

## Taking Stock: Surveying the Relationship of the Writing Center and TA Training

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[C]an one make a case for expanding the role of writing center tutoring in the training of classroom teachers on the basis of this study. . . ? The answer is both “no” and “yes.” No, because one should not presume to apply the results of a qualitative study beyond the study’s specific context. And yes, because, if not scientifically, then intuitively, one must assent that few activities provide as firm a ground for the transition of teachers to the classroom.

—Jane Cogie (83)

The relationship of the writing center and the composition program is an issue of general interest for writing program administrators (WPAs) in both settings (Balester and McDonald, Burnham and Jackson, Waldo).<sup>1</sup> As suggested by Cogie in the epigraph to this essay, for example, the role of the writing center in teacher development is of particular interest for WPAs at institutions that use graduate students as composition teachers. Alongside Cogie, such scholars as Muriel Harris and Peggy F. Broder have persuasively argued that tutoring provides valuable experience in talking about writing and broadens TAs’ understanding of writers and writing processes. However, while there has been a fair amount written on the benefits of tutoring experience for future and present teachers of writing, previous research in this area has taken the shape of firsthand testimonials in which authors provide local commentary to explain the relationship between tutoring and teaching as they have experienced it firsthand (King et al., Leeson, Rotenberg) or as they have seen it develop among TAs in their own centers (Anderson et al., Harris). Other scholars draw upon common tenets of one-to-one writing pedagogy to speculate what writing centers can, generally speaking, offer to teacher development (Broder, Clark). Even case studies, which use a more evidence-based approach, still argue from a scant handful

of tutor experiences to suggest possible relationships between tutoring and teaching (Child, Cogie). While the level of agreement in these individual testimonies suggest areas in which tutoring experience may facilitate the development of future teachers of writing, the heavy reliance in these studies upon the authors' personal perceptions and experiences make it difficult either to apply their results beyond the authors context or, when disagreement exists, to assess contradictory assertions of firsthand observation.

The current study therefore attempts to broaden the evidence base concerning the relationship between tutoring and teaching beyond individual observation. With the assistance of a grant from the Council of Writing Program Administrators,<sup>2</sup> we surveyed WPAs in writing programs and writing centers in order to describe the extant roles of writing centers in TA development programs and to determine whether prior claims based in individual perceptions would be supported by the experiences of other WPAs—not only those in institutions that use the writing center in TA training, but also in those programs that do not include such a requirement and where working in the writing center was an optional experience for graduate students. Finally, we wanted to examine what, if any, negative elements might be attributed to writing center involvement in TA preparation. This essay, then, first reviews previous scholarship to establish an inventory of claims concerning the writing center's role in TA training and then describes the results of a nationwide survey. It concludes with a discussion of the opportunities and challenges survey respondents associated with this sort of TA preparation and reflection upon the possible implications of our results. By expanding the scholarly gaze beyond the local scene and then investigating that tensions that emerge between writing centers and writing programs, this essay attempts to improve our understanding of the relationship between tutoring and teaching and to complicate our understanding of the potential costs and benefits of such programs.

### **TEACHING AND TUTORING: SURVEYING THE CLAIMS**

Although claims about the role of the writing center in teacher preparation have been based in individual experience, in many areas these personal reflections demonstrate a readily-recognizable degree of consensus. That is, despite the authors' differences in institutional locale and intended audiences, with two notable exceptions, there is little contradiction among the assertions. Whether writing specifically for a writing center audience (King et al., Child, Jackson, Manguson, Leeson, Rottenberg), a more broadly-conceived audience of writing program administrators (Broder, Cogie), or to the general audience of writing specialists that comprises the field of

composition studies (Clark, Collins), researchers in this area not only argue for the value of writing center experience for teachers of writing, they also make these arguments along remarkably similar lines. When reviewing the range of scholarship, then, distinct trends emerge. The oft-repeated claims that form these trends these can be grouped into three categories: comprehension of subject matter; communication of subject matter; and assessment of student needs.

### *Comprehension of Subject Matter*

An enduring claim is that tutoring experience offers TAs an improved understanding of the writing process. Over twenty years ago Lee Ann Leeson claimed in *The Writing Center Journal* that working in the center helped broaden her understanding of the writing process by leading her to realize the extent to which, prior to gaining tutoring experience, her “ideas of effective writing techniques were influenced by the methods [she] used,” in her own writing (19). Working in the center, Leeson suggests, exposes the would-be teacher to a variety of writing processes. In a similar vein, Muriel Harris recently argued that writing center practice enriches one’s theoretical understanding of process:

Reading about writing processes provides a background for understanding how we write, but that knowledge is one step removed from observing writers at work and seeing the messiness and reality of actual composing. . . . As tutors, however, they sit with writers at work and gain a close understanding of when and how to intervene and what classroom activities help develop students’ understanding of their own writing processes. (197-8)

Such assertions about the process-based relationship between tutoring and teaching are foundational to scholarship in this area. In terms similar to those used by Leeson and Harris, Broder (37), Cogie (90) and Clark (347) have claimed that writing center work helps TAs better understand writing processes. Tutoring may facilitate more than comprehension of the writing process, however; Broder argues that “after a term or two, tutors are more confident of their understanding of grammar” (41) as well. From abstract rhetorical principles to specific mechanical knowledge, then, WPAs have advocated tutoring as a way to understand the broad range of knowledge that comprises the material taught in the writing classroom.

