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# WRITING CENTER ASSESSMENT

## *Searching for the "Proof" of Our Effectiveness*

Neal Lerner

Two words that haunt writing center professionals are "research" and "assessment." The first is too often held out as something others do to us, something we do not have time for, or something that is lacking in our field. The second is tied to our financial and institutional futures—if we cannot assess how well we are doing whatever it is we are supposed to be doing, we are surely doomed.

In this chapter, I reclaim these two words in several ways. First, I review the history of calls for our field to answer the assessment bell, calls that act as a sort of evaluative conscience, laying on 20 plus years of guilt about our inability or unwillingness to prove ourselves to our institutions and, ultimately, to ourselves. Next, I offer a critique of the few published studies of writing center effects, pointing out the logical and methodological complications of such work. Then, I turn to the larger assessment movement in higher education, particularly the work being done to study students' first year in college or university. I take from that research not only useful assessment tools that might be adapted to writing-center settings, but also important cautions about the nature of assessment work and its potential pitfalls. Finally, I offer some examples of real live assessment from the writing center I direct at my institution, not necessarily as exemplars for the field, but instead as indications that the work I call for can, indeed, be done. Overall, my intent here is to offer a clearer understanding of research to provide evidence of writing center "effects," its uses and limitations, and to put into a critical context the common call to investigate how well we are doing.

### EVALUATE OR ELSE

For any of us engaged in writing center work, it always seems obvious that one-to-one teaching of writing is effective, and this belief has a long history. In 1939, E. C. Beck wrote in *English Journal* that "perhaps it is

not too much to say that the conference method has established itself as the most successful method of teaching English composition" (594). Nevertheless, as writing centers moved from "method" to "site"—as Beth Boquet (1999) describes the evolution of the free-standing writing center—frequent calls for "accountability" followed, usually in response to threats from budget-conscious administrators or misguided faculty. However, the attempts to provide this accountability (or simply call for it) that have appeared in our literature often say more about our field's uneasiness with evaluation research than about the effectiveness of the work we do.

One source of uneasiness is with the use of statistics beyond the simple counting of numbers of students or appointments. In 1982, Janice Neuleib explained this uneasiness by noting that "many academics tend to wring their hands when faced with the prospect of a formal evaluation. English teachers especially have often not been trained in statistics, yet formal evaluation either explicitly or implicitly demands statistics" (227). For Neuleib, "formal" evaluation is necessary because "[good] tutoring and all that goes with it cannot be appreciated without verifiable evaluation techniques" (232).

While Neuleib's call is nearly 20 years old at the time of this writing, it is difficult to say that the field has answered her charge with a rich body of statistical research. The reasons for this absence are many, but most important, in my view, is composition's orientation toward qualitative or naturalistic studies of students' composing processes, as Cindy Johanek has pointed out (2000, 56). While I am aware that qualitative evidence can lend a rich and nuanced perspective to our evaluation studies (and have performed and will continue to perform such studies myself), I join Johanek in calling for additional research methods, namely quantitative or statistical ones, to understand more fully the work we do. Statistical evidence also lends itself to short forms, perfect for bullet items, PowerPoint presentations, and short attention spans—in other words, perfect for appeals to administrators and accrediting bodies. I would also argue that despite Neuleib's statement about our fear of numbers, our field is often under the sway of numerology, given the ways we have always counted who comes through our doors and why.

Nancy McCracken of Youngstown State identified the need to evaluate in 1979: "Many of us have had to expend so much effort convincing our funders of the need for a writing lab in the first place that I think that we have not adequately addressed the need for evaluation and the

key issues involved" (1). To answer this charge, McCracken relied upon "error analysis of writing samples done at the start and at the end of the term" (1). This analysis (or counting, really) included "total number of words and paragraphs and rates of occurrence of focus-errors [errors identified by student and tutor from starting sample]" (1–2). While the pre-test, post-test design is encouraging, what is troubling here is a powerful focus on the text itself and the reduction of student writing into primarily mechanical features. It is difficult to imagine that the tutor[1] identified invention or revision strategies as a student's primary need and could evaluate progress on those tasks based on two writing samples; however, McCracken tells us that "demanding thorough diagnosis and evaluation has profoundly altered our staff's perceptions of their function and their effectiveness. It is enormously satisfying for the tutor to see clear evidence of progress where before it was only vaguely sensed" (2). Some students might surely have made "progress" of a sort, but McCracken does not provide accounts of how many students improved or how much improvement occurred in individual cases. Instead, we are left with one possible approach to proving the assumption that McCracken identifies and that many of us hold dear: "We have all had to discover ways to demonstrate what we know is the tremendous effectiveness of the writing lab experience for our students" (1).

