PROPOSAL NARRATIVE

1. Proposal Narrative

Title: Analysis of Writing Center Usage at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse

A. Abstract

Having only begun on a large scale in the 1970s, Writing Centers as institutions have a rather recent history. As a result, both the values of Writing Centers and research on the usage and effectiveness of Writing Centers is evolving quickly, and new information is being sought after. In order to address the scope of the usage of our Writing Center at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, archival data on client appointments will be analyzed. This data will be analyzed through a combination of quantitative analysis including statistical procedures to test for significance, and through a textual analysis of written information. The proposed outcomes of this data are patterns and trends in Writing Center usage both over time and in the identified categories. With this information, services in the Writing Center, as well as how client information is recorded, could be improved or evaluated to better track students’ use of the Center. In addition, other practical applications include communication to departments about what their students are struggling with in their writing; with this goal in mind, more effective classwork or workshops can be created to address directly the writing needs of students to make them more effective writers, and thus, improve their education experience here at UW-L.

B. Background/Statement of the Problem/Significance of the Project

Beginning in the 1970’s, Writing Centers have a fairly recent history in terms of actual practice (Harris 1990). As a result, what constitutes a Writing Center and how it can serve students is still evolving, as professionals from the field discuss ideas and trends in Writing Center usage and values. Currently, hundreds of Writing Centers have been developed in post-secondary institutions and as part of composition or language arts programs in secondary education (Harris 1990). These centers are often based around peer-tutoring or collaboration methods that reflect a shared interest in a student’s success between the student and the peer tutor. The trend in increased Writing Centers has influenced the trends in how the writing process is viewed. For example, the trend of thinking about the writing process as a “fluid” or recursive process that emphasizes revision and student involvement has increased (Jones 2001).
In post-secondary institutions, Writing Centers are often employed to address students’ weaknesses in academic writing, and how students can improve the skills often sought by employers: analytical thinking and good reporting of written communication (Yeats et al. 2010). Naturally, researchers have engaged in research to determine whether students’ writing actually improves from using a Writing Center. While some research argues for the inconsistency and challenges associated with conducting research on quantitative assessments (Jones 2001), other studies have shown data that directly reflect an increase in students’ writing ability after using Writer Center services. For example, Yeats et al. compared the success of first year students in their classes between those who had attended the writing center and those who hadn’t. A significant correlation was found between writing center attendance and achievement; furthermore, successive progress in the second year was found to be significantly associated with Writing Center attendance (2010). Additional studies show indirect evidence that Writing Centers are effective through positive reviews from students about their increased writing ability after leaving a tutoring session or writing activity (Harris 1995). Although the direct relationship of students’ improvement to writing ability has been difficult to measure overall, the valuable skills taught by Writing Centers such as critical thinking skills, the expanded capacity for gathering information, and more initiative in one’s work are beneficial to a student’s success at the University, and in life (Jones 2001).

In addition to determining the effectiveness of Writing Centers in improving students writing ability, it also important to analyze Writing Center usage because of the variety of students who use its services. Many Writing Centers see a variety of students with a diverse range of learning abilities, and cultural backgrounds. These students use the Writing Center for a variety of reasons, and are often from many different departments within a University (Williams 2004). At the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse (UW-L), the Writing Center is not an exception to this idea, and works with students in many backgrounds, as well as for many different areas of instruction. Preliminary analyses have been done to determine total appointments over the Writing Center’s existence, and what percentage of students are native English speakers versus English as a Second Language students (ESL) and undergraduate versus graduate students; however, no overall assessment has been done to analyze how usage of the Center has varied by its location within the University, and for what students “say” they are coming in for in terms of help.
The usage of UW-L’s Writing Center has been increasing over time (2012-2013: 1650 visits, 2013-2014: 2078 visits) and this increase reflects a need to better understand how to both track where students on campus are coming from, and what their needs are for writing help. Currently, through the Writing Center we have four years of data that reflect various pieces of information about each student appointment including 1) students’ year in school, 2) their proposed needs (why they are coming into the Writing Center for help), 3) what class their assignment is for, and 4) what their major is at the time of the visit. Thousands of pieces of data have been archived including tutor logs, conference records, comment cards, as well as appointment booking information. This data is from across years, and changes have been made in terms of the space the Writing Center is located in, and also the booking policies and systems of the Writing Center. With this data, I hope to provide information about patterns of usage in the Writing Center to improve the services we offer students, communication between the Writing Center and academic departments in the University, and the manner in which we document and track Writing Center usage through internal reporting. This information can ultimately result in the improved experience of UW-L students and their writing skills, making them more marketable in their time after attending this University.

C. Objectives

The objectives of this study are to analyze the existing Writing Center data in order to determine 1) how the use of the WC has varied by its location at the University and also 2) how students’ use of the center has changed over time. This study will include a large amount of data such as tutor logs, conference records, comment cards, and appointment booking data. It is proposed that after this study I might find patterns of usage or usage increases in what departments use the Writing Center, and why students are coming into the Writing Center for help.

D. Research Methods

In order to address my research objectives, I will employ several methods to analyze the existing archive of Writing Center data. The existing data can currently be broken up into two major categories: online information from our booking site, and written survey information. The written information can then be broken into documents filled out the by tutor (conference sheets and tutor logs) and a document filled out by the client (comment card). To determine what trends exist in Writing Center usage, I will compile data and look for significant trends and
relationships among different categories and across years.

Numeric Data

I will address the numeric data through a quantitative analysis that will determine whether significant relationships exist in correlation or association. This analysis will also be used to assess the validity and reliability of the survey information I will be analyzing. The Statistical Consulting Center in the Math Department will be consulted, as well as my advisors to decide what statistical tests will most accurately assess and represent the trends in my data.

Written Data

To analyze the written data on conference sheets, tutor logs, and comment cards, I will conduct a textual analysis that focuses on finding trends or patterns on both tutor and client open-ended responses. In addition, other methods such as coding sentences based on their content into specific categories will be employed to sort information. The coding scheme will reflect a universality where anyone who is using the coding system should obtain similar results. This process will ensure data is looked at and categorized as objectively as possible.

E. Final Products and Dissemination

If awarded funding, I will present at the UW-La Crosse annual Celebration of Research and Creativity in Spring 2015. I also will submit my research to the Journal of Undergraduate Research in the upcoming spring semester. In addition, I plan to submit a paper to the Council of Writing Program Administrators Conference occurring next July in Boise, Idaho. Through these presentation avenues, my final project will then consist of a poster illustrating my data results, and a written manuscript that can be submitted to the research journal. It is also my goal that my research may be used in future reports to justify Writing Center funding.

F. Budget justification

- $1,000: Student Stipend
  - The proposed amount of time it would take to analyze all of the existing data and compile results is around 4 weeks. Working at eight hours a day, five days a week, this would amount to 160 hours of work. I currently am paid $12/per hour at the Writing Center, which would put $1,000 within the range of pay I would receive for this many hours of work.
● $100: Office supplies for organizing and processing research.
● $50: Printing costs for printing out any research posters or manuscripts to present at conferences.

References:


