

# Southern Discourse in the Center

A Journal of Multiliteracy and Innovation

---

TITLE: Leveling the Playing Field in Composition? Findings from a Writing Fellow Pilot

AUTHOR(S): Candis Bond

VOLUME/ISSUE: *SDC* 24(2)

PAGES: 37-60

PUBLISHED: Fall, 2020

---



*Southern Discourse in the Center: A Journal of Multiliteracy and Innovation* (*SDC*) is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal published twice per year by the [Southeastern Writing Center Association](http://www.southeasternwritingcenter.org) (SWCA, [www.southeasternwritingcenter.org](http://www.southeasternwritingcenter.org)). As a forum for practitioners in writing centers, speaking centers, digital centers, and multiliteracy centers, *SDC* publishes articles from administrators, consultants, and other scholars concerned with issues related to training, consulting, labor, administration, theory, and innovative practices.

Feel free to send queries, ideas, and proposals to us at [southerndiscoursejournal@gmail.com](mailto:southerndiscoursejournal@gmail.com).

© by Southeastern Writing Center Association (SWCA). You are free to make copies of and distribute this file for research, teaching, and training purposes as long as you keep this cover page attached.

# Leveling the Playing Field in Composition? Findings from a Writing Fellow Pilot<sup>1</sup>

Candis Bond

Writing fellow programs (WFPs) have supported faculty, consultants, and writers for more than four decades (Hughes and Hall). Studies have shown these types of programs support consultants and faculty through opportunities for collaboration, professional development, increased self-awareness, and scholarship (Bleakney et al.; Carpenter et al.; Corroy; Gentile; Haring-Smith; Hughes and Hall; Mullin et al.; Severino and Knight; Spiegelman and Grobman). For students, these programs have been found to improve performance and confidence (Corroy; Dvorak et al.; Regaingnon and Bromley; Vance). In a cross-institutional study, Lara Vance found these benefits to be most pronounced for “at-risk” students.<sup>2</sup> Students at greater risk for failing writing courses or who feel marginalized on campus may benefit more from WFPs than peers because, as Laurie Gorbman suggests, these programs “bridge” the gap between basic and advanced academic writing. Additionally, writing fellows (WFs) provide social acclimation, mentorship, and content knowledge alongside consulting in writing, which adds to students’ social capital, confidence, and sense of agency in college settings (Dvorak et al.; Henry et al.). These programs can also “promote more

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the Southeastern Writing Center Association for awarding funding for this project through the Christine Cozzens Research Grant and Initiative. Without this support, my writing center could not have afforded to staff a writing fellow pilot.

<sup>2</sup> Vance focuses specifically on students identifying as low-income, first generation, and minorities. For more on how embedded tutoring programs support marginalized students, see studies by Boylan; Fowler and Boylan; Hodges and White; Henry et al.; and Solórzano et al.

democratic pedagogies” by destabilizing classroom hierarchies to promote equitable partnerships (Spiegelman and Grobman 6).

The embedded nature of WFPs is central to their value for at-risk and marginalized students since many studies have found these students are often less likely than their peers to use external support in college (Boylan; Engle et al.; Hodges and White; Solórzano et al.).<sup>3</sup> An exception is Lori Salem’s study investigating students’ choices to use or not use writing centers. She found students who were historically excluded from higher education, including women, people of color, and multilingual writers, were actually more likely to use writing support. However, she also notes these students’ “choices” result from both personal decisions and social conditions that may simultaneously lead them to view such writing support as remedial and, thus, stigmatizing. In other words, even if marginalized students do visit writing centers, they may perceive such support to be a sign of their exclusion rather than a normal part of higher education. Significantly, however, studies report that all students are more likely to use tutoring long-term when they participate in WFPs (Corroy; DeLoach et al.; Gentile; Hannum et al.; Pagnac et al.; Spiegelman and Grobman; Titus et al.). In this respect, WFPs can be a way for institutions to create more equitable learning environments for both marginalized and mainstream students. These programs can normalize writing support in ways that reduce stigma and increase access for all (Dvorak et al.).

## **Promoting Equitable Outcomes at Augusta University: A WFP Pilot in Context**

With equity in mind, our writing center piloted a WFP in fall 2019 at Augusta University (AU), a mid-sized public research university in the Southeast. The program was part of a university core curriculum redesign initiative called Gateways to Completion (G2C). G2C was developed by the Gardner Institute, a non-profit organization committed to improving underrepresented students’ retention and completion rates, equity, social justice, and mobility. The G2C initiative supports faculty-developed course redesign within the core curriculum to improve DFWI (drop, fail, withheld, and incomplete) rates and student success. As the director of the writing center, I was made co-chair of the G2C redesign committee for English 1102, the second course in AU’s first-year composition sequence. Our subcommittee was tasked with developing and piloting

interventions to improve student success in this course. DFWI data over the last several years showed nontraditional and minority students were at greater risk of failing. Consequently, we hypothesized that piloting a WFP could create a more equitable playing field for students. Linking WFPs to WAC-initiatives, Spigelman and Grobman point out these programs do “not specifically or intentionally target ‘weaker’ students in a particular class but consider writing instruction [as] crucial to all students” (5). We envisioned our WFP as doing this work; a WFP program could promote educational access, agency, and equity without stigmatizing students in composition.

