational editing. An additional faculty stated that they expected students to get help with citation formatting in the writing center. One faculty wanted students to be sure they realized there are resources on campus to help them. An emerging theme is that faculty think the writing center is only good for basic English skills. While they are important, it is not the only thing the writing center is used for. Informing instructors of the services of the writing center could be something useful for the LOC and the college.

In addition to faculty responses, students were asked questions about whether their instructors refer them to the writing center. Five of the 10 student participants said that an instructor suggested visiting the writing center, but it was directed at the whole class, not them specifically. Four student participants did not have an instructor referral. The recurring theme of publicity for the writing center is evident in these responses. Students aren't told the value of the writing center and instructors don't share how important writing services support is for students. There is a lack of knowledge about the writing center amongst faculty and students.

Then students were asked if they would heed the instructor's advice if they suggested visiting the writing center. Eight of the 10 students indicated that if the instructor suggested it, they would go visit the writing center. Student participants presumed that the instructor knew what was best for the student. When asked why they would heed the instructor's advice to visit the writing center, student participants indicated that if the instructor was suggesting it, they probably needed a little more help. A follow up question for students asked if they had come to the writing center on that day

on their own accord (not instructor-referred). All student participants indicated that they came in on the day of data collection for this doctoral project on their own accord. This further indicates there is a pattern of a lack of instructor to student referrals which could mean the writing center has a diminished presence on campus.

For the third research question, faculty and students were asked about referral patterns to the writing center. Four of the five faculty answered that they do not refer students so there are no patterns. When asked if faculty feel the need to refer students to the writing center, five faculty participants mentioned that if they have a student who is struggling, they will look at a rough draft in class, but they only examine it for content. This furthers the pattern of faculty not referring students to the writing center and perhaps adds to why faculty don't refer. This might help the LOC with some insight into the instructor's perspective, but a larger sampling population may be needed.

Students were also interviewed for this research question and asked how many times they visited the writing center. A good portion of students are coming to the writing center, but only a third of them come often enough to resemble regularity. Similarly, about a third of them only visited one time; coincidentally, it happened to be the day of data collection for those students. The last third of students, technically most students interviewed, have been there a few times. This data shows that students may be coming for a few visits, but not regularly. It is possible that these numbers have changed based on the time of data collection; however, at that time, the numbers were equal amongst student participants.

Students were then asked whether they plan their visits to the writing center or if they are spontaneous. The pattern is that most students (60%) planned out their visits. This could include things like visiting the writing center website, investigating the hours open, or looking at the scheduled consultants. It means that students want to come visit the writing center, but they need the time in their own busy schedules to do so. One thing the writing center could investigate in the future is which hours work best for students. Currently, it is open during most business hours and some weekday evening hours, but the hours are not consistent every semester. Further investigating when students need the writing center could improve services.

Next, students were asked, "Have you ever told another student about the writing center?" Six students have told another student about the writing center. Four students have not discussed the writing center with other students. As a follow up question, students were asked about the outcome of this. Of those six students who told others about the writing center, three student participants were unsure if their peers visited the writing center after they suggested it. Three students either knew for certain that someone came to the writing center after they suggested it or heard other students talking about it to know that it was a good resource. This shows that some word-of-mouth is occurring, but it seems to be on a small scale.

For the fourth research question, faculty were first asked whether they had overheard students talking about writing support services. Two of the eight faculty who stated that they had not heard students talking about the writing center also indicated that students did come tell them they had a great experience at the writing center. There was

no observed conversation with other students after that. As previously indicated by data collection, word of writing support services is not filtering from instructors to students. Based on this interview question, instructors do not overhear students talking about writing support services amongst their peers. Improving public relations of the writing center could increase writing support services.

An important faculty question during the interviews was about suggestions for improving writing support services. The responses from faculty varied based on familiarity with writing support services. Faculty G suggested that someone come from the writing center to classes and have a workshop time where the consultant sat in the classroom and offered individual help to the students. They suggested that it would be a way to connect with students during classroom work time. This could also be used to promote the writing center to other students who may not have heard of it. Faculty I suggested extended hours into the evening. They state that a lot of students pack their day with classes or worktime and may not have time to go. That may be something the writing center or LOC could investigate further.