### *Communication of Subject Matter*

Just as scholars have argued that writing center work helps TAs better understand the subject(s) of writing, so too have they claimed that tutoring improves one's ability to impart this knowledge to students. Clark, for example, states that "working closely with students in the Writing Center increases new instructors' awareness of students' needs and concerns, enabling them to view their classes as groups of individuals" (349). Broder (37), Cogie (80) and Harris (198) all concur with Clark's assertions: not only does such experience enhance TAs' general understanding of the importance of "responding to each writer with care" (Cogie 80), but it is also thought to facilitate TAs' specific response strategies, for one of the most popular claims in the literature is that tutor-teachers offer more useful feedback to their students. As Broder describes:

[T]he writing center . . . provides valuable experience in dealing with the challenging, delicate task of making suggestions for revision. . . . Tutors learn that reading the whole paper before criticizing it makes it easier to see its strengths and to see it as a draft to be improved rather than a finished product to be proofread. (40)

In other words, tutors not only understand better what feedback to give but also how to give it; as Harris explains, tutors do more than "learn to prioritize in terms of what to work on first" (198); they further discover to "look beyond the page for clues as to how to help the writer, and they also learn how to respond to the writer in ways other than giving back comments, such as those written on the margins of student papers" (Harris 198). In sum, then, the argument that tutors better understand how to communicate abstract rhetorical principles effectively emerges as a clear trend.

### *Assessment of Student Needs*

Related to arguments about tutors' communicative skills are claims about their abilities to assess student needs. Some assertions in this area are based in tutor experience with students' texts; for example, it has been claimed repeatedly that teachers with writing center experience are exposed to a broad range of student writing from across the disciplines. Because of this exposure, tutors are not only more able to assess accurately the strengths and weaknesses of student texts (Broder 39, Clark 348) but also construct more effective writing prompts (Broder 40, Clark 349, Harris 199-200, Lesson 20, Rottenberg 12). Representative of this line of argument is Lynnea Chapman King's assertion that her experiences with "innumerable assignments . . . and the students who seek help with them have caused [her] to

. . . restructure not only [her] assignments, but also [her] courses” (King et al. 4). Given tutors’ exposure to a wide range of assignment prompts—and students who are confused by them—it is unsurprising that tutors and administrators frequently cite the impact of such experiences on the assignments they later construct as teachers.

It is also claimed that tutors come to assess student learning through a pedagogical emphasis on listening (Broder 38-9, Child 175-7, Cogie 80, Harris 201). Writing center work requires careful listening, and as Broder notes, such experience encourages tutor-teachers to bring active listening into the classroom:

A tutor comes to realize that the two voices in the dialogue of the conference ought by no means to be heard equally. The tutor’s role is not to tell the student what to do with his paper but to help him to discover what it is that he himself wishes to do. The ability to *listen* to the student, to attend with respect to what he has to say, is one of a writing teacher’s most valuable assets. (Broder 38-9)

The range of writers encountered in the writing center, then, requires tutors to engage in student-centered learning. By working with a diversity of writers on a range of writing tasks, tutors learn to engage in student-centered pedagogies. And, as the spectrum of pertinent scholarship agrees, such pedagogies carry over into their teaching.

### *The Areas of Dissensus: Establishing Agendas and Assigning Grades*

Although there are areas of strong agreement among scholars concerning the kinds of influence of writing center exerts over the formation of teacher pedagogy, there are also topics of pointed disagreement. Possibly the most contested issue is the relationship of tutoring experience to the ability to manage time efficiently. It has been argued that writing center experience both offers TAs an improved ability to manage time (Broder 40, Harris 200-1) and has a negative impact on this same skill (Child 175-8). On the one hand, as Harris argues, because tutors’ and clients’ “time together is limited, tutors learn how to become efficient users of time” (200). On the other hand, Child’s study documents tutor-teachers’ frustration with classroom time constraints (172-5). As Child cynically observes, these tensions might arise from the differing concepts of time that define the tutorial and classroom:

In general, agendas for tutorials are highly personalized and situation specific; they are seldom if ever written out. Agendas for the classroom, on the other hand, tend to be rather generic and are often little more than filing cabinet objects. (172)

As suggested by the contrast between Harris and Child's positions, although scholars agree that writing center work influences tutors' management of time, there are contradictory opinions on how this ability translates into the classroom.