Prior to implementing our WFP, a WF was selected who had already completed the three-credit Writing Center training course and worked for two years in the writing center. This WF completed five additional, specialized training modules that focused on: student learning outcomes for English 1102; resources for teaching skills integral to English 1102 outcomes; readings related to WFPs, differences between writing center and classroom-based tutoring, and power dynamics within the classroom; and role-play scenarios specific to WFP work. I also drafted a WFP mission statement and learning outcomes and shared these with the WF and faculty partner. The faculty partner added the WF to his course learning management system (LMS) so she could see his materials, and they met prior to the start of the semester and several times after to determine how the WF would participate during class time. The WF attended most class sessions and assisted with presenting course materials, leading class discussions, and facilitating peer review. Within and outside of class, she also met with students individually and in small groups to work on their writing.

In order to assess our WFP pilot, I conducted a mixed-methods study<sup>3</sup> focused on students’ perceptions. While the direct measures used in initiatives like G2C are helpful, this study aimed to prioritize students’ experiences, voices, and narratives. I sought to answer the following research questions:

1. Does the presence of a WF make students feel more confident when writing for English 1102?

---

<sup>3</sup> This study was approved by the Augusta University Internal Review Board (study # 1444240-2).

2. Does the presence of WF contribute to students' perceptions of improved writing ability in English 1102?
3. Does the presence of a WF increase the likelihood that students will seek external writing support for future courses?

Students' responses to pre- and post-surveys support conclusions from previous studies: WFPs benefit student writers. Survey responses revealed four major findings:

1. There are positive correlations between WFs and improved student perceptions of writing ability, confidence, and writing support;
2. Positive emotional affect connected to writing was more common for students working with a WF;
3. Students were aware of the WF's ability to destabilize classroom hierarchies;
4. Students most frequently associated the WF's guidance with "decoding," which has implications for how WFPs imagine the WF's role and WFP pedagogy.

## **Study Design and Methods**

This study was a mixed-methods, quasi-experimental design that compared two sections of English 1102 taught by the same faculty member. Section "A" was taught normally without a WF while section "B" was taught normally but with the addition of a WF. Although the study is not truly experimental in design, I call these sections "control" and "experimental" for ease of reference. Sections A and B were chosen based on the availability of the faculty partner and WF; however, although the sample was not randomly selected, students in both sections were demographically comparable and representative of the larger 2020 freshman class at AU.<sup>4</sup> All students in both sections were given the opportunity to take identical pre-surveys on their perceptions of writing

---

<sup>4</sup> Gender, race, first-generation status, freshman index, and Pell recipient status were similar in both sections and were within 15% of freshman-wide statistics. The only major distinction across sections was military identification. While 15% of the 2020 freshman class and the experimental section identified as military, 40% of the control section were military. Although the sample was representative of the 2023 freshman class at AU, this university's demographics limit the generalizability of the data beyond local contexts. Cross-institutional data would be needed to make findings generalizable to other institutions.

ability, confidence, and writing supports in the first two weeks of classes during the fall 2019 semester. In the final two weeks of the semester, all students in both sections were given the opportunity to take a post-survey about their experiences in English 1102 and how they correlated with shifts in perceptions of writing confidence, ability, and writing supports. The post-surveys differed by section, with the experimental section's surveys including additional questions related to students' experiences with the WF.

A total of fifteen students from each section (N=30) responded to the pre-survey. A total of nine students from the control section and ten students from the experimental section responded to the post-survey (N=19). Surveys included a mix of closed and open-ended questions. Quantitative data were recorded and analyzed. Qualitative survey responses were analyzed using a mix of predetermined coding categories and a grounded theory approach: the three research questions focusing on perceptions of writing ability, confidence, and writing supports informed coding, but I also remained open to emergent themes in the data. The NVivo software package was used to code data and group themes.

As a pilot, limitations of this study include its small sample size, lack of full participation in pre- and post-surveys, the faculty partner's affiliation with the Writing Center (he has worked in the center and incentivizes visits, which could impact students' perceptions and behaviors), and the quasi-experimental design. Comparing two sections is reductive, as students' perceptions and behaviors are multifactorial and causation cannot be proven—only possible correlations can be found in the data.

Despite these limitations, I chose this design to learn more about students' perceptions at the start and end of English 1102 more generally. It was an added bonus to learn how the addition of a WF influenced some students' views. This study is also limited to indirect measures: feelings and perceptions. Although a possible limitation, perceptions can offer important insights because composition scholars have noted the importance of emotions, feeling, and perception in learning and transfer (Driscoll and Powell).

