

A "Quick-Fire" Study on Effective Frequency Thresholds for Mandatory Writing Center Visits

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Introduction

The topic of mandatory writing center visits is a popular concern among writing center professionals. A search of the WCENTER listserv, using such key terms as “mandatory visits” and “required visits,” revealed regular conversations or threads from 2012 to 2018 about mandatory or required appointments. The conversation has also persisted as a central topic in more than 20 articles and dissertations since Gary Olson's 1981 “Attitudinal Problems and the Writing Center.”¹

Writing center administrators (WCAs) therefore have many resources from which to draw advice and determine their own policies on mandatory visits to achieve a variety of different goals (i.e., advertising, positive perspectives, increased drafts, improved writing, higher course grades). This article contributes to these resources by presenting a “quick-fire,” *ad hoc* study of mandatory writing center (WC) visits at our institution, a public, regional university in the Southeast with a student population of approximately 8,000. The following sections explain the impetus for the study, the methodology, and unexpected discoveries about the number of mandatory visits that correlate to positive outcomes, identified here as “effective frequency thresholds.” Small, local studies like the one described here should enable busy WCAs to test the

¹ Readers can find many of the articles mentioned in this study listed in Babcock and Thonus's *Researching the Writing Center: Towards an Evidence-Based Practice* (86-109).

generalizability of the results of contemporary RAD research within their own local context.

Background and Methodology

Our research question emerged from a change in the institutional culture and teaching loads for full-time lecturers at our university. Prior to this change, FYC lecturers had either a 4/4 or a 5/4 teaching load, depending on their service responsibilities, but a restructuring of upper administration and budgets resulted in a mandate that all FYC lecturers shift to a 5/5 teaching load. In response to this change, two of the authors of this study, Sundi and Eliot, met to determine the best strategies for ensuring students continued to receive sufficient feedback on their writing processes despite the increased time constraints on faculty. Sundi, as a first-year composition lecturer, asked Eliot, director of the university writing center, if he would support required writing center visits that she wanted to embed in her first-year composition writing assignments. She felt that the practical demands of her new schedule limited her time for instructor feedback and that peer feedback from experienced writing tutors could offer her students additional support to supplement her instruction.

Despite his long-held resistance to mandatory visits, Eliot agreed to Sundi's request. The WC staffed about 20 undergraduate writing tutors, most of whom were 2-3 year seasoned tutors, and all of whom had completed a semester-long, 3-credit-hour tutor training course. Eliot felt that the WC schedule and tutors would be able to handle an influx of Sundi's students. In addition to providing important support to a colleague, he recognized that his tutors' collaboration with Sundi and her students might provide an important test case for his reevaluating the efficacy of mandatory visits and possibly determining a future policy for the WC as a whole. Before departing their initial meeting, Sundi asked how many visits she should require for each assignment or for the semester. Since Eliot had traditionally discouraged, if not prohibited, mandatory visits, he didn't know what number to suggest. His subsequent literature review of scholarship on mandatory visits and voluntary visits for a range of writing courses (e.g., basic writing, FYC, writing and literature) of different levels (first-year, sophomore, and so forth) lay the

foundations for the control and experimental groups of the study that emerged.

The WC scholarship Eliot discovered presented a range of recommended frequencies for mandatory and voluntary visits: from one visit per semester (Bishop; Clark; Gordon; Pleasant) to three visits per semester (Irvin; Robinson; Schmidt and Alexander; Van Dam; Williams and Takaku) to thirteen visits per semester (Smith). On the low end, Irene Clark's "Leading the Horse" recommends at least one required visit per semester for the general population of FYC students because students reported visits helped their skills and their assignment grades, while Wendy Bishop's "Bringing Writers to the Center" recommends "a single required visit" per semester to positively shape students' attitudes about writing, in general, and WCs in particular (39). On the upper end, Allison Smith's dissertation, *Writing in/on the Borderlands*, suggests one required visit per week, during 13 weeks of a semester, for basic writers to improve motivation, attendance, and pass rates. While the literature presented this range, three visits emerged as a common recommendation and a working number that the authors' WC could support for Sundi's courses. Heather Robinson's "Writing Center Philosophy and the End of Basic Writing" suggests three mandatory visits for basic writers to move students' concerns about writing from extrinsic (grades) to the intrinsic (writing well for its own sake). And in "What a Difference Three Tutoring Sessions Make," Lennie Irvin writes about required visits, "Three tutoring sessions represents a threshold where the efficacy of tutoring moves from being satisfactory to being more significant — particularly for students in introductory classes" (5).

Though Eliot and Sundi had three mandatory visits as a working number and the human and financial resources to support it, they couldn't help wondering along with Irvin, when he asks, "Can we identify more closely what happens for writers as the frequency of tutoring increases?" (5). In other words, if there were no limitations on resources—space, human, financial—would an increased number of visits always have positive effects on student performance?

To explore Irvin's question in their institutional context, Eliot and Sundi opted for a quantitative analysis that would align with their university's

emphasis on data-driven decision making. In doing so, they implemented a methodology that heeds Pleasant's call for more “empirical research studies based on the intervention vs. nonintervention model” and add “to the relatively small amount of literature on this important topic” (25). To implement this model, Eliot gained IRB approval to allow Sundi to assign mandatory visits to three of her four second-semester English composition classes and to allow him to work with Judi Livingston, the first-year composition director, to collect and analyze the data. With the exception of the nonintervention section, which served as the control group for the study, Sundi's students in the intervention sections were required to visit the writing center for each major writing assignment, during any point in their writing process.² One section was required to visit once per assignment, for a total of three visits per semester. A second section was required to visit twice per assignment, for a total of six visits per semester. A third section was required to visit three times per assignment, for a total of nine visits per semester (see Table 1). The mandated visits were a part of students’ peer review activities, and all sections had an additional in-class peer review session for each assignment. Finally, for those students in the experimental sections, they had to forward to Sundi their appointment reports to confirm their writing center attendance.

Table 1. Classes, Visit Requirements, and Enrollments

| Classes | Visit Requirements | Enrollments |
|-----------------|--------------------|-------------|
| ENGL 1102 82169 | 0 | 22 |
| ENGL 1102 83889 | 3 | 22 |
| ENGL 1102 82164 | 6 | 24 |
| ENGL 1102 82168 | 9 | 24 |

² Students in all four sections were given the opportunity to opt out of the study, but none did. Therefore, the number of students consenting to participate in the study equaled the number of students enrolled for each section.

At the conclusion of the semester, Eliot and Judi collected demographic and quantitative data from each student in the study, which included age, gender, ethnicity, high school GPA, SAT verbal score, SAT writing score, course GPA, institutional GPA, and number of visits to the writing center. While Eliot and Judi were interested in discovering relationships and correlations among the demographic information and grades, the sample sizes were relatively small, which made it difficult to split their data into subgroups and retain statistically-significant results. Ultimately they focused on the bottom line: What are the effects of varying mandatory writing center visits on students' course productivity, measured by their course grade?³

This focus on students' course grades was both strategic and practical. In the local context of this study, and likely in today's larger educational landscape, course productivity— and its causal relationship to student retention and progression— is of central importance for administrators who make difficult resource allocation decisions for support services like university writing centers. Specifically, this study's institution is part of a state-wide system that has devoted significant resources to participating in the Gardner Institute's Gateways to Completion (or G2C) Program. G2C is presented as “an evidence-based process to create an institutional plan for improving student learning and success in high-enrollment courses that have historically resulted in high rates of Ds, Fs, Withdrawals, and Incompletes especially for low-income, first-generation and historically underrepresented students” (*Gateways to Completion Guidebook* 5). With this institutional and system-wide focus, Eliot and Judi recognized that interventions and support programs that could demonstrate statistically-significant improvements in students' grades were more likely to receive support and funding from upper administration decision-makers.

³ Students received participation points that were included in their final grade to hold them accountable and to motivate or encourage them to attend the required WC visits. For the purposes of this study, however, students' final grades were recalculated with these participation points removed in order to ensure that any identified correlations stemmed from the benefits of tutoring rather than from students' compliance with the requirement to visit the WC.

In addition, focusing on students' course grades would provide very timely feedback, allowing Eliot to develop new program policies for mandatory visits and Sundi to settle on a specific mandate level, beginning as early as the following semester. Admittedly, the investigators did not examine drafts and development (e.g., Pleasant), assess multiple factors of writing (e.g., Irvin), or include students' self-reporting qualitative experience with the requirement. But as a "quick-fire" study, it provided the authors with important information about mandatory visits, without overwhelming Sundi's, Judi's, and Eliot's already hectic schedules, and they were able to use this information to develop specific curricular policies that benefit their student population. In addition, their focus on course productivity can be supplemented with future analyses of student work, as all students' written submissions are retained in the online learning management system class sites for Sundi's courses.