A broad survey of the evaluative methods of this period was offered by Mary Lamb in 1981. Lamb surveyed 56 writing centers nationwide and found six "methods of evaluation": 1) basic statistics (i.e., usage data—nearly all centers reported this accounting); 2) questionnaires or surveys of students and faculty (used by half of the centers); 3) pre- and post-tests, usually of mechanical skills (only four centers collected writing samples in this method; the others used "objective" tests of English mechanics); 4) follow-up reports of students' grades who used the center (18% used this method); 5) external evaluations (14% of the centers surveyed used this method); 6) reports of staff publications and professional activities (7% used this method).

Since that time, I cannot imagine that the terrain has changed much. Ticking off the numbers of students who come through our doors and subdividing them according to categories that would make a census taker proud are about as easy as it gets and, for many of us, are adequate to the level of accountability to which we are held—at least the current level of accountability. But I am reminded of my first semester as a writing center director when I met with my division director and presented

some nice tables on how many students we had worked with. "But of the hours you are open, during how many of those are your staff actually working with students?" Gulp! It seems my criteria for evaluation did not quite match up with my boss's criteria. That's not a good thing when it comes time for budget allocations (my staff salary budget was cut 40% by the end of that semester). I would also maintain that justifying our existences based upon how many students we work with will never get us very far. "Voluntary" writing centers (in other words, excluding those which students are required to attend or those centers that also run computer labs and count every time a student downloads an mpeg as a "contact") typically see no more than 10 to 15 percent of their student bodies, based on responses to that inquiry I and others have posted to the listserv WCenter over the last five years. That is not exactly a selling point. Thus, counting works fine when our supervisors give our annual reports about a close a reading as you might expect for columns of numbers subdivided by myriad categories. But when the inevitable budget crunch occurs, when the axe-wielding Provost is hired or a "back-to-basics" English chair rises from the ranks, those nifty tables and charts just won't cut it. In those cases we need to be ready with real evidence, convincing data, and a grasp of how to produce those figures.

Finally, the audience for our assessment efforts need not only be those who pull the purse strings. As Nancy Grimm points out in this volume, writing centers are uniquely positioned to investigate the ways that students—particularly non-mainstream students—encounter the cultures of higher education. With this research agenda, writing centers can move beyond simply defending their budgets and instead make significant contributions to these students, to our institutions, and to the knowledge in our field.

## A REVIEW OF SOME EVALUATION STUDIES, OR HOW TO LIE WITH STATISTICS

The number of published statistical studies on writing center effects is quite few.[2] Two accounts that have appeared in *The Writing Lab Newsletter* are Stephen Newmann's "Demonstrating Effectiveness" (1999) and my own "Counting Beans and Making Beans Count" (1997). Both studies asked the same question: "Do students who use the writing center get higher first-year composition grades than students who do not?" Both studies used the same methods: compare students' grades who use the writing center with those who do not, but try and position

students at similar starting points by using SAT Verbal scores. The assumption here is that two students with an SAT verbal of 450 would end up with about the same grade in first-year composition (FYC). However, if one of those students visits the writing center, that student's grade would be higher than the student with the same SAT score who did not visit. Thus, the hope is that the "intervention" of the writing center pays off in tangible results, namely higher course grades.

Both Newmann and I did report such results. Newmann writes that "the lower SATs [of students who were tutored] and smaller percentage of As [for students who were not tutored] suggested that the Writing Program helped less able students who were willing to work harder to perform as well as their peers" (9). My claim was that "students at the lowest end of the SAT verbal benefited the most [from writing center visits]; on a one-hundred point scale, the mean grade of this group was five points higher than students within the same SAT verbal range who did not come to the Writing Center" (3).