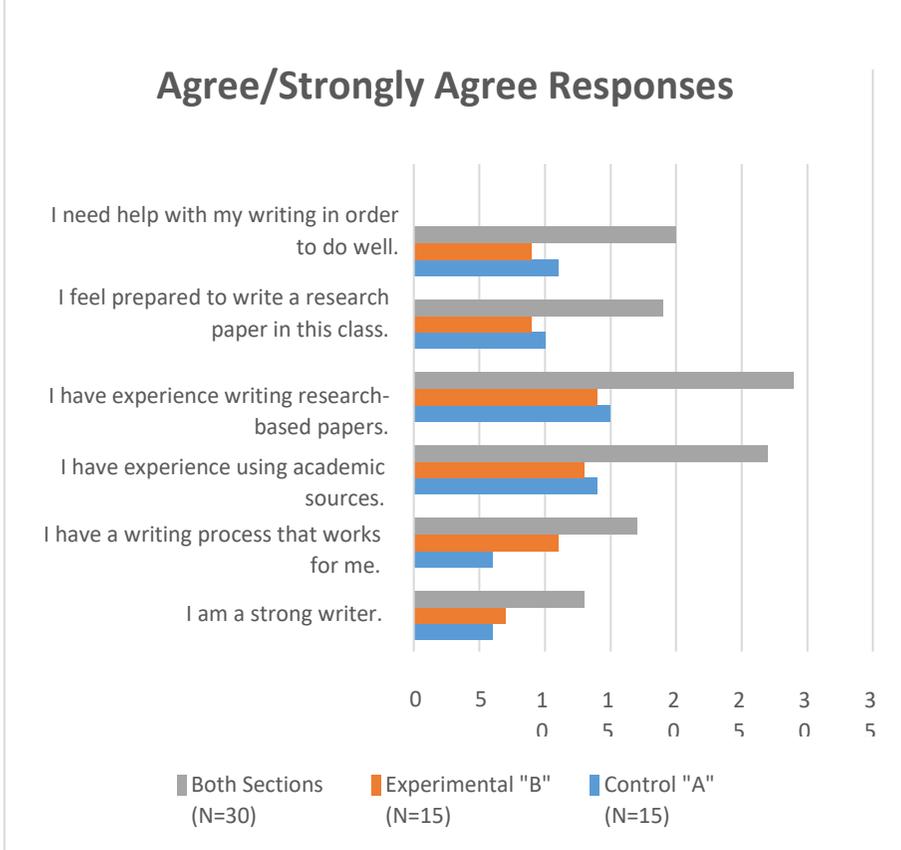
## **“I never have gotten clear feedback”: Shared Traits and Perceptions on Pre-Surveys**

I conducted pre-surveys in order to develop a better understanding of students' perceptions of college writing, ability, confidence, and support coming into English 1102. Pre-surveys also helped me establish whether both sections of English 1102 shared traits and perceptions, supporting comparison across groups post-intervention. Pre-surveys did show that students across sections shared similar perceptions of past writing experience and preparation. Another key finding was that prior “experience” with writing, genre, or composing skills did not translate into perceptions of high confidence or strong ability. As demonstrated in *fig. 1.1*, in spite of reporting prior experience and preparation with research writing, only about half of respondents viewed themselves as strong writers at the start of the semester, suggesting low confidence levels, and two-thirds of respondents felt they needed help with writing to do well. Qualitative pre-survey responses, which were grouped into five themes, including perceptions of writing confidence, ability, external supports, former experience, and emotional affect, mirrored closed-ended responses. Almost all respondents reported prior experience with research writing coming from high school English and AP courses, but many expressed worry that this preparation was inadequate for college research writing, making statements such as, “I prepared and wrote scientific research papers in high school, but I have yet to compare that to the level of writing required in college.”

Students reported varying levels of perceived ability dependent upon the genre, purpose, and audience, with academic writing being preferable to a few and creative, non-academic writing being preferred by the majority. When writing about past experiences and perceptions of confidence and ability, students expressed emotional affect connected to writing: they “enjoyed” writing creatively and for non-academic audiences, but most expressed feelings of “stress” and “anxiety” when writing in academic settings for a grade, although some found this writing “easy.” One student explained, “Writing assignments give me stress and anxiety. The idea of expressing my feelings and vulnerabilities in a word document that I will hand in to a stranger who will then grade me on those vulnerabilities is scary. The repeated process of trial and ultimate failure that is revision and editing enhances my fears.” In addition to discussing genre, many used process-oriented language to

express why they had or lacked confidence when writing. For example, one student wrote, “I love doing research based writing because I feel like I’m educating myself and because I’m an independent person I feel like that’s what I like about it most. I’m able to do the research on my own time and process the information the way I would want to.”

Although some students focused on process when discussing ability and confidence, others reported frustration at “missing the mark” in terms of grades. Of this latter group, several students felt a disconnect between their perceived level of ability and the grades received, and many were skeptical of the “subjectivity” of grading writing. One student, for instance, vented, “I have always been an average writer. I never have gotten clear feedback that helps me to understand what I could do better when writing.”