In addition to the dissensus on time management, there has also been disagreement over the impact of writing center experience on individuals' ability and comfort with grading. Child, for example, describes former tutors' discomfort with evaluation (177-8). Cogie's results, however, appear to refute those of Child. That is, as Cogie claims, her "findings . . . differed sharply from Child's. Unlike Child's first-time teachers [with tutoring experience] those in my study did not express frustration or anxiety at the differences [to tutoring] posed by graded, large group work" (80). While the differing data from Child and Cogie's examinations of similar populations might suggest a new avenue for investigation, an even more notable contrast exists between Child's critical perspective of the tutoring-grading relationship and Broder's assertions that prior tutoring experience, in fact, facilitates grading expertise. Broder argues that

[T]he writing center can help to prepare tutors for the future necessity of assigning grades to students' work. . . . [T]he experience of having worked with so many students does help the tutor when later, the chores of grading must be confronted. A tutor's writing center work has enabled her to see scores of student papers that represent a wide range of ability: before the tutor faces her own classroom she has acquired a soundly-based knowledge of what she can expect these students to be able to do. (42)

Child and Cogie agree that tutoring impacts time management ability yet disagree diametrically on the positive or negative nature of that impact, so too there is a high level of agreement that working in the writing center also influences one's grading-related ability and attitude, yet assessments of this impact range from the clearly positive (Broder) to the highly negative (Child).

### *Criticism of the Writing Center as "Training Wheels"*

Even as a review of the scholarship reveals trends among individual testimony concerning the value of tutoring in teacher preparation, so does such a survey indicate a similarity among critiques of such practice. Melissa Nicolas' recent polemic against such programs in the pages of *Praxis* represents well those individuals who advocate against mandatory writing center experience for TAs:

I know from talking with some of these graduate students that the message they get from this set-up is that tutoring must be easy and not necessarily all that important. After all, their thinking goes, they have no particular training, expertise, or even interest in the matter, and, yet, they are given that job to do. In addition, since graduate students in this model must tutor in the writing center before they enter the classroom, the writing center is positioned as a place for novices, the not-ready-for-the-classroom place, not necessarily a place for people with skills and training. (Nicolas par. 7)

In other words, just as writing centers resist a narrow identification as the place for bad writers, so too should they refuse to serve as the place for untrained graduate instructors. Concurring with Nicolas' critiques, the practice at such well-known and well-regarded writing centers as those of New York University, Ohio State and Purdue has been to hire graduate students tutors with previous teaching experience. Along these lines, Mary Wisoki, a former director of the NYU writing center observes:

From its beginnings in 1980, the New York University Writing Center required that TAs receive training as teachers before they could tutor. In 1980, Lil Brannon argued convincingly ... that tutoring requires more people skills and a broader knowledge of composition than FY comp courses.... I also think that the Center is a very public face for the writing program—a bad tutor can do damage to lots of students as well as to the Center's reputation. Finally, some TAs discover they really aren't interested in working one-on-one—or that working in the Center isn't "easier" than teaching, like they first assume. I wanted TAs to figure this out prior to any appointment in the Center. (Wisocki n.p.)

While many WPAs may attribute a range of values to writing center experience for TAs, then, there are also signs that other WPAs find such programs less than desirable. Accordingly, in addition to investigating the influence of tutoring on teaching, the survey provided respondents a forum to comment upon the appropriateness of using new TAs in the writing center.

#### **METHOD: SURVEYING THE FIELD**

As suggested in this review of the literature, there is a level of consensus concerning the areas of impact of writing center experience on teacher pedagogy. Each of the extant studies, however, is largely based in the author's

experience and, to a lesser extent, reflection upon previous relevant scholarship. By contrast, the goal of the present study was to broaden the experiential base that comprises the evidence for the relationship of tutoring and teaching to move the investigation beyond first person accounts towards a broader investigation of trends in administrative attitudes and practices. The researchers thus developed a survey instrument which was distributed over WCENTER and WPA-L.

When creating the survey instrument, we drew upon the three areas of consensus we had identified in the literature (comprehension of subject matter, communication of subject matter, and assessment of student needs) and the two areas of dissensus (time management and grading) to create an attitudes inventory. In addition to those items based in the scholarship, one statement—"TAs with tutoring experience more quickly grasp postmodern composition theory"—was not drawn from the previous research. Rather, it was included to assess any "halo effect"; that is, to determine if respondents were inclined to attribute all positive statements to writing center experience.