Faculty H recommended that the writing center provide an excerpt for syllabi every semester that outlines their services. That would help get the word out amongst students and instructors and it would be a means that every student and faculty utilize. Faculty A suggested that the writing center publish a list of consultants who are more comfortable with certain areas of writing. For example, if a consultant is stronger with editing or proofreading, a student may want to visit them for editing help. Faculty F suggested giving students a pre-test to gauge where students' writing skills are before

they get into the classroom. Marketing and public relations was something brought up by a couple of faculty, Faculty E in particular. Faculty E thought that students may not want to visit due to shame or hesitance. Making the writing center readily available as a place where students can get help and advertising throughout campus may help alleviate some of the fear in students, per Faculty E.

Faculty C suggested that the writing center provide professional development courses for faculty to help those who may not be comfortable with their own writing skills. They recommended professional developments such as improving the clarity of assignments and teaching students about the writing center. This could help faculty that are uncertain of writing support services or faculty who may not possess strong writing skills. Making the writing center a part of the college orientation should be mandatory according to Faculty D. This could include a 15-minute one-on-one informative session with the writing center and a tour of services, per Faculty D.

Faculty B suggests having information sheets ready for writing topics such as topic sentences, good transitions, paragraph structure, and then how the whole piece comes together. They state some faculty could use these suggestions with their students. Faculty B also recommends placing a larger emphasis on the connection between writing and logic. There were positive suggestions that could help improve writing support services. One common theme that emerged was that faculty may not be comfortable with their own writing but may be too self-conscious or ashamed to visit the writing center. Instead of asking faculty to come visit the writing center, as it currently does, faculty may just need resources available for their use. Another theme was the writing center hours.

This is a concern brought up by both faculty and students and should be investigated further.

Students were also asked about suggestions for the writing center. Answers from students varied based on student experiences. Student D suggested that the consultant asks the student what they want to take away from the session before it begins. Then the student suggested that the consultant follow that protocol strictly during the session. Student B stated, “For me personally, I don’t need a therapist as my teacher, but I need someone who is going to be supportive and be able to kind of take from my explanations that I might need a little bit more support.” This student also indicated that they realized that some students may need more support than they did so this may not apply to every consultation session. Student J recommended that the consultants should read as much as they can during the session and be very specific in their responses as it relates to the purpose of their assignment. Student H suggested that consultants focus on more of the specifics of writing such as grammar and punctuation. This student assumed that it’s the instructor’s job to get the content in the assignment correct.

Student G declared the writing center needed to have more consultants and more space. They compared the writing center space to the Math Lab space, which is much larger by comparison, and indicated that the writing center needed more. Student A suggested that there should be a dedicated outside waiting area for the writing center. As it is, the student said the writing center space is small and it was awkward for them to come in when the consultant was helping another student. Making sessions longer than 20 minutes was suggested by Student E. This student suggested that using an

appointment-based system would allow students who needed more time to set that block of time aside.

Student C mentioned that perhaps the writing center could offer various intro to writing workshops for students. They suggested that this was an area they needed guidance in and it seemed obvious that the writing center might offer it. The hours the writing center was open was a concern for Student F. They indicated that there were some days with later hours and some days where the writing center closed earlier. Due to this student's work schedule, they may not be able to make it during the day, but they appreciated the later hours in the evening.

Student I said that they thought the writing center is good right now. However, they indicated it's as good as it can be given the hours open, the availability schedule, and space. This student was also a bit confused by the sign-in process. Students are required to sign in to the LOC via a computer then sign in at the writing center on a paper sign in sheet. This student mentioned that they felt followed and a bit anxious by providing so much information. The hours of the writing center are another theme that emerged during this section. Having dedicated hours for the writing center seems like it would help reach more of the student population. Some other patterns are the location of the writing center and appointment times. These things could be evaluated by the LOC director and the writing program director if space and availability are assessed.