**Figure 1.1:** Positive Perceptions of Writing Preparation, Confidence, and Ability

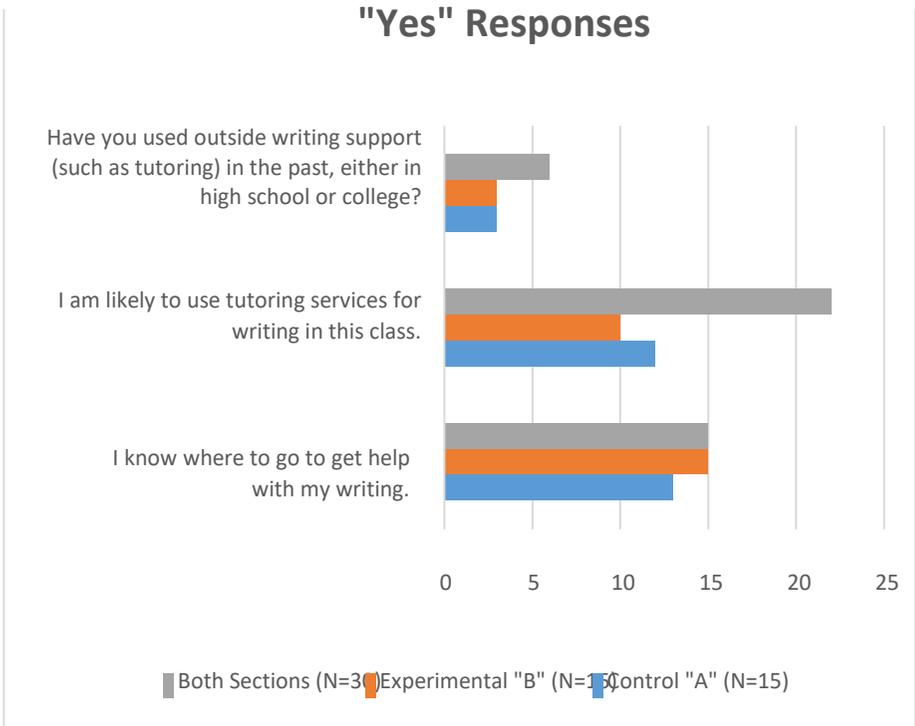
Both sections also demonstrated knowledge of writing support but a failure to use such support in the past. Based on pre-surveys, most students knew where to go to get help with writing (see *fig. 1.2* on the next page), and they listed viable options, including the Writing Center, their professor, the library, and the multi-subject tutoring center on campus. Two-thirds stated they would be likely to use these resources, even though only 20% had used such services in the past. Most students reported not using writing tutoring in the past because they “didn’t need to” or they could “do it [them]sel[ves].” Others cited barriers with time and scheduling. Still others feared it might “do more harm than good” if a tutor did not understand their teacher’s preferences. The pre-surveys suggest a level of optimism—knowledge that seeking writing support is a good thing to do—yet most students had not followed through on seeking writing support before in spite of their knowledge and perceptions. Based on Salem’s research, if they haven’t had direct exposure to these resources prior to starting college, it is unlikely they’ll change their mind once they arrive. Thus, based on pre-surveys, there is reason to be skeptical that these students will really use these services if they remain accessible on a strictly voluntary basis. Those who used writing support in the past several benefits, including improved organization, process, and audience awareness. These students listed a wide range of writing supports, including family, friends, classmates, former teachers, professors, the internet, and the Writing Center or Multi-Subject Tutoring Center.

## **“She was able to guide me”: Post Surveys Show Positive WF Impact**

Nine students in the control group and ten in the WF group completed post-surveys. The same themes identified on the pre-surveys were used to group qualitative responses in post-surveys. In addition to these four themes of perceptions of writing ability, confidence, support and emotional affect, an additional theme emerged in the post-survey WF section data: perceptions of professor authority and the WF’s role. This theme connected directly to perceptions of growth in ability and overall success, so it was combined in the discussion of WF-section students’ perceptions of writing ability. In this section, these themes are discussed alongside students’ quantitative post-survey responses.

## Perceptions of Writing Ability, the WF Role, and Classroom Authority

Across sections, the majority of students felt they improved in writing ability and gained experience (see table 1.1). When speaking of their ability, students from both groups most often referred to specific skills connected to the course objectives, including analysis, attention to detail, process and scaffolding, research skills, and rhetorical knowledge. Respondents across sections commented most frequently on improved research ability (n=8). They expressed increased skill in finding and evaluating sources, scaffolding research, integrating research, analyzing sources, paraphrasing and quoting, and citing sources.