Survey data was gathered in two parts. In the first, participants were asked to respond to items in an attitudes inventory (see Table 1) using a five point scale in which 1 = "Strongly Agree" and 5 = "Strongly Disagree." In addition, the instrument solicited information about programs' policies and procedures. Participants were also encouraged to include any discursive commentary that would help the researchers understand their responses. A copy of the survey instrument is appended to this essay.

*Table 1. Items Included in Administrator Attitudes Inventory*

In comparison to first-year TAs without such experience, I believe TAs with tutoring experience are:

- better prepared to teach
- more prepared to discuss writing
- more able to assess accurately student learning
- more comfortable establishing daily lesson plans and adhering to them
- more comfortable establishing semester-long agendas in their syllabi and then adhering to them
- better prepared to grade student essays
- able to more accurately assess the strengths and weaknesses of student texts

In comparison to first-year TAs without such experience, I believe TAs with tutoring experience:

- better appreciate diversity in students' home cultures
- offer more useful feedback to student writers
- better understand grammatical and mechanical principles

- construct more effective assignment prompts
- have a better understanding of the writing process
- more quickly grasp postmodern composition theory
- more effectively incorporate listening into their pedagogy

### DATA: SURVEYING THE RESPONSES

The responses received represented a range of administrators at a variety of institutions: Among the 28 usable responses were 12 from writing center directors, 10 from composition program directors, 4 from respondents who both administered the writing center and the composition program, and 2 from individuals who administered other types of writing programs. Thus, the administrative perspective of both the writing center and the composition program are represented in these results.

Just as a range of administrative perspectives is represented in these findings, so too, these data represent a range of TA preparation programs. 15 of these respondents worked in programs where writing center work was always or sometimes required of TAs as part of the teacher preparation programs. By contrast, 13 respondents were from programs with no such requirement; these individuals described programs in which writing center experience was in addition to, not an integral part of, TA training. The synthesis of attitudes described in this survey, then, represents a broader range of WPAs than merely those of individuals who already participate in such programs and so expands the perspectival base beyond that represented in the previous scholarship.

The last item on the demographic section of the survey focused on those issues of money and prestige that coalesce around TAs in the writing center. That is, as Nicolas argues, writing center administrators may be cautious about the center's role in teacher preparation due to fears that such participation can make tutoring look like a "lesser" position: a less difficult, less prestigious job that deserves less pay. Looking at the data, however, suggests that the majority of respondents work at schools where assignments to the center and the classroom are seen, at least, as fiscally equivalent:

*Table 2. TA Compensation*

If all other determining factors are equal (ex: M.A. or Ph.D. candidate, progress towards completion) what effect does a TA's assignment have on their stipend:

- |                      |    |
|----------------------|----|
| • Teachers earn more | 5  |
| • Tutors earn more   | 1  |
| • They earn the same | 22 |

The information generated by the second portion of the survey, which focused on administrators' attitudes towards TAs' writing center experience, yielded a less consistent data pool than did the demographical portion of the instrument. That is, in total we received 28 responses, but many of those were incomplete or contained answers that were not usable (such as lengthy discursive responses in lieu of using the form's five point scale). The annotations at the bottom of Table 3 explain how many responses we were able to use for each item.

**Table 3. WPA Attitude Inventory  
 Response Means and Standard Deviations**

**1= Strongly Agree    5=Strongly Disagree**  
 mean (standard deviation)

Item (#)	WC requirement <sup>1</sup>	No WC req <sup>2</sup>	WC WPAs <sup>3</sup>	Comp WPAs <sup>4</sup>	Total <sup>5</sup>
better prepared to teach. (1)	1.45 (0.93)	2.61 (1.44)	1.91 (1.44)	2.23 (1.05)	2.10 (1.35)
more prepared to discuss writing (2)	1.45 (0.93)	2.39 (1.64)	1.82 (1.60)	2.15 (1.10)	1.98 (1.43)
more able to assess accurately student learning (3)	2.00 (1.00)	2.53 (1.28)	2.36 (1.36)	2.35 (0.94)	2.30 (1.17)
more comfortable establishing daily lesson plans and adhering to them (4)	3.00 (0.89)	2.53 (1.15)	2.91 (1.04)	2.85 (1.00)	2.73 (1.05)
more comfortable establishing semester-long agendas in their syllabi and then adhering to them (5)	2.90 (0.94)	2.53 (1.15)	2.82 (0.98)	2.85 (1.10)	2.72 (1.06)
better prepared to grade student essays (6)	1.63 (0.67)	2.64 (1.60)	2.00 (1.54)	2.30 (0.94)	2.20 (1.35)
able to more accurately assess the strengths and weaknesses of student texts (7)	1.36 (0.50)	2.39 (1.52)	1.82 (1.60)	2.15 (0.81)	1.94 (1.27)
better appreciate diversity in students' home cultures (8)	2.80 (1.39)	2.23 (1.16)	2.70 (1.57)	2.67 (0.86)	2.48 (1.27)
offer more useful feedback to student writers (9)	1.72 (0.64)	2.25 (1.22)	1.81 (1.17)	2.35 (0.57)	2.02 (1.02)
better understand grammatical and mechanical principles (10)	1.91 (0.54)	2.50 (1.05)	2.00 (0.90)	2.40 (0.84)	2.08 (0.86)
construct more effective assignment prompts (11)	2.09 (0.83)	2.50 (1.09)	1.91 (0.83)	2.90 (0.87)	2.32 (0.98)
have a better understanding of the writing process (12)	1.82 (0.87)	2.14 (1.09)	2.00 (1.26)	2.10 (0.73)	2.00 (1.00)
more quickly grasp postmodern composition theory (13)	3.54 (1.36)	2.66 (1.15)	3.20 (1.03)	3.33 (1.33)	3.08 (1.01)