Review of the Literature

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was Knowles's (as cited in Knowles et al., 2005) theory of andragogy. With this theory, Knowles et al. (2005) identified six assumptions about how adults learn:

- Before implementing the learning process, adults need to know why they should learn something.
- Adults take responsibility for their own decisions and, subsequently, for their own lives and are capable of self-direction.
- Adults have a vast array of educational and life experiences which should not be ignored in education.
- Adults are ready to learn the things needed to cope efficiently with their actual real-life situations.
- An adult's learning will be subject-centered, life-centered, or problem-centered.
- The adult's motivation for learning stems from external motivators such as job satisfaction, quality of life, or self-esteem.

The term *andragogy* is defined as core adult learning principles which adapt to all types of adult learning situations (Knowles et al., 2005). The focus of *andragogy* is to understand the position of an adult learner during the process of education (Merriam, 2001). Knowles' theory of andragogy provided insight into why writing centers are necessary for adult learners at the community college level who may not have developed

scholarly writing skills prior to entry into college. The doctoral study was grounded on these principles of andragogy.

One of Knowles' assumptions that connects with the idea of the writing center is the adult's orientation to learning and motivation to learning (Knowles et al., 2005).

Adult learners are different from younger learners in that they require a level of independence and the andragogical model is based on the idea that adult learners need to understand why they are learning something before committing it to memory (Morman, 2016). Adults are more likely to learn new skills or knowledge when they are motivated to do so. When applied to writing skills, adult students at the community college level will likely learn the intricacies of scholarly writing when required to produce scholarly writing or to reach a goal, such as passing a class or earning a degree.

Furthermore, as adults learn to accept the responsibility of scholarly writing at the college level, they discover ways to develop those skills. If an adult learner believes that they are incapable of learning the scholarly writing skills necessary to be successful in college, they may not be inclined to seek further guidance from campus resources, such as a writing center. With consideration of Knowles's theory of andragogy, adults would most likely benefit from easily accessible resources, such as an on-campus writing center, to assist them with self-directed development of scholarly writing skills (Knowles et al., 2005). This would logically be applied to the writing center as the student population is all adult learners and the resource is already established on campus. The concept of andragogy will allow students to take a problem or task to the writing center and will help writing center consultants assist adults in understanding the relevance of the subject

matter before beginning the learning process (Harwell, 2016; Knowles et al., 2005). The adaptation of the theory of andragogy can easily be applied in a college academic setting and the study site.

Knowles' et al. (2005) conceptual framework connects to the research questions presented because the writing center consultants should employ a framework ideal for tolerance when approaching adult learners. If tutors give students the proper tools to be successful with writing, going to the writing center will be a positive, effective experience for students. Outcomes from this study might assist the writing center and its administration to work towards implementing a conceptual framework and thus can improve the students' writing success through the following means: (a) by examining students' initial expectations of the writing center and how they perceived the instruction and approach they received as helpful or not, (b) by asking why instructors require visits to the writing center and looking at what they expect students to get out of the visit, (c) by inquiring about whether or not students return to the writing center voluntarily after being required to visit, (d) by exploring the effect of the writing center on the students' academic writing achievement, and (e) by investigating how instructors believe the writing center can be organized to maximize its effect on student writing. Thus, students should receive the tools needed to be successful throughout their remaining academic careers and into their professional careers.

Student Perceptions of Writing Centers

Because many community college students struggle with writing (Missakian, Olson, Black, & Matuchniak, 2016), it is important to examine is how students perceive

writing centers. It is natural for perceptions to vary amongst faculty, students, and even administration, but it is important to note that one method is not better than another; instead, varying viewpoints and perceptions are dependent upon institutions to determine the success of the writing center (Cheatle & Bullerjahn, 2015). Writing centers were initially developed as a response to writers with lower skills, but more recently, centers have adapted the idea that all writers need feedback and no writer ever outgrows that need (Missakian et al., 2016). Some students may view the writing center as an editing service for grammar and punctuation checks, but others may use the writing center as an intervention between student and instructor (Missakian et al., 2016). These varying perceptions create varying expectations between writing center staff and students which may lead to incorrect perceptions of inefficiency (Missakian et al., 2016). Furthermore, if students feel engaged in the writing process with the writing center staff, rather than just coming in to just talk about writing, students will report productive sessions (Bromley, Schonberg, & Northway, 2015). Even though many students struggle with writing, a writing center can bridge the gap between academic writing and overall academic success at the college level.