**Figure 1.2:** Student Knowledge and Perceptions of Writing Support

**Table 1.1**

Post-Survey Student Perceptions of Writing Ability and Confidence  
 (“strongly agree” or “agree” responses)

Post-Survey Question	Experimental “B” (N=10)	Control “A” (N=9)	Both Sections (N=19)
In this course, I felt prepared to write the required research paper	8	8	16
In this course, I gained experience using academic sources.	10	8	18
In this course, I gained experience with research-based writing.	8	8	16
In this course, I became more confident about my ability to write well.	8	7	15
In this course, I developed and/or honed a writing process that works for me.	9	8	17
In this course, I became a stronger writer.	9	7	16

Beyond improving research skills, both sections noted growth related to writing process and rhetorical awareness, but these skills were emphasized more in the WF group and were connected directly to the WF (see table 1.2). When asked if the WF influenced writing process, a student wrote, “She was able to guide me through portions of writing in an easy way for me to understand.” Another student wrote, “She certainly helped a lot. She taught me that it wasn't so important to have your thesis set in stone at the very beginning. So, instead of using my thesis as my outline for my writing, let my writing be an outline for my thesis. This helped a lot, especially in the stressful times of me trying to figure out how to match my paragraphs up to make it flow with my thesis without having to adjust it.” Many students in the WF group mentioned increased ability to scaffold. These students talked about breaking up their research projects into smaller steps, and several noted the WF helped them differentiate between drafting, revising, and editing.

**Table 1.2**

Post-Survey Perceptions of Writing Fellow Impact (*“strongly agree” or “agree” responses*)

Post-Survey Question	Experimental “B” (N=10)
Having a Writing Fellow was helpful in this course.	8
I enjoyed working with the Writing Fellow.	7
The Writing Fellow provided me with the help I needed in order to do well in this course.	7
The Writing Fellow helped me feel prepared to write the required research paper.	5
The Writing Fellow helped me gain experience using academic sources.	5
The Writing Fellow helped me gain experience in research-based writing.	5
The Writing Fellow helped me become more confident about my ability to write well.	6
The Writing Fellow helped me develop and/or hone my writing process.	7
The Writing Fellow helped me become a stronger writer.	9

Additionally, while only one student in the control noted increased awareness of rhetoric and audience, writing “I did learn how to structure my paragraphs better and how to make an essay clearer to the reader,” three students discussed rhetorical awareness in the WF group. When speaking of rhetorical awareness, however, students in the WF section repeatedly emphasized the teacher as audience, rather than a general or disciplinary readership. One student wrote, “I had to quickly relearn to write to my teacher’s approval”; another stated, “It was mostly just accommodating what the professor was teaching and incorporating it into my current method of writing”; and finally, the third student wrote the course “was pretty challenging due to that every professor has different styles of writing and grading.” Students in the WF section overwhelmingly cited the WF’s role as “decoder” as most helpful when developing rhetorical awareness, reinforcing the idea of the professor as audience. For example, a student wrote, “I was able to understand the comments made on my paper and use her recommendations to better my writing.” Another wrote, “I was able to go to her and ask questions and address concerns with her.” Several students mentioned how helpful it

was to be able to use the WF to “ask questions.” “Clarify,” “understand,” and “figure out” featured in their comments frequently in association with the WF. Many also used the word “tips” in association with the WF, and these “tips” about writing made them perceive tasks to be “easier.” Put more simply, it seemed students valued the WF’s ability to “teach to the test,” so to speak; they found her presence helpful for demystifying instructor expectations and how to succeed on assignments.

It is not surprising that students found value in the WF’s role as “decoder.” Decoding is directive, and writing center scholars recognized the value of directive approaches more than forty years ago (Clark and Healy; Corbett). Many WCPs have linked directive approaches specifically to the WFP context, pointing out that WFPs impose time constraints and conditions upon consulting work that make nondirective strategies, Socratic dialogue, and attending to higher order concerns before lower concerns impractical and undesirable (Corbett; Little Liu and Mandes; Spigelman and Grobman). Viewing the WF as a directive “decoder” may also support more equitable classrooms and outcomes by providing marginalized and less prepared students with support they need to navigate academic discourse. In a recent study by Harry Denny and his colleagues, it was found that working-class and first-generation college students especially valued directive consulting strategies and found them integral to performing well in their writing courses. Yet, in this study, the WF’s decoding work simultaneously reinforced instructor authority in ways that may undermine another asset of WFPs: their ability to create more democratic classrooms by destabilizing professor authority and promoting student agency. In other words, when linked with rhetorical awareness, in particular, viewing the WF as “decoder” creates a challenging pedagogical double-bind that warrants further study in the context of WFPs and WF training.

In spite of this double bind, students in the WF section still noted and felt they benefited from the democratic effects of the WF’s presence. Professor authority and writing for the teacher were not mentioned in the control group, but four students in the WF group explicitly mentioned the professor’s authority, describing a de-centering of traditional classroom hierarchy. For example, one student wrote, “It’s really helpful having [a WF] in English classes, to help get a better point-of-view from a different authority that isn’t your professor,” while another explained it was helpful “having someone who felt like a mediator between student

and professor.” Some students viewed the WF as a peer, offering comments such as, “she interacted with me as a knowledgeable and candid peer.” On the other end of the spectrum, some viewed the WF as closer to a teacher or “expert,” making comments such as, “the Fellow was able to provide a professionalized peer review serving as a more competent “spell/grammar check” ensuring my essays made sense prior to submission.” Still others commented on the ambiguity of the WF’s role, stating, “I was unsure as to how I should refer to them. By that I mean they aren’t one of my peers, but they aren’t exactly a professor either.” However they viewed the WF’s role, respondents found collaborating effective, using words such as “helped,” “guided,” “figured out,” and “understanding” in association with the WF’s advice during consultations and coursework.