more effectively incorporate listening into their pedagogy (14)	2.09 (0.94)	2.14 (1.10)	2.09 (1.04)	2.20 (0.91)	2.12 (1.01)
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<sup>1</sup> programs requiring writing center work as a part of TA training; n = 11

<sup>2</sup> programs not requiring writing center work as a part of TA training; n = 13

<sup>3</sup> writing center WPAs; n = 10-11

<sup>4</sup> composition program WPAs; n = 10

<sup>5</sup> total responses = 25

Several predictable trends emerge in Table 3: WPAs in programs with a writing center, for example, generally exhibit a more positive attitude towards integrating the writing center in TA preparation than do WPAs in programs with no such requirement. Notably, however, the majority of the exceptions to this trend are found in items 4 and 5, which relate to time management and represent dissensus in the scholarship, and item 13, related to postmodern composition theory. In reference to time management, the average of responses to assertions that tutors were “more comfortable establishing daily lesson plans and adhering to them” (item 4) and “more comfortable establishing semester-long agendas in their syllabi and adhering to them” (item 5) were 2.73 (SD 1.05) and 2.72 (SD 1.06), respectively. When considering these data in light of the survey’s 5-point scale (1 = Strongly Agree; 5 = Strongly Disagree), these numbers seem to reflect the ambiguity of the previous scholarship; both scores are notably near the uncertainty of a 3.00 score. More specifically, the averaged attitudes of WPAs who work in programs where writing center work is required of TAs is, in fact, a perfectly ambiguous 3.00 (SD 0.89) on item 4 and a nearly perfect 2.90 (0.94) on item 5, thus reflecting the contradiction of the published scholarship to a remarkable degree.

In response to the other item related to dissensus in the scholarship—TAs with tutoring experience are “better prepared to grade”—WPAs seem to have a more optimistic view than that expressed in Child’s study. The overall mean response to this item (2.20; SD 1.35) and, more specifically the response from WPAs in programs with a writing center requirement (1.63; SD 0.67) suggests that respondents believe tutoring improves a new writing instructors’ ability to grade. These data align the responding group’s attitude with Broder’s assertion that “the writing center can help to prepare tutors for the future necessity of assigning grades to student work” (42).

Given the high correlation of these data with the published scholarship, the results of this study suggest that the positive opinions that dominate the research express views beyond those held by the individual authors; rather, these assertions are supported by experiences of a national pool of WPAs, a group that includes individuals in writing centers and in composition programs. Such opinions seem more reliable when considered in light of item 13 (TAs with tutoring experience “better understand postmodern com-

position theory”). Across all demographic categories, this is the item with which respondents most strongly disagree. Such reactions suggest that the WPAs positive attitudes towards other items on the inventory can be read as indicative of their views and not the result of a generalized “halo effect.” In light of these data, the overall suggestion that respondents agree that writing center experience is a useful component of TA preparation seems highly persuasive.

### **IT’S LIKE COMPARING ORANGES AND FIRST-YEAR WRITERS: RESPONDENTS’ COMMENTS**

Not all the information by the survey supported the use of new TAs in the writing center, however. While the attitudes inventory indicates that the writing center provides a site of enrichment for TA preparation programs, respondents’ discursive comments suggested potential conflicts. Of the eight individuals who commented on the effect of integrating writing center experience in TA training, three spoke of such experience positively, yet four spoke of it in mixed terms, and one respondent was highly negative about such a requirement. Among the positive reasons cited for writing center experience were that such TAs were “better prepared for all aspects of teaching writing,” and “TAs who tutor [in the respondent’s writing center] enter with a much broader sense of how writing is taught and practiced across the curriculum.” One respondent aptly summarized the many benefits that have been attributed to tutoring experience:

I strongly believe that tutoring experience provides a strong background for new TA’s. Sitting next to the tutee and looking into her face as she struggles with an assignment increases awareness of the importance of clear and purposeful assignments, as well as positive, encouraging, constructively critical feedback. Tutoring experience provides the teacher with a deeper understanding of the writing process and its connection to thinking; it also helps teachers to see the complex relationship between the writer’s literacy history (i.e., family, language, and education backgrounds) and his or her writing.