Successful Writing Centers

Writing is a significant portion of most classes at the community college level, but it is particularly important in a composition classes. Furthermore, writing centers are now considered to play a significant role in the pedagogy of the composition classroom (Clark, 2008). The goal of a writing center is to alleviate some of the burden from classroom instructors and to seek guidance from a third party (Brickey, 2013). Instead,

writing centers should be used to teach, encourage, and model the writing process to students, and perhaps, an improved grade could be used as a measure of success (Brickey, 2013). In a cooperative effort, writing centers can focus on how the entire school community comes together to increase student confidence as writers (Oriani, 2012). Oriani reported that, in a successful writing center, the most prominent change noticed was the confidence in student writers after visiting the writing center.

Some of the burden of responsibility lies in the writing center consultants. Writing center consultants are using instructor feedback, assignment details, and instruction interpretation to guide students (Grimm, 2009) which can be complicated. But an effective writing center represents the connection between two important criteria in composition pedagogy: writing instruction should be student-centered and the process of writing is considered a process (Clark, 2008). Writing centers are operated by a diverse set of individuals who all have varied backgrounds and work experiences (Caswell, McKinney, & Jackson, 2014). The one-on-one nature of a writing center lends itself well to revision and editing as well as taking the individual needs of students into consideration at each writing center visit (Isaacs & Kolba, 2009). It cannot be stressed enough that writing center consultants must listen carefully to the student and tend to each student individually (Liggett, 2014). A successful writing center will consider the methodologies and best practices of the process approach to writing; this means that students will plan, draft, obtain feedback, then revise all writing assignments (Clark, 2008; Isaacs & Kolba, 2009). Utilizing these strategies will help the writing center be as effective as possible.

Both faculty and students should be involved with the writing center. Whenever applicable, faculty should encourage students to take advantage of a writing center whenever possible (Martinez, Kock, & Cass, 2011). Quite often, writing centers have limited resources and focusing on promotional efforts to achieve the goals set forth could prove extremely valuable to both the writing center and the administrators (Ryan & Kane, 2015). A persistent task includes organizing classroom visits to promote the services of the writing center (Ryan & Kane, 2015). Utilizing services such as writing centers encourages students to become active participants in their education (Martinez et al., 2011). In addition, the support of faculty in other disciplines should be solicited and encouraged; this will enhance rapport with students and will encourage students to have a sense of self-efficacy and self-improvement (Martinez et al., 2011). Using the writing center as a cooperative effort will improve writing support services.

Overview of the Study

Purpose and Rationale

The purpose of this case study was to gather the empirical data required to make informed decisions about a direction for the writing center, which was designed to support students in achieving successful writing achievements and to prepare students for overall academic success. The purpose of this study was to examine the students' expectations of the writing center and how they perceive the help they received, to examine why some instructors require visits to the writing center and what they hope students will get out of the visit, and to seek feedback from instructors on how the writing center can maximize the effect on student writing. In addition, this doctoral project

examined the nature and characteristics of student referral patterns to the writing center and faculty and student demographics.

Writing centers are a bridge between the classroom and student comprehension and they can encourage collaboration where a student seeks a safe space to get help (Brickey, 2013). By nature, writing centers work through several stages of the writing process such as drafting, critiquing, and soliciting constructive criticism (Grimm, 2009). But writing is a cornerstone in academia and it is an integral part of almost every class at the college level (Arbee & Samuel, 2015). Data were collected from various sources, such as interviews with multiple subjects—both student and faculty—and collection of demographic information from the LOC.

Design

The research design that was used was a qualitative case study. Merriam and Creswell stated that a case study is an analysis of a system that is already in place and it investigates a real-life phenomenon. Case study knowledge has certain characteristics that sets it apart from other types of qualitative research; it is more concrete, more contextual, more focused on reader interpretation, and is based on reference populations as determined by the reader (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). Because the writing center was already established, and the basis of this doctoral project was to evaluate and improve the writing center, a qualitative case study was the most appropriate option.