Another distinction of WF respondents was an emphasis on holistic growth, which was not mentioned by students in the control group. For example, one wrote, “I have learned many valuable tips to improve my writing and overall feel that I have advanced my writing abilities,” while another stated, “I believe my writing has become better as a whole.” They also explicitly mentioned the importance of receiving process-oriented feedback from both the professor and the writing fellow and overall improvement in areas such as time management. Additionally, students in the WF group noted changes in perceptions of writing. For example, one wrote, “My perception of writing during this course has improved.” While no respondents in the experimental group expressed dissatisfaction with the course, three respondents in the control group felt they did not make any substantial improvements in ability. All three noted they gained content knowledge, such as the definition of analysis, how to paraphrase, and how to structure a persuasive essay, but they also stated that, in spite of absorbing content, their writing did not improve upon application. One, for example, said, “Before this class, I was terrified by the idea of writing a research paper and the process for it: finding sources, checking them for functionality, and integrating them into the paper in a way that makes sense. During this class, I did not have any practice looking for sources to write about because all of the possible sources for the topic were provided to me as assigned reading, and I didn’t get much feedback from my source integration in order to improve. I did learn a lot about proper paraphrasing that I didn’t know before.”

Responses from the control group citing a lack of targeted feedback as the source of perceptions of lack of growth suggests that more personalized feedback throughout English 1102 could improve students' perceptions of ability and improvement, supporting the use of WFs within writing courses. This observation was affirmed by students in the WF group when they were asked directly about the WF's influence on their perceptions of changes in writing ability. These students used the word "improved" frequently in their responses, associating "improvement" with grades, meeting the professor's expectations, and mastery of writing process, especially gaining "tips" for revision and editing. Throughout comments related to enhanced performance, students stated it would have been "harder" to be successful without the WF, claiming she made it "easier" to clarify professor expectations and understand course material.

## **Perceptions of Writing Confidence and Emotional Affect**

As with the pre-surveys, perceived growth in ability did not translate into boosts in perceptions of writing confidence. Students reported much less change in confidence as compared to ability, with half reporting improvement and half reporting no change. Thus, one finding of this study is that experience and practice—so often used as the measure for improving student success in composition and writing center pedagogy—may not impact confidence levels. Based on this finding, writing centers may need to reassess methods in the center and the classroom for boosting students' perceptions of confidence. Students in the WF section did report a correlation between the WF's presence and increased writing confidence, which raises an important question: what are WFs offering students beyond increased opportunities to practice skills that results in greater confidence? While peer support, mentorship, and sociality all likely play a role, future studies might attempt to isolate specific strategies and roles used by WFs that most correlate with boosts in writing confidence in order to maximize the positive impact of WFPs.

While confidence levels didn't change much across sections, confidence was discussed in different terms by each section, with the control group emphasizing comfort and the experimental group emphasizing agency and ability. Four respondents from the control section expressed perceptions of increased confidence by using words such as

“comfortable” and “confidence” to describe changes in their writing. One, for example, wrote, “This course helped me feel comfortable with the research,” while another wrote, “This course increased my confidence in writing a research paper.” Whereas the control group stressed increasing “comfort” with skills, the WF group focused on agency and personal growth, using phrases such as “I have grown,” “I was able to change,” “I felt fully capable,” and “more confident” to describe their altered perceptions of the course, writing, and their skillset. For example, a student in the WF section wrote, “This course emphasized the rules of citation and quotation at levels I have not been introduced to in the past. It makes me feel more confident in my ability to properly quote text without threat of plagiarizing.” Those who reported changes in confidence in the WF group linked increased confidence to the WF’s ability to clarify the professor’s expectations and comments on drafts. For example, a student wrote, “My confidence improved a little because I was able to understand the comments made on my paper and use her recommendations to better my writing.” Others linked confidence to improved process, writing statement such as, “She helped me revise and edit my essays and taught me tips for editing that helped me feel more confident.”

Similar to perceptions of confidence, perceptions of negative emotional affect related to academic writing did not change significantly in either section according to post-surveys. Only one student in the control group expressed positive affect, writing, “I enjoyed the research based writing since the sources were easy to use and access. Although writing all of it was sometimes difficult, overall it was enjoyable.” On the other hand, two students expressed negative emotions related to writing in English 1102, focusing on research-based tasks that were “hard” or “terrified” them. Similarly, only one student in the experimental group noted positive emotions connected to academic writing for the course, stating English 1102 made some aspects of writing more “entertaining.” The same respondent, however, said they “did not enjoy” the writing required in the course, while another expressed meeting professor expectations was “challenging.” Across sections, but more so in the control group, students expressing negative emotions noted the importance of feedback and outside help for easing their fears and completing tasks. The WF students’ responses tended to qualify negative emotions with gains in confidence and ability related to specific skills, engaging in what Dana Lynn Driscoll and Roger Powell, in the study of the connection between