Two studies, similar methods, similar triumphant results; unfortunately, both are about as statistically and logically sound as the flat tax. Three assumptions underlie both studies: (1) that students with lower SAT scores are at a disadvantage in first-year composition courses; in other words, that there is a strong relationship between SAT Verbal scores and final grades in FYC; (2) that a student's final grade in FYC is an indication of her or his writing ability; and (3) that students will receive the same grade in FYC regardless of the instructor. The first assumption is fairly easy to disprove. For my institution, for the combined first-year classes from 1996 to 1999 or 488 students, the correlation between students' SAT Verbal scores and FYC average[3] was equal to .12. In non-mathematical terms, this result says that the relationship between the two scores was extremely weak (a correlation of zero indicates no relationship; correlations of –1.00 or 1.00 indicate the strongest relationship possible). In fact, the correlation between SAT Math and FYC grades was higher (.20) than the one for SAT Verbal! Thus, for my institution at least, trying to predict FYC grades based upon students' SAT Verbal scores just does not work.

The second assumption—that there is a strong relationship between a student's FYC grade and his or her writing ability—is one that should be troubling to anyone who has taught the course. Sure, some students benefit tremendously and flourish in terms of their writing. Others come to us with considerable skill and leave at about the same level.

Many are somewhere in between. In other words, tying writing center effects to FYC grades is troubling territory when we really do not know for sure if the grade is a fair assessment of the goals that the writing center holds for its student visitors.

The third assumption—that grading is consistent across FYC sections—is also troubling. When I conducted the study I refer to above, my division director and I realized that one instructor gave almost all of her students very high grades (and very few had visited the writing center!). I do not bring this up to condemn that colleague—perhaps she was working on a contract system or some other method that allowed almost all of her students to meet her criteria for high grades—but my point is that FYC grades in most places (or at least in my institution) are not particularly consistent across sections/instructors.

So, are the difficulties inherent in these sorts of studies[4] the primary reason why we generally avoid conducting them in the first place? Perhaps. However, we do not have to look far in order to understand how to make powerful statistical arguments. In the last two years, I have become increasingly involved in research on and the development of academic activities for students' first-year, and in particular, first-year seminar courses. That body of literature is a valuable resource for ideas and justifications for research on writing center effects.

## IF THEY CAN DO IT, SO CAN WE—LEARNING FROM STUDIES OF FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR

What is perhaps most interesting about the literature on first-year seminar and other programmatic attempts to provide support for first-year students is how the descriptions often echo writing center themes. For example, Betsy Barefoot, the Co-Director of the Policy Center on the First Year of College, has described a dilemma familiar to many of us:

> A pervasive and central problem is that many of the programs and activities that constitute the 'first-year experience' are in a continuous battle for status within the academy . . . never becoming a central, sustainable part of the institution's fabric. First-year programs often have a single champion rather than broad-based institutional support and frequently operate with a minimal budget or no budget. (quoted in Cuseo 2000, 2)

In response to this need to "institutionalize" first-year programs, many researchers have engaged in an impressive array of studies; how-

ever, what distinguishes much of this work from writing center assessment are the efforts to tie evaluative research to the goals the institution holds for its students, whether those are simply retention or are part of larger general education goals. Barefoot (2000), again, offers the following three observations about administering and evaluating first-year seminar courses. I, however, have substituted "writing centers" for "first-year seminars" to demonstrate the applicability to our field:

> [Writing centers] are not a magic bullet that will change student behavior. [They] can serve as one piece of a comprehensive [educational] program—a linchpin of sorts to give coherence to the curriculum and co-curriculum.
>
> [Writing center] effects can be multiplied through connections with other structures and programs such as learning communities, advising, orientation, and residence life.
>
> Assessment of [writing center] outcomes is important. If [writing centers] are to survive the vicissitudes of changing administrations and fluctuating resources, there must exist some evidence that the [writing center] is doing for students and for the institution what it was designed to do. (3–4)

Thus, we need to think broadly about research on writing center effects, not just about how many students came through our doors or if those students were satisfied, but about how do our writing centers contribute to the teaching and learning goals that our institutions hold dear? How do we begin to investigate such matters?

## A Framework for Research on Writing Center Effects

M. Lee Upcraft and John Schuh (2000) lay out a comprehensive eight-part framework for assessing students' first-year experience, one that I will adapt to writing center work. Assessment should include the following: 1) keep track of who participates, 2) assess student needs, 3) assess student satisfaction, 4) assess campus environments, 5) assess outcomes, 6) find comparable institution assessment, 7) use nationally accepted standards to assess, and 8) assess cost-effectiveness. For many of these points, I will also show some of the assessment attempts I have been making in my own writing center.