Participants

To answer the research questions, I collected data from both faculty and student participants. Faculty interviews were selected based on whether participants have

experience sending students to the writing center, but composition instructors were not chosen given that they are presumed to be biased in favor of the writing center. Student interviews were selected based on information gathered from the writing center logbook that records who visited in the last month; this policy ensured the visit to the writing center is fresh in the students' mind. In addition, a flyer was placed in the writing center to solicit volunteers for the study. The first ten faculty instructors and the first ten students that responded to the invitation were selected. Student participants for the study were selected using purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is a type of sampling used in qualitative research that seeks selection of information via the most effective means and finding individuals that are qualified to discuss the phenomenon (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, & Hoagwood, 2015). Faculty were selected using convenience sampling which selects participants based on factors like time, money, availability, or location (Merriam, 2009). All 20 participants were informed of their rights and consented to be a part of the research.

With ten faculty participants and ten student participants, the inquiry per individual is deeper and there is a higher likelihood for detailed responses. This qualitative case study used participants that provided enough information to assist the writing center with the services provided but did not include too many questions so that it took up an extended amount of the participants' time. The questioning for each participant, based on the research questions, was not so overly cumbersome that participants were inconvenienced for hours; instead, it was a manageable time per participant. Because qualitative research is a process of understanding the problem from

the participants' perspective (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009), I approached the study from an investigative and descriptive point of view.

Research Questions

The questions I posed in this doctoral project research problem were to understand the writing center's processes as a means of increasing student academic achievement. The broad research questions addressed three topics of concern in student writing: the student expectations of the writing center, how the instructors utilize the writing center, and potential development for the writing center. The specific concern for the writing center was how to improve the writing skills of students and better support when they encounter students who struggle with writing. This overall concern led to the development of four research questions to collect information that might assist the writing center in their goal:

- RQ1: What are students' initial expectations of the writing center and how do students perceive whether they received the help they needed?
- RQ2: Why do instructors require visits to the writing center and what do they hope students will get out of the visits?
- RQ3: What suggestions do instructors and students have for improving writing support services for students?
- RQ4: What is the nature and characteristics of student referral patterns to the writing center?

Data Collection

Because individual responses were needed for this doctoral study, qualitative research was used. Using a qualitative case study was the best option for this research as qualitative data are more participant focused (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). Creswell (2012) stated that qualitative methods are an investigative method of research that is designed to understand a social group or interaction, such as a writing center. In addition, qualitative research occurs where human behavior and events happen (Creswell, 2012), as would transpire at a writing center. Qualitative research allows for exploration through questioning and responses from participants, and it allows data to be collected where the participant is most at ease (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). Qualitative case study was chosen because the feedback provided by interviews with faculty and students can be more descriptive and detailed. The collection of numerical data was insufficient for this case study as individual responses from survey participants serves this case study best.

Data collection instruments and sources included a note-taking sheet and digital recording device used during the interview. Questions were written in the order they were asked; additionally, there were a list of topics to explore. This approach allowed for a more natural and informal interview process; this also helped put the participant at ease. Interviews took place on the study site property in the Learning Opportunity Center area in a private room. Interviews were individual instead of group interviews to maintain confidentiality and privacy. Upon completion, interviews were transcribed by me. Each interview was catalogued and labeled per date, time, and participant. The participants' names were omitted from the transcript, but I assigned a description for each participant

such as "Faculty A" or "Student A" to ensure participant confidentiality. Data was generated, gathered, and recorded in the most efficient means possible. Interviews took place over four weeks. Each interview consisted of questions developed by me and interviews were planned for approximately 45 – 60 minutes.

Recommendations

There is a long history of writing centers in the United States. Various forms of writing centers can be traced back to the 1890s (Driscoll & Perdue, 2012) and are in more than 90% of all colleges and universities in the U.S. today (Girgensohn, 2012). In fact, there are more writing centers and more composition scholars than ever in history (Driscoll & Perdue, 2012). English departments and writing centers are uniquely positioned to have expertise regarding writing pedagogy and writing assignment best practices (Werner, 2013). Writing centers, in general, emphasize writing at any stage in the process and for every type of discipline; thus, they can advocate for writing assistance campus-wide (Werner, 2013). Werner stated that through collaboration over time, stronger teachers and stronger courses can develop.