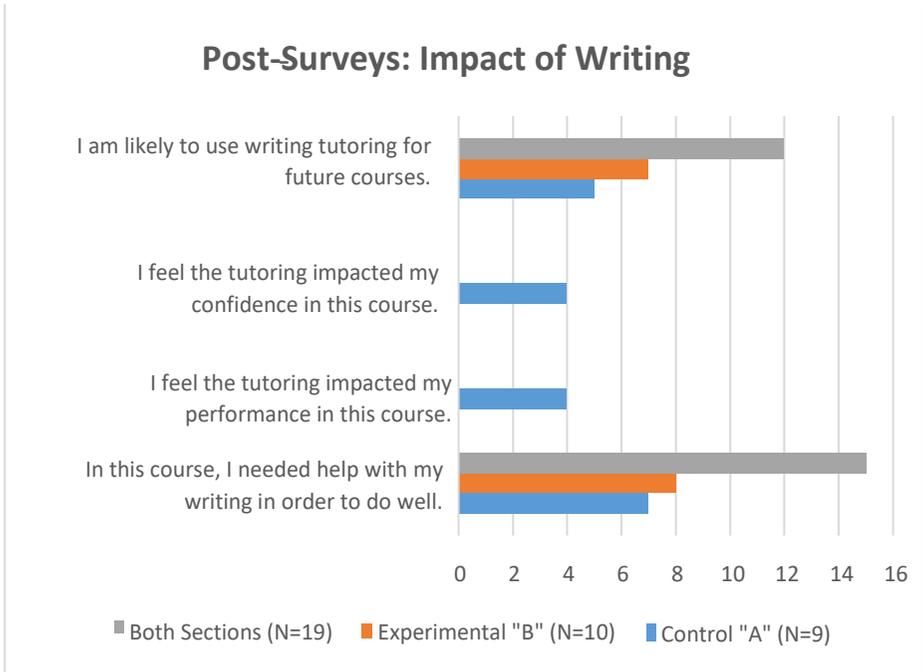
emotion and writing transfer, call emotional monitoring and regulation. By facilitating emotional monitoring and regulation, WFs could have long-term impact on students' retention and application of writing skills. WFs also add opportunities for receiving feedback, which both groups noted as important for overcoming negative emotional affect related to academic writing.

In addition to helping students manage and regulate negative emotional affect, WFs have the potential to introduce positive emotions into environments and tasks usually associated with negative affect simply by being present as a support system. All students in the WF group (n=10) reported positive views of the WF and the program and used emotionally salient language to describe their experience. One wrote the WF was “a joy to work with.” Another wrote, “I loved this program and fee that it is super useful!!” While several students noted increased confidence, one additionally noted a growth in personal pride: “[the WF] always offered great criticism and how I should improve it, and with her advice, I was able to produce writings I was really proud of. Even though I did not hit it right on the nose, her help with my second essay and made me actually proud of the writing I turned in.” None of the students in the WF group had recommendations for improvement or negative comments. Thus, WFs can mitigate negative emotional affect and introduce positive emotions into the writing process, potentially improving transfer long-term.

## Perceptions of Writing Support

Most students across sections still felt they needed help with writing to do well in composition (see *fig. 2*), just as they had said on the pre-survey, but only six students (30%) in the control used these services for a total of 23 consultations. Comparatively, all twenty students in the WF course interacted with the WF in some capacity during course activities such as peer review, small group meetings, and presentations, while 9/20 of these students (45%) met individually or in small groups with the WF outside of class for a total of 31 appointments. This increases to ten students (50%) and 37 appointments if Writing Center meetings with other consultants are included. Seven, or 70% of post-survey respondents in the WF course said they were very likely to use writing tutoring for future courses, as compared to five, or 62% in the control section. Significantly, three out of the survey respondents (30%) in the WF

section changed their mind about writing support. Originally, these students said they would not seek writing support for this class or future courses, but their post-surveys showed a change in attitude. No students in the control section changed their attitudes about using writing support.



**Figure 2:** Post-Survey Student Perceptions of Writing Support

Students in the control group who used writing support commented positively about its impact, while those who did not cited barriers influencing their behavior, including lack of accessibility and perceived need. For example, one student explained that “feedback on my writing was enough to answer any questions or concerns I had.” Another wrote, “I could have gone to the Writing Center, but the hours are very limited because walk-ins are not accepted and the appointments are often booked.” In contrast to the control group, students in the experimental group reported accessibility and additional feedback beyond the professor as key strengths of the WFP and the primary reasons they sought out WF and/or external writing support. One wrote, “It was nice to have a set person to be able to go to, and someone who was available during class time, too. That is usually a big problem in getting help is having to find time outside of class to do it, but having her here during

class made it easy.” Similarly, another wrote, “It made it super easy to reach out for help. To students who maybe wouldn't have reached out for help because they didn't know how to or where to start having an Embedded Course Tutor helped with that. [The WF] was easy to contact and she could probably learn your writing style after a little to help you the most.”