1. *Keep Track of Who Participates.* As Mary Lamb pointed out in 1981, counting who comes through our doors is something that nearly every writing center does and reports on, and is often the extent of our evaluative attempts. In the five years that the MCPHS Writing Center has been open, I have faithfully submitted those usage reports to my dean.

Certainly, demonstrating usage can provide persuasive evidence that we are meeting our goals. For example, if a writing center was targeted to certain student populations (e.g., first-year students or non-native English speakers) reporting on how many of *those* students were served can be a much more impressive and meaningful number than percent of total student body (which, as I pointed out earlier, is quite low in most cases). For instance, the MCPHS Writing Center was primarily intended to meet the needs of students in first-year composition, and we usually find that between 50 to 70 percent of the first-year class comes through our doors—a much more impressive number than percentage of the whole student body. We also have consistently found that 60 to 75 percent of the writers we see self-identify as non-native English speakers, a persuasive number to show administrators who are concerned about providing academic support for this growing population at my college. Thus, we need to keep counting, but our counting needs to have a specific focus and should not be the extent of our evaluative efforts.

2. *Assess Student Needs.* Upcraft and Schuh (2000) ask, "What kinds of services and programs do first year students really need, based on student and staff perceptions, institutional expectations, and research on student needs? Put another way, how do we know if what we offer 'fits' our first-year students?" (1). This is a powerful question when considered in light of our field's often-stated desire to be "student-centered." How much do we know about the needs of writers who come to our centers, and, perhaps more importantly, the needs of writers who *do not* visit us? How does writing center work fit into current theories of student learning and development (see, for example, Haswell 1991; Baxter Magolda 1999)? I cannot say that I have fully engaged in researching these powerful questions; however, this past academic year I did survey FYC students and had particular questions for students who did not visit the Writing Center. What I found was that the primary reason for students not visiting was that the hours were inconvenient (40% of the responses), followed closely by "Did not need to receive feedback from a tutor" (32%) and "Primarily worked with classroom teacher" (24%). However, 86% of the students who did not visit agreed with the statement that "The Writing Center is for any student engaged in any writing task," and 82% indicated that they would make use of an online Writing Center if one were available. These findings indicate that in terms of students' needs, we can do a better job of scheduling available hours or of creating on-line services, but that we are not limited by students'

remedial definition of our work. Thus, feedback from students who did not use our services this past academic year gives valuable input on the assessment of current efforts and indications for future ones.

3. *Assess Student Satisfaction.* This area of evaluation is one that many writing center directors pursue, and we often find that students are highly satisfied with our services, particularly if we survey them right after a session is completed. However, it is difficult to sort out if writers are just trying to be supportive of their peers who work in the writing center or if they were genuinely satisfied. James Bell's (2000) approach to this dilemma was to survey writing center users at three different points after their session: immediately afterward, two weeks later, and two months later. He found that satisfaction remained high over time: "Two months after a 45-minute conference all impact might be expected to have dissipated, but three-quarters of the clients agreed or strongly agreed that they could still apply what they had learned, and two-thirds agreed or strongly agreed that it would continue to help them in the future" (22). Bell's assessment protocol is a practical and powerful example for our field to follow.

One other important constituency often left unassessed is faculty. What are faculty perceptions of the writing center? At the end of the 2000-01 academic year, I distributed a survey to faculty[5] and found results that were encouraging: On a five-point Likert scale (five = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree), the highest mean rating, 4.9, was for "I feel comfortable referring my students to the MCPHS Writing Center." The two next highest responses were for "Students who utilize the Writing Center make discernible improvements in their writing" (4.5) and "I view the Writing Center as a valuable resource even for competent writers" (4.5). Faculty also indicated they were aligned with our intent to help all student writers by showing fairly strong disagreement (2.5) with the statement "The main function of an effective writing center is to serve primarily the weakest student writers." The survey also provided a public relations opportunity to let faculty know that the Writing Center is concerned about meeting their needs, including our availability to help faculty with their writing in progress, a survey item that was met with surprise by quite a few responders.