Results and Analysis

After gathering the data on the students who visited the writing center from the intervention and nonintervention classes, Judi and Eliot began with a simple comparison between the number of visits students were required to make and the number of visits they actually made in order to reveal the following: (1) how students behave with respect to the mandate (i.e., how fully do they comply with it); and (2) the relationship between their course grade and their actual number of visits. They compared frequency counts of actual visits for students in each mandated level, i.e., 0-visits, 3-visits, 6-visits, and 9-visits. The frequencies suggest that mandating visits has a positive effect on most students' use of the writing center. Among students who were "encouraged but not required" to visit the writing center, 27.3% actually went to the writing center (see Table 2). Among those students who were required to visit the writing center, 86.4% of the three-visit group attended; 75.0% of the six-visit group attended; and 91.7% of the nine-visit group attended. Across the three "intervention" groups, 84.3% of the students visited. The majority of students in the intervention sections also showed themselves willing to visit the writing center multiple times, with 60% of these students making three or more visits to the center. This is a notable finding

because three visits corresponds to the visit threshold that Irvin and others argue positively affects student writing and performance.

Table 2. Frequencies of Student Visits for each Requirement Level

| Actual Visits | 0 Visits Required | 3 Visits Required | 6 Visits Required | 9 Visits Required |
|-----------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| 0 | 16 | 3 | 6 | 2 |
| 1 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 |
| 2 | 2 | 8 | 1 | 0 |
| 3 | 0 | 8 | 4 | 2 |
| 4 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 0 |
| 5 | 0 | 1 | 5 | 6 |
| 6 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 7 |
| 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| 8 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| 9 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 10+ | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Total | 22 | 22 | 24 | 24 |
| % who attended | 27.3% | 86.4% | 75.0% | 91.7% |

The frequency analysis reveals that, as expected, the average number of Actual Visits by students increases as the number of required visits increases, ranging from a mean value of 0.50 visits for students who were encouraged but not required to visit the writing center to 4.58 visits for students who were required to visit nine times. Although these findings are positive overall, they do reveal that the average number of student visits for each intervention group fell short of the mandated number of visits. Counter to initial expectations, the majority of students in each mandate level did not meet their minimum required visits. Of the students who were required to visit the writing center three times, 40.9% met the requirement with only one student visiting

the WC more times than was mandated. Of the students required to visit six times, only 8.3% did so, and again only one student exceeded the mandated number of visits. No students required to visit nine times met or exceeded the requirement. These findings therefore raise important questions for how WCAs and faculty in the first-year composition program might implement and incentivize mandatory visits more effectively into a course curriculum.

After the frequency analysis, the authors performed a correlation analysis between students' actual number of visits and their course grades within the nonintervention group and the intervention groups (see Table 3). This correlation analysis effectively quantified the relationship between students' actual visits and course grades and provided an explanation of how "confident" the authors should be in that estimation.

Table 3. Correlations between Number of Visits and Students' Final Course Grades by Mandate Level

| N | Visits Mandated | Avg. Actual Visits | Pearson Correlation | Significance (2-tailed) |
|----|-----------------|--------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|
| 22 | 0 | 0.5 | 0.197 | 0.380 |
| 22 | 3 | 2.14 | 0.343 | 0.118 |
| 24 | 6 | 2.61 | 0.322 | 0.125 |
| 24 | 9 | 4.58 | 0.430 | 0.036* |

*Correlation is considered significant at or below the 0.05 level

The results of this analysis suggest that a loose positive correlation exists between actual student visits and students' final course grades across the three intervention groups, but the correlation is not statistically significant for the group of students who were required to visit the writing center three times, nor was it statistically significant for the group of students who were required to visit six times. At first glance, these results seem to counter Robinson's, Irvin's, and others' claims that three visits constitute an effective threshold frequency for producing demonstrable benefits to student writing. The frequency analysis described above, however, illustrates that, despite the 3-visit and 6-visit mandate levels, the average number of actual visits by students in these groups remained below three (2.14 and 2.61, respectively). As a result, our findings that an average of two+ visits seems to approach, but not attain, statistical significance lends support to the idea of three visits as an important threshold for writing center visits. Visits below this threshold may provide benefits, but it takes multiple visits to ensure confidence that these benefits will include improvements in their course productivity.