Given these many benefits, it is unsurprising that one respondent simply wrote, “We don’t have any mandatory writing center service for new TAs, but I wish we did.”

While such comments echo the praise for such initiatives that dominates the pertinent scholarship, other comments were more mixed. Two respondents argued that pedagogical implications of writing center work were not inherent to tutoring experience but resulted from the pedagogy

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and practice of a specific center or were even the inborn qualities of the tutors themselves. As one WPA notes:

Many of your questions assume that consultant training is responsible for the improvement of certain skills, when I think that the selection process facilitates the process as much as the training. For instance, I'm inclined to say that as much as possible, I take people who show signs of thoughtfulness and reflection: they tend to be better listeners from the get-go.

By drawing attention to the pedagogical differences that individualize writing centers, this respondent questions any implicit value attributed to the act of tutoring by arguments that address the intrinsic value of working in a "typical writing center" (Broder 38) or that reason "intuitively" (Cogie 83) for the generic value of such experience. In a similar vein, another survey participant responded:

I think the degree to which people with WC experience are more accustomed / not accustomed (and better at) the things listed [in the attitudes inventory] depends on where they've worked... W/ people coming from the really good WC, they feel very prepared to respond to student writing, but they're not very comfortable with actually grading it.

Even while echoing ambivalence towards the relationship between tutoring experience and grading, this response also draws attention to the varieties of tutoring experiences and calls into question any essentialist statements about the absolute value of such experiences.

In addition to the positive and mixed comments were two respondents who questioned the value of such programs from the writing center's point of view. In this vein, one participant stated:

I'm pretty neutral about whether and how tutoring prepares TAs for teaching. Our graduate tutors are required to have at least a year's composition teaching experience before they can apply for WC positions. I think this requirement makes for excellent tutoring. In turn, I firmly believe that tutoring has a very positive impact on their subsequent teaching, particularly on their construction of assignments, their comments on student work, and their ability to discuss writing with their students.

Here, then, is another challenge to TA preparation programs that include a writing center component: if tutoring can serve as preparation for teaching is the reverse true: is it appropriate to use teaching as mandatory preparation for tutoring? And, if so, what are the implications for the writing center when it serves as a site of TA preparation? That is, while the attitudes survey suggests

that WPAs are in agreement that there are potential benefits from TA preparation programs that include a writing center component, there is less consensus about what benefits such programs might offer the writing center. One respondent, in particular, summed up this perspective in a vivid metaphor:

[A]lthough tutoring often enriches students' experiences and helps them become considerably better TAs (and this seems almost uniformly true—they are better in so many ways), I would not make tutoring a prerequisite—and certainly would not if all grad students expect to receive wc/TA appts. This is unfair to the students they might tutor. Just as with TA selection, the first consideration ought to be for students—will this person offer top-notch teaching or tutoring? If not, they shouldn't be taken on any more than a floundering med student ought to get better by missing my vein 19 times ... keep practicing on oranges!

In sum, then, while the attitudes inventory strongly suggests a general belief in the value of tutoring experience for teachers of writing, the discursive comments raise some specific critiques of such initiatives from the perspective of the writing center.

#### **IMPLICATIONS: SURVEYING THE POSSIBILITIES**

While many WPAs in both the writing center and the writing program will no doubt sympathize with the respondent who would prefer we find practice “oranges” for our future teachers of composition, the generally positive opinions documented by this study suggest that such programs will continue to exist. Indeed, given the many benefits of tutoring experience for future teachers of writing, such programs seem not merely inevitable, but highly desirable for future teachers of writing if not necessarily for the writing centers in which they work. The results of this study, however, also suggest considerations for WPAs in charge of these programs:

#### *Center-Based TA Training Programs Must Account for the Relationship between Writing Center and Writing Program Pedagogies and Goals*

Such advice may seem self-evident to many WPAs; after all, it was over ten years ago that Mark Waldo argued convincingly that writing centers and composition programs should share “pedagogical philosophies” and “complementary goals” (74). And yet, there remain intrinsic, material differences between the classroom and one-to-one teaching environments. As Valerie Balester and James McDonald observed in the pages of this journal, however, such differences—and the tensions they beget—are too frequently glossed over:

WPAs seemed to define their territories [the writing center and the writing program] in ways that discouraged them from becoming involved in the policies and practices in each other's domain. . . . Respondents almost never described coming to an agreement about philosophies and goals as a result of their collaboration. And when two WPAs had a fundamental disagreement over goals and philosophies (for example, over whether the writing center should focus on grammatical errors), the writing center might have an uneasy, even marginal position in the composition curriculum. (77)

Although such a “marginal position” for writing centers would seem counter to any potential benefits of center-based TA preparation, those programs that relegate new TAs to the center with little classroom discussion of the relationship of teaching and tutoring seem to enact the role Balester and McDonald describe. Teacher preparation programs that do not explicitly address those unique pedagogies of one-to-one writing instruction that have emerged in writing center scholarship lose the opportunity to expose TAs to an entire body of teaching knowledge. Also, through their very silence on the pedagogical differences between the center and the classroom, such programs continue to marginalize the writing center experience that they ostensibly value; writing center work becomes pre-theoretical, pre-professional practice that precedes, for example, the “real” expert knowledge gained through the composition pedagogy course and the “real” work of teaching in a classroom environment.

By contrast, acknowledging both the harmony and dissonance between classroom- and center-based writing instruction deepens TAs' understanding of both scenes of instruction and the pedagogies there enacted. For example, exposing TAs to current areas of inquiry in writing center studies, such as definitions of the writing center as site or a method (Boquet), the abstract implications of one-to-one tutoring (Black), and the critical implications of the postmodern writing center (Grimm), not only impacts future teachers' career-long understanding of the theoretical tensions and practical complexities that coalesce around the writing center, but also elaborates and improves the critical apparatus that TAs will take into their first classrooms.

*Evaluations of Both the Writing Center and the Composition Program Should Assess the Impact of Center-Based TA Preparation on the Writing Center*

Clearly emerging in this study, as in previous research, is an argument for the value of writing center experience in TA preparation. What is less clear, however, is the impact of such programs on the writing center. At first glance such programs may appear a win-win situation: the TAs get experience talk-

ing about writing, and the center gets graduate student tutors. Upon closer examination, however, the potential effects of such programs on the writing center may be less than utopic: while first-year writing might gain more expert teachers from a TA preparation program that includes the writing center, for example, the center itself may accrue an increased turnover rate through such programs, for once they are trained to competency, TAs are taken out of the center and put into the classroom. Centers that rely on TA training programs for their writing center staffs can therefore lack continuity. Likewise, mandating writing center work as part of TA preparation disempowers the writing center by removing its ability to select tutors on the basis of ability and interest. Thus, rather than giving an unproblematic “gift” of tutors to the center, such programs are actually asking the center to take on the increased challenge of perennial tutor training and need to be viewed as such. In their assessments, then, WPAs in both the writing center and the composition program need to carefully attend to the impact of TA training on the ongoing success of the writing center and to recognize the center resources such programs consume.

Ultimately, while the results of this study suggest that writing center tutoring is an extremely valuable experience for TAs in writing programs, the results of such programs for the writing center are less clear. If we agree that the writing classroom and the writing center are instructional scenes we equally value, our arguments concerning training TAs in the writing center must take into account more than the effects of such programs on the TAs but on the writing center. Only by considering the impact of TA training on both educational scenes will the programs yield the full pedagogical benefits of such initiatives, not just for the TAs but for the programs as well.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For purposes of this study, “composition program” designates curriculum-based writing programs, such as first-year writing, and writing program administrator (WPA) refers to individuals who lead composition programs and/or writing centers; “tutoring” refers to ungraded one-to-one writing instruction that takes place in a writing center and “teaching” refers to graded, curriculum-based writing instruction that takes place in a writing classroom.

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**Appendix:**  
**Survey of TA Training Programs**

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The goal of this survey is to gather information from writing programs which employ graduate student TAs who also have the opportunity to work in the writing center. If you have any questions, please contact Melissa Ianetta at [ianetta@okstate.edu](mailto:ianetta@okstate.edu). Thank you for your participation!

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**Part I: About You and Your Program:**

1. What do you administer?  
\_\_\_\_ Writing Center  
\_\_\_\_ Writing Program  
\_\_\_\_ Both  
\_\_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_
  
2. What is the approximate enrollment for your institution? \_\_\_\_\_
  
3. What graduate degrees does your department offer (check all that apply):  
\_\_\_\_ MA in English  
\_\_\_\_ PhD in English  
\_\_\_\_ MFA in English  
\_\_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_
  
4. Are the teaching assistants (TAs) in your program ever **required** to work in the writing center at any time during their assistantship?  
\_\_\_\_ Yes  
\_\_\_\_ No  
\_\_\_\_ Sometimes (Please describe in comments section at the end of the survey)

**If no, please skip to question 8 of the survey**

5. Approximately how long has writing center tutoring been part of the professional development of your TAs? \_\_\_\_\_ years
  
6. Generally speaking, how many semesters are TAs required to work in the writing center **prior** to teaching?  
\_\_\_\_ One  
\_\_\_\_ Two  
\_\_\_\_ More than two: please specify \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_ None; TAs teach and tutor simultaneously or teach prior to tutoring
  
7. How many hours a week are TAs with a full time appointment required to tutor?  
\_\_\_\_ 1-5  
\_\_\_\_ 6-10  
\_\_\_\_ 10-15  
\_\_\_\_ 15-20  
\_\_\_\_ More than 20
  
8. Do TAs with a full time appointment who tutor have other responsibilities as part of their TA position?  
\_\_\_\_ No  
\_\_\_\_ Yes, they teach \_\_\_\_\_ sections of writing  
\_\_\_\_ Yes, they observe experienced teachers of writing \_\_\_\_ hours a week

- 
- \_\_\_\_\_ Yes, they are required to take part in other activities (Please explain at the end)
9. If all other determining factors are equal (ex: MA or PhD candidate, progress towards completion) what effect does a TA's assignment have on their stipend:
- \_\_\_\_\_ TAs teaching earn more  
\_\_\_\_\_ TAs in the writing center earn more  
\_\_\_\_\_ These assignments carry equal stipends
10. What kind(s) of professional development are TAs provided in the writing center? (Check all that apply)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Pre-semester orientation of approximately \_\_\_\_\_ hours  
\_\_\_\_\_ Required course in tutoring methods  
\_\_\_\_\_ Assigned readings on tutoring methods outside of required courses  
\_\_\_\_\_ On-going mentoring by experienced tutors  
\_\_\_\_\_ Workshops conducted throughout the semester  
\_\_\_\_\_ Observation of tutorials conducted by experienced tutors  
\_\_\_\_\_ Evaluation by writing center director  
\_\_\_\_\_ Other (Please describe in the comment section at the end of the survey)
11. If there is a tutoring course, does it carry credit(s)? yes no
12. If there is a credit bearing tutoring course, is it graduate or undergraduate credit(s)?                      Graduate                      Undergraduate
13. TAs in your program begin teaching their own classes:
- \_\_\_\_\_ First semester of graduate school  
\_\_\_\_\_ Second semester of graduate school  
\_\_\_\_\_ Second year of graduate school  
\_\_\_\_\_ Depends on TA's previous teaching experience  
\_\_\_\_\_ Other (Please describe in the comment section at the end of the survey)
14. What professional development activities are offered to TAs teaching in your program? (check all that apply)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Pre-semester orientation of approximately \_\_\_\_\_ hours  
\_\_\_\_\_ Required graduate course in composition pedagogy  
\_\_\_\_\_ Participation in a peer mentoring program  
\_\_\_\_\_ Observation of experienced teachers' classes  
\_\_\_\_\_ Required ongoing workshops during the semester  
\_\_\_\_\_ Optional ongoing workshops during the semester  
\_\_\_\_\_ Available files or website of teaching ideas  
\_\_\_\_\_ Evaluative observations by composition program personnel  
\_\_\_\_\_ Other (Please describe in the comment section at the end of the survey)

## Part II: Perceived Effects of Tutoring on Teaching

Please respond to the following statements by **bolding** the number that best represents your response.

1= Strongly Agree

5= Strongly Disagree

In comparison to first-year TAs without such experience, I believe TAs with tutoring experience are:

better prepared to teach.

1

2

3

4

5

---

more prepared to discuss writing

1            2                            3    4    5

more able to assess accurately student learning

1            2                            3    4    5

more comfortable establishing daily lesson plans and adhering to them

1            2                            3    4    5

more comfortable establishing semester-long agendas in their syllabi and then adhering to them

1            2                            3    4    5

better prepared to grade student essays

1            2                            3    4    5

able to more accurately assess the strengths and weaknesses of student texts

1            2                            3    4    5

In comparison to first-year TAs without such experience, I believe TAs with tutoring experience:

better appreciate diversity in students' home cultures

1            2                            3    4    5

offer more useful feedback to student writers

1            2                            3    4    5

better understand grammatical and mechanical principles

1            2                            3    4    5

construct more effective assignment prompts

1            2                            3    4    5

have a better understanding of the writing process

1            2                            3    4    5

more quickly grasp postmodern composition theory

1            2                            3    4    5

more effectively incorporate listening into their pedagogy

1            2                            3    4    5

### Part III: Comments

Please use this section to follow up on your answers elsewhere in this survey and/or to offer any other information you think might help us to better understand your responses. **Thank you for your participation!**