In addition to our own surveying, a great opportunity for writing centers is to connect with larger institutional efforts at surveying student satisfaction. Offices of Institutional Research, Student Affairs, or other campus entities are increasingly using instruments such as the College

Student Experiences Questionnaire (Pace and Kuh 1998) to investigate student satisfaction with a wide variety of their educational experiences. While specific questions about writing centers will likely not appear on the national standardized surveys, they will contain questions about academic support services, or they often have the ability to be customized. Thus, important allies for any writing center director are those survey creators and administrators on your campus. Assessment of writing center satisfaction should be seen as part of a larger institutional effort.

4. *Assess Campus Environments.* In the context of first-year programs, Upcraft and Schuh (2000) note, "It is critical to take a look at first-year students' collective perceptions of the campus environments within which they conduct their day-to-day lives. For example, what is the campus climate for first-year women? What is the academic environment, both inside and outside the classroom?" (2). As applied to writing centers, these can be powerful questions, particularly as we look not merely at "effects," but at the environment of the writing center itself. What is the students' perception of the writing center? How is space used by students and staff? What determines the flow of traffic? What is the writing center climate for different student groups: women, men, non-traditional students, non-native English speakers? It is often claimed that writing centers are "safe havens" of sorts,[6] but how systematic have been our attempts to understand this environment from the perspective of writers, tutors or faculty?[7]

5. *Assess Outcomes.* While many institutions increasingly describe their work with students in terms of "outcomes," writing centers have been slow to take up this challenge, partially because of fears that outcomes talk might reduce the complexity of the work we do to "measurable" gains outside of the goals we hold for our centers. However, consider Upcraft and Schuh's (2000) broad categorization of outcomes as applied to first-year programs: "Of those students who participate in [our] services . . . , is there any effect on their learning, development, academic success, transition to college, retention, or other intended desired outcomes, particularly when compared with non-participants?" (2). In other words, it is important to think broadly of writing center outcomes, not in terms of the narrowest measures—students' command of mechanical skills—but in terms of such things as students' development as writers and success as college students, as well as the ways the writing center contributes to the professional development and future success of its tutors.

Researching these sorts of outcomes is quite challenging, of course, but also quite necessary to establish writing centers as essential academic components. A natural effect of such work might also be to have us broaden our individual missions vis-à-vis our institutions. After all, the goals we hold for our writing centers—whether articulated formally in mission statements or less formally in our promotional materials and annual reports—provide the first focus for our assessment efforts. But those goals themselves can often be broadened to include not just our effect on student writers, but our effect on the entire institution. Such is the strategic work of making writing centers central to the conversation about writing at our institutions, to paraphrase Stephen North's charge (1984, 440).

In terms of the outcomes measures I have pursued, I cannot say I have quite measured up to the challenge I offer. Nevertheless, I have collected and analyzed a broad range of writing center data and have plans for continued analysis.[8] For example, in order to investigate the achievement differences between first-year students who used the writing center and those who did not, I combined four years worth of data on first-year students, as shown in the table below:

Table 1
First-Year Students, 1996-99

| | *Mean SAT Verbal* | *Mean H.S. GPA* | *Mean FYC GPA* | *Mean First-Year GPA* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *WC Users (307)* | 487 | 3.23 | 3.07 | 2.73 |
| *WC Non-Users (181)* | 499 | 3.11 | 2.78 | 2.42 |

All of the above differences between writing center users and non-users are statistically significant,[9] with the exception of SAT Verbal scores. In other words, the two groups did not start at different levels according to SAT Verbal scores, but those who did visit the Writing Center at least once during the academic year had First-Year Composition grades and end-of-first-year GPAs that were higher than students who did not visit the writing center.

Alert readers are by now remembering the condemnation of my own and other studies several pages earlier. However, I need to frame the results above in a somewhat different way. SAT Verbal scores *are* a measure of *some* ability; it is just a statistical reality that they have little relationship to FYC grades. However, by showing that SAT Verbal scores were not significantly different for writing center users and non-users, I

am showing that these two groups were starting from a similar footing, according to this measure (and let me add that it is a measure that administrators will recognize immediately). My previous cautions about relying on FYC grades and about studies that do not take into account teacher effects are well worth considering here. However, my argument for positive writing center effects is bolstered by "big" numbers. By looking at data across multiple years, multiple students, and multiple teachers, but applying the single variable of writing center usage, I am making a pretty convincing argument that this single factor—visiting the writing center—has a pretty powerful relationship not just to students FYC grades but to their overall first-year GPA, despite the broad variation in those other factors over the four years for which I am accounting. In terms of the single outcome of students' grades, visiting the writing center makes a difference.[10]

One other way of considering the contribution of writing center visits is through the statistical technique of multiple regression, which calculates the contribution of several factors on some outcome. In my case, I used multiple regression to find out how well the factors of students' SAT Verbal score, SAT Math score, high school GPA, and number of writing center visits can predict first-year GPA. Writing center visits were a statistically significant variable in the entire equation,[11] lending more support to the idea that the writing center makes a difference.

One common critique of such findings is that students who visit the writing center get better grades because they are more motivated. To explore this hypothesis, I used the results of the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI, H&H Publishing), a self-reporting instrument of "readiness" to learn, which we had first-year students complete during summer orientation for the 1999-2000 academic year. Two of the LASSI measures address "attitude" and "motivation," so I compared the scores of students who visited the writing center that academic year with those who did not. What I found was that neither of those factors—as well as the eight other LASSI measures—showed statistically significant differences between the two groups. In other words, according to that instrument and for that academic year, writing center users were not more motivated than non-users.

My use of the LASSI (unfortunately, for only a single academic year because we have not administered it since then) is an example of how we can connect our writing center assessment efforts to larger institutional attempts to collect data. Many institutions, including my own,

administer the CIRP survey (The Higher Education Research Institute) to incoming freshman every fall. The CIRP provides a great deal of demographic data, as well as an indication of students' high school study habits and attitudes.[12] Tremendous possibilities exist to use these data to compare students who use the writing center with those who do not, as well as to compare these groups according to results of satisfaction surveys, such as those I mentioned earlier.

One more obvious area for writing center outcomes research is the specific contribution writing centers make to students' development as writers. In 1981, Mary Lamb expressed surprise that only four of the 56 centers she surveyed collected "pre- and post-test samples of writing" (77). I doubt that situation has changed much since, usually because centers are not set up to collect such data, and a whole host of complexities would surround such a procedure (e.g., sorting out non-writing-center influences on students' development, creating the logistics to collect consistent samples, coordinating the grading/evaluation of the samples). I can report that I did make an attempt at such a study, using the diagnostic essay that a group of first-year students wrote during freshman orientation, comparing that essay to a similar writing task—a required Writing Proficiency Exam that students wrote within a year after completing FYC—and then calculating whether writing center visits would make a difference in students' "improvement" over the two tasks. While I did find that the grades on the later writing sample were significantly higher than the first (grading was done by two independent raters), writing center visits were not a significant factor. Several complications confound these findings, however. Students knew that the diagnostic essay did not "count," so perhaps that writing effort was less than characteristic. Graders also knew which essay was the diagnostic and which was the proficiency exam, thus biasing their judgment that the latter task could be of superior quality. Finally, while I did control for teacher effects with this sample—all students were from my sections of FYC—only one out of 46 students did not visit the writing center; thus, I could not separate students into two clear groups. Perhaps almost all benefited from their writing center experience! Nevertheless, the research design I used holds promise for future efforts at examining the effects of writing center visits on students' actual writing, whether on a single task or on multiple tasks.

One approach to understanding the effects of writing center sessions would be to examine the influence of conference dialogue on student

writing or to ask, "Are there components of the tutor-writer conversation that get incorporated into a student's subsequent draft?" This question has been explored in the context of elementary and high school students' writing conferences with their teachers (see Vukelich and Leverson 1987; Sperling 1991), but not on the college level or in writing center settings. It would be one way to understand not just writing center effects, but the process of learning that we believe goes on in writing center sessions.

An additional area of writing-center effects are the benefits that tutors—whether peer or professional—draw from their work. Molly Wingate (2001) has reported on the ways that her undergraduate tutoring staff at Colorado College benefit from their writing center work, including higher grade-point averages and more satisfaction and higher rates of annual giving as alumnae as compared to the rest of the student body (9–10). Indeed, the acknowledgment of the writing center as an ideal place for the training of composition teachers is long standing (see, for instance, Almasy and England 1979; Clark 1988; Zelenak et al. 1993). Thus, our understanding of writing center "outcomes" can be broadened far beyond students' command of English mechanics or grades in first-year composition, and can instead be expressed in ways that administrators, colleagues, and students will understand and value.