Further support for three visits as a minimum threshold can be seen in the correlation results for the group of students who were required to visit the writing center nine times during the semester. For these students, the 2-tailed significance value is 0.036, which translates to a 95% confidence that their visits to the writing center positively correlate with their course grades. It is important to note here that this group of students visited the writing center, on average, 4.58 (or between four and five) times during the semester. These results therefore add important nuance to our understanding of visit thresholds and provide greater specificity for Irvin's contention that "three or more visits" to the writing center will improve student success. Put simply, the findings from this quick-fire study indicate that the improvement in first-year composition students' grades is solidified when students' actual visits to the writing center increase to at least four or five times during the semester. According to these results, the fact that these visits were "mandated" by their teacher does not negate the positive benefits of the visits, as critics of mandatory visits sometimes fear.

Readers may object at this point that there are many factors that go into how many times students visit the writing center and how effective these writing center visits prove to be. Such objections are undoubtedly valid, especially in determining why students did or did not meet the mandated-level of writing center visits. At the same time, one of the principal benefits of a Pearson correlation analysis is that it takes these other influences into account and controls for their presence, as it computes the numeric relationship between actual visits and course grades. Put simply, qualitative analysis is useful for understanding more fully why students visited the writing center, and the number of times that they did visit, but it is not necessary to compute the numeric relationship between those visits and their course productivity.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on these results and analysis, the investigators have arrived at two conclusions. First, they can provide an initial, localized answer to Irvin's question, "Can we identify more closely what happens for writers as the frequency of tutoring increases?" This study has shown for its particular participants and locale that more than two visits are needed to positively and significantly contribute to students' course grades. Additionally, the study has taken the relative element of Irvin's "three or more visits" and added specificity with the approximation of four-to-five visits' positive effect on students' course productivity. Because of this specificity, Eliot, the WCA of this study, can confidently recommend to writing lecturers that they create a system of mandatory visits that ensures students visit the writing center at least three times, but preferably four or five times. It also provides important quantitative evidence for Eliot to present to the Provost's office and other decision makers in the upper administration as he advocates for additional resources to meet increased demand for mandatory visits. At this point, readers might wonder, "Why should we think that shifting the burden to writing centers will be a sustainable move when universities are cutting budgets and resources?" Practically speaking, WCAs armed with extensive qualitative and quantitative scholarship are in a position to advocate for additional resources because, frankly, peer tutoring is an entry level, part-time

position without benefits, and, thus, relatively affordable in the eyes of upper administration.

Second, the authors conclude that the gap between actual visits and required visits needs further investigation. Their findings illustrate how quantitative analyses can be used in conjunction with, and as a means for targeting, qualitative analyses. On average, students' actual visits ranged from 44% to 71% of the mandated number of visits for the intervention groups. Going forward, the authors plan to develop qualitative survey and self-reflection activities to investigate what factors most influence the gap between writing center mandates and the number of actual visits. Questions to consider include the following: Might there have been conflicts between students' schedules and tutor availability? Did the way the instructor presented or monitored the requirement affect their participation? What effect might tutor training have had on student compliance with the requirement? Might students have needed more incentive, such as a raffle or another marketing and prize-oriented program to ensure their participation?

Finally, the authors strongly encourage WCAs at other institutions to conduct their own “quick-fire” quantitative studies, like the one described here, that will provide important insight into their unique circumstances or recurring questions and will also provide them with data to support their requests for writing center resources at their institution. For the particular context of the study discussed here—including resources, timeline, and accessible data—the authors wanted to know how many visits Sundi should require to supplement her instruction, potentially improve her students' writing, and in turn improve their course productivity, all within the limitations of the writing center's resources. And, of course, they wanted to know if there was a ceiling or upper threshold, leading to new discoveries of efficacy. Though the answer to the “upper threshold” question is inconclusive and invites further research, the WCA and lecturers at this particular institution have a clear starting point for their new policy on mandating visits to the writing center, as well as more focused quantitative and qualitative questions to investigate as they hone their analysis of mandatory visits to the writing center.

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