My recommendations included in the white paper are as follows: The writing center should:

- Create consistent hours for the writing center for each semester that includes several weekday evening hours and the possibility of weekend hours
- Develop a training manual for the writing center consultants that will explain expectations and could offer session guidance

- Implement faculty professional development courses to improve faculty writing skills such as assignment sheets or various writing skills
- Improve campus-wide faculty and student outreach

The recommendations were based on the case study, data collection, and were supported by extensive data from the literature review.

Writing Center Consistent Hours

The writing center needs to review the hours it is open for both consultants and faculty on campus. Consistency is just as important as academic lessons (McLaughlin, n.d.). For students who may not have consistency outside of their scholastic environment, consistency while on campus may be key to their success (Cox, n.d.). A writing center session should have a process, but it is not a substitution for faculty interaction or response (Boquet, 2002). Successful writing center directors across the country comment that recognizing that students are vulnerable when visiting the writing center and consultants must take that into consideration during sessions; the consultant should work to question the student and allow for independent thinking (Boquet, 1999). To allow the student to become a better writer, there needs to be room for them to find their own errors (Girgensohn, 2012). As an instructor, there should be consistency in all aspects of classroom management and curriculum (Cox, n.d.), so it is natural to transfer that same ideal to the writing center consultants.

Training Manual for Consultants

Based on the feedback provided by students and faculty, there needs to be consistency in everything the consultants do. Perhaps developing a consultant handbook

or standard operating procedures might help keep things consistent amongst consultants. From the research findings in this study, students receive varied feedback from consultants which can sometimes be unhelpful. Allowing students and faculty to work autonomously during consultation sessions may benefit the sessions individually and benefit the writing center as a part of the college or university (Girgensohn, 2012). Consultants can guide students, but students are the experts in their own writing. Similarly, if consultants act freely and take responsibility for their sessions, they will perform more professionally which will develop the writing center for the institution (Girgensohn, 2012). In general, using praise instead of blatant criticism is another way consultants can improve student sessions (Sewell, 2016). Getting all the consultants to a base level will improve writing support services.

Faculty Professional Development Courses

It is no secret that faculty are invested in the students and want to see them succeed. In general, both English faculty and the writing center staff are deeply invested in improving student and faculty writing across campus (Werner, 2013). Instead of just focusing on student writing, writing centers should also allow faculty the opportunity to receive feedback on their writing assignments for students (Werner, 2013). One interesting finding from this study was that some faculty are not confident in their own writing, so they don't require students to meet basic English requirements in their writing assignments. One faculty suggestion was to hold faculty professional development courses which would aid faculty in developing their own skills or provide them with access to resources for the classroom. Providing a professional development course on

writing assignment sheets, as per the participant's suggestion, would aid faculty in conveying their expectations and requirements to students.

Writing can be a challenge for both students and faculty. While writing is essential to a learner's long-term success, supporting writing is a challenge for instructors (Nielsen, 2012). One way to alleviate that challenge is to incorporate self-assessment and student-directed instruction methods in the classroom (Kallison, 2017; Nielsen, 2012). Since writing is sometimes an inner dialogue with oneself, the writing process requires continual objective self-analysis (Nielsen, 2012). By allowing students the opportunity to assess their own work, students build the confidence necessary to further writing skills (Nielsen, 2012). Several examples of student-guided instruction could include peer review sessions, research assignments, and group learning (Kallison, 2017). When learners interact with each other, they form a mutually beneficial relationship by learning to make contributions both individually and to the group (Sharp, 2018). Collaboratively, the process of writing can become easier.

Instead of just relying on writing center consultants, faculty could become more involved with the writing process. Incorporating faculty into the writing center could aid the faculty (Clark, 1993) as well. Unfortunately, some faculty have no experience in writing pedagogy, which can be a real concern (Werner, 2013). Instead of thinking of the writing center as a place to fix writing, it should be thought of as a collaborative effort (SHSU writing center improves students' skills, aids faculty, 2018). Writing centers should not be categorized into assisting only students; instead, writing centers may also be great places to help faculty meet the needs of the student population (Werner, 2013).