The rationale for seeking or not seeking writing support across groups suggests the value of a WF for increasing students' help-seeking behaviors. If a writing fellow is assigned to a course, they can contextualize the importance of seeking feedback from as many sources as possible, even if writing is already strong and the professor provides substantial feedback, thereby supporting a growth mindset; the WF can also configure scheduling so that all students have access to writing support both within the classroom and outside of it, decreasing barriers to access. Although WFs have the potential to improve students' perceptions of writing support and increase their help-seeking behaviors, post-surveys also showed comparable numbers of students across sections who did not plan to seek writing support for future courses ( $n=4$  in the control section and  $n=3$  in the experimental section). Furthermore, since completing English 1102, no students have returned to the Writing Center from either section. This fact suggests that, while a WF may positively impact students' perceptions of writing support, they may not significantly impact students' long-term behavior, despite students' expressed good intentions. More longitudinal studies are needed to better understand how WFPs influence students' help-seeking behaviors throughout their academic careers.

## **Conclusion**

Although this study cannot offer conclusive statements about the correlation between WFPs and equitable outcomes in English composition, its findings do suggest these programs can support all students by normalizing writing support and making it accessible. Despite its limitations, this WF pilot study affirms previous study findings that show WFPs improve students' perceptions of writing ability, confidence, and support. Additionally, this study suggests centers may need to think more about the ways WFs simultaneously promote equitable student outcomes and perpetuate traditional hierarchies of

power when they act as “decoders” for students, especially in areas such as rhetorical awareness.

Directive approaches offer needed writing support that can benefit students, especially those who feel marginalized or underprepared for college, but they can also undermine centers’ mission to teach students how to write for wider, disciplinary or public audiences. This contradiction needn’t be a deal-breaker, but training for WFs and the mission of WFPs may need to be framed to embrace such contradictions as inherent to this distinct kind of writing support. It may be that embracing these paradoxes can lead to innovative pedagogy in WFPs; by being transparent and welcoming contradictions, WFPs could generate new pedagogy for promoting equitable writing instruction.

This study also hints at the need to reexamine connections between contextualized, skill-based writing instruction and transfer. Writing Centers are grounded in the idea of writing as a skill, emphasizing the importance of practice and repetition in context. Research on writing has also found that students’ emotions are integral to transfer and long-term growth in writing. This pilot suggests, however, that increased practice doesn’t necessarily translate into increases in perceptions of writing confidence and positive emotion. Thus, beyond integrating practice and process, writing centers may need to explore strategies for increasing student perceptions of writing confidence, perhaps through teaching emotional monitoring and regulation as recommended by Driscoll and Powell. Future studies could also focus on correlations between WFs and student confidence in order to determine which practices most impact confidence levels and emotion in the WFP classroom and beyond. Finally, although some students in this pilot did change their mind about seeking writing support based on their experience with a WF, one year out, no students have followed up on their decision in subsequent semesters. Other WFP studies have shown similar changes in perception of writing support, but few have followed students long-term to see if perceptions translate into changed behaviors. Longitudinal studies are needed to determine how other WFPs and other factors continue to influence students’ decision-making in the long-term.

## Works Cited

- Bleakney, Julia, et al. "How Course-Embedded Consultants and Faculty Perceive the Benefits of Course- Embedded Writing Consultant Programs." *WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship*, vol. 44, no. 7/8, 2020, pp. 10-17.
- Boylan, Hunter R. "Targeted Intervention for Developmental Education Students (T.I.D.E.S)." *Journal of Developmental Education*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2009, pp. 14-23.
- Carpenter, Russell, et al. "Guest Editor Introduction: Revisiting and Revising Course-Embedded Tutoring Facilitated by Writing Centers." *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2014, <http://www.praxisuwc.com/121journal>
- Corbett, Steven J. *Beyond Dichotomy: Synergizing Writing Center and Classroom Pedagogies*. The WAC Clearinghouse, <https://wac.colostate.edu/docs/books/dichotomy/corbett.pdf>
- . "Bringing the Nose: Peer Power and Authority, On Location." In Spigelman and Gorbman, pp. 101-111.
- Corroy, Jennifer. "Institutional Change and the University of Wisconsin-Madison Writing Fellows Program." *Young Scholars in Writing: Undergraduate Research in Writing and Rhetoric*, vol. 1, pp. 25-44, 2003, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt46nrx5.22>
- Clarke, Irene L. and Dave Healy. "Are Writing Centers Ethical?" *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, vol. 20, nos. 1-2, 1996, pp. 32-48.
- Crank, Virginia, et al. "Reimagining the First Year as Catalyst for First-Year Writing Program Curricular Change." *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2019, pp. 53-65, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1205215.pdf>
- Decker, Teagan. "Diplomatic Relations: Peer Tutors in the Writing Classroom." Spigelman and Grobman, pp. 17-30.

- DeLoach, Scott, et al. "Locating the Center: Exploring the Roles of In-Class Tutors in First Year Composition Classrooms