6. *Find Comparable Institution Assessment.* While we often recognize the particulars of the local context within which our writing centers are situated, we also often seek comparisons with similar institutions. In times of particular need—budget cuts or salary justifications—the requests appear on WCenter with a strong sense of urgency. Research on writing center effects should similarly be considered within the scope of other institutions, whether that is the results of our efforts or our methods. Our field is a relatively young one in this sense—national "benchmarks" do not necessarily exist, accreditation efforts have primarily stalled, and the central collection and dissemination of writing center data is logistically challenging. One hopeful sign in this direction is the creation of a Writing Centers Research Project at the University of Louisville (see http://www.louisville.edu/a-s/writingcenter/wcenters/wcrp.html). This "think tank," archive, and research center is a new venture and one that will certainly raise the possibility for the kinds of cross-institutional comparisons that Upcraft and Schuh (2000) call for in terms of first-year programs.

7. *Use Nationally Accepted Standards to Assess.* Similar to the item above, our field has not necessarily created national standards that might be used to gauge our effects. The International Writing Centers Association has created a useful self-study document (see http://faculty.winthrop.edu/kosterj/NWCA/nwcadraft.htm), and efforts have recently linked writing center assessment experts to the Writing Programs Administrator consultant-evaluator program. However, the political terrain of calls for "standards" can be quite rocky; in the history of our field such calls are usually associated with back-to-basics movements, attacks on non-standard literacy practices, and a pedagogical focus on mechanics. One useful framework in this debate is Alexander Astin's (1993) notion of "talent development" as the preferred goal of our institutions. In Astin's words, "The fundamental premise underlying the talent development concept is that true excellence lies in the institution's ability to affect its students and faculty favorably, to enhance their intellectual and scholarly development, to make a positive difference in their lives" (6–7). Astin contrasts this view of "excellence" with long-held notions of institutional assessment based upon the amount of resources held (including high-quality students and faculty, library holdings, campus facilities) and the reputation accorded the institution, usually according to the amount of resources. Thus, in the national-ranking view that predominates, institutions that add little more than networking possibilities for their graduates continue to be held in much higher regard than institutions that move students much farther along the developmental continuum, and assessment efforts are focused on the former and ignore the latter.

The applicability of Astin's ideas of "talent development" fit well with the goals of our writing centers, where our efforts are focused on the development of students' writing processes and on our tutors' professional development. If we are to develop standards for writing center excellence, such a view should predominate, particularly given the paucity of resources many writing centers are facing. Perhaps even our long-standing attempts to escape the label of "remediation" can be reconsidered when we realize that working with the most underprepared writers allows for the greatest amount of development, a charge that few other campus entities embrace as fully as writing centers do.

8. *Assess Cost Effectiveness.* This final component is one that makes most of us take pause. In the context of first-year programs, Upcraft and Schuh (2000) ask: "Are the benefits students and the institution derive

from the programs and services targeted to first-year students worth the cost and how do we know?" While we are reluctant to ask that question in terms of writing centers, and are quick to acknowledge the difficulties in calculating costs and benefits, budget-conscious administrators always have—and always will—ask such a question. However, by engaging in the assessment procedures outlined in this framework, we will be in a much stronger position to argue for the benefits of our work and to show the relative costs. These need not merely be in reductive terms, i.e., dollars and centers. Instead, we need to think broadly about our contributions to institutions, considering our writing centers' contributions to campus life and climate, to general education outcomes, to our institutions'commitment to academic excellence. Given the paucity of most of our budgets, the work we do comes at a relative bargain—now it is incumbent upon us to demonstrate that bargain with sustained research and assessment.

## AND IN THE END

My intention in this chapter has been to demonstrate that research on writing center effects does not require an additional graduate degree or a small army of assessment "experts." Collaborating with colleagues across our institutions can serve the dual purpose of capitalizing on local expertise and sending the message that the writing center is serious about assessment. For institutions with graduate programs, writing center assessment can provide an important venue for graduate students to put into practice the methods they are learning in the classroom (see, for example, Olson, Moyer, and Falda 2001).

In 1979, Nancy McCracken wrote, "No matter the size of the writing lab, for several different purposes and at several different points in its development, the director has to justify the lab's existence" (1). That need has not gone away in the intervening 22 years, but hopefully now we can avoid the defensiveness of "justification" and instead begin to assess our work in ways that we feel are meaningful and useful.