While this may be true for some campuses, it is possible that instructors do not take advantage of resources available to them (Werner, 2013), so the college would have to work on a campus-wide outreach consistently.

Campus-Wide Outreach

During data collection, faculty consistently mentioned that they didn't know what the writing center was for, they didn't know where they were located, or they didn't know how to find information on the writing center. Only some instructors use required writing center visits in their courses. Since the 1980s, there has been some evidence to show that required visits can be helpful for students (Sewell, 2016). There is research to show that writing centers are the most effective when students take responsibility and come in on their own accord because this allows students to be actively engaged in their consultations (Sewell, 2016). Fortunately, a study found that after the initial consultation at the writing center, students identified that they would return to the writing center on their own accord in the future (Sewell, 2016). The problem that the college may have is getting students into the writing center for the initial visit.

To do this, the writing center will need to reach out to all students and faculty. The goal is that students should take what faculty suggest via feedback and seek out writing support services on their own; from this, students can have an improved view of what the writing center does (Boquet, 1999). But if an instructor prompts the student to visit and the student gets a good grade on the assignment, it could reinforce the benefits of the writing center which would encourage students to return upon their own free will

(Sewell, 2016). Faculty should also be aware of writing support services and should work to help improve services.

The best way to do this is to outreach to all faculty and students campus-wide. This could include posters, flyers, emails, or word-of-mouth campaigns. The entire burden does not rest on the faculty of the college, but it should be a collaborative effort. Another suggestion from a faculty member at the college was to add in a section on the general syllabus for all disciplines explaining a bit about the writing center, where they are located, and what students or faculty need to bring to a session. Through marketing efforts, the whole campus will know of the services provided at the writing center.

Conclusion

The study findings and professional literature demonstrate clear evidence of a continuing need for writing development and support for students and faculty. The writing center needs a clear direction to meet the needs of all students and faculty. Graduating students should be able to integrate into the job market with more skills – especially writing skills. The head of the writing program, the LOC director, and the college administration will be able to make informed decisions about the effectiveness and the future of the writing center. In the future, the writing center will have a baseline with which to gather data and implement change. Full implementation and discussion of the results from this study will take place in 6 months to 1 year.

This doctoral project had many strengths, such as discovering the perceptions of faculty and students about the writing center. While some perceptions were positive, there were some negative aspects that should be addressed. Some possible limitations of

this project could be financial as some of the changes could cost professional development money, instructor time, and/or substitute pay. Future research may be warranted after some changes are made at the writing center. The goal of the writing center is to improve student writing skills, which will improve overall academic achievement.

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Appendix B: Student Interview Questions

Interviewee:

Date:

Time:

Location:

STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	RQ or Theoretical Framework
1. What were your initial expectations of the writing center? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. If they were positive, please elaborate. b. If they were negative, please explain why in detail. 	RQ1: What are students' initial expectations of the writing center and how do students perceive whether they received the help they needed?
2. Once a writing center session is complete, how do you perceive whether you received the help you needed? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. If you did not receive the help you needed, what was your next plan of action? b. If you did receive the help you needed, how did you apply the changes discussed in your consultation? 	RQ1: What are students' initial expectations of the writing center and how do students perceive whether they received the help they needed? Knowles theory - Adults take responsibility for their own decisions and, subsequently, for their own lives and are capable of self-direction.
3. Please talk a little bit about your experiences with the writing center. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Do you remember a writing assignment that you had an excellent consultation session? b. Do you remember a writing assignment that you had a session that didn't help you? 	RQ1: What are students' initial expectations of the writing center and how do students perceive whether they received the help they needed?
4. Have you come to the writing center on your own accord (not instructor-referred)? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Please compare the instructor-referred visit to the self-referred visit briefly. 	RQ2: Why do instructors require visits to the writing center and what do they hope students will get out of the visits?

	Knowles theory - Adults take responsibility for their own decisions and, subsequently, for their own lives and are capable of self-direction.
5. What suggestions do you have for improving writing support services for students? a. Please be as detailed as possible.	RQ4: What suggestions do instructors and students have for improving writing support services for students?
6. How many times have you visited the writing center during your time at the college?	RQ3: What is the nature and characteristics of student referral patterns to the writing center?
7. When you plan on visiting the writing center, is it a spontaneous or planned visit? Please elaborate.	RQ3: What is the nature and characteristics of student referral patterns to the writing center?
8. Have you ever told another student about the writing center? a. What was the outcome of this?	RQ3: What is the nature and characteristics of student referral patterns to the writing center?
9. Think about a time when you brought an assignment to the writing center. What was the purpose of this assignment? In other words, how was this assignment contributing to your education in that class?	Knowles theory - Before implementing the learning process, adults need to know why they should learn something.
10. Now that you have identified the purpose of the assignment, why was it assigned to you?	Knowles theory - Before implementing the learning process, adults need to know why they should learn something.
11. For the next two questions, think about your experiences with the writing center consultant. Did you feel the writing center consultant was effective? a. Why or why not?	Knowles theory - Adults have a vast array of educational and life experiences which should not be ignored in education.

<p>12. How did the writing center consultant or your instructor connect your assignment to a real world educational and life experiences?</p>	<p>Knowles theory - Adults have a vast array of educational and life experiences which should not be ignored in education.</p> <p>Knowles theory - Adults are ready to learn the things needed to cope efficiently with their actual real-life situations.</p> <p>Knowles theory - An adult's learning will be subject-centered, life-centered, or problem-centered.</p>
<p>13. How do your educational and life experiences help your writing skills and/or your ability to finish a writing assignment?</p>	<p>Knowles theory - Adults have a vast array of educational and life experiences which should not be ignored in education.</p> <p>Knowles theory - Adults are ready to learn the things needed to cope efficiently with their actual real-life situations.</p> <p>Knowles theory - An adult's learning will be subject-centered, life-centered, or problem-centered.</p>
<p>14. What is your motivation for finishing your degree?</p>	<p>Knowles theory - The adult's motivation for learning stems from external motivators such as job satisfaction, quality of life, or self-esteem.</p>

Appendix C: Faculty Interview Questions

Interviewee:

Date:

Time:

Location:

FACULTY INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	RQ or Theoretical Framework
1. Why do you require visits to the writing center? a. Please be as detailed as possible. b. If there is a specific writing assignment you use, please describe that.	RQ2: Why do instructors require visits to the writing center and what do they hope students will get out of the visits?
2. What do you hope students will get out of the visit?	RQ2: Why do instructors require visits to the writing center and what do they hope students will get out of the visits?
3. Have you overheard students talking about the writing center services and/or referring other students to the writing center? a. If so, please paraphrase what was said.	RQ4: What suggestions do instructors and students have for improving writing support services for students?
4. What suggestions do you have for improving writing support services for students? a. Please be as detailed as possible.	RQ4: What suggestions do instructors and students have for improving writing support services for students?
5. What was the nature of student referral patterns to the writing center? a. In other words, when do you feel the need to refer students to the writing center? b. Are there consistent writing concerns you see in your classroom? i. Do you address those concerns during classroom hours?	RQ3: What is the nature and characteristics of student referral patterns to the writing center?

<p>6. Describe your expectations of adult learners in your classroom.</p>	<p>Knowles theory - Before implementing the learning process, adults need to know why they should learn something.</p> <p>Knowles theory - Adults take responsibility for their own decisions and, subsequently, for their own lives and are capable of self-direction.</p>
<p>7. Describe the methods or strategies you have found to be the most successful when engaging adult learners.</p>	<p>Knowles theory - Before implementing the learning process, adults need to know why they should learn something.</p> <p>Knowles theory - Adults take responsibility for their own decisions and, subsequently, for their own lives and are capable of self-direction.</p>
<p>8. Describe how you incorporate a variety of educational and life experiences of students in your writing activities for your course.</p>	<p>Knowles theory - Adults have a vast array of educational and life experiences which should not be ignored in education.</p> <p>Knowles theory - Adults are ready to learn the things needed to cope efficiently with their actual real-life situations.</p>
<p>9. Describe what you believe makes the most positive influence in improving the academic achievement of adult learners.</p>	<p>Knowles theory - The adult's motivation for learning stems from external motivators such as job satisfaction, quality of life, or self-esteem.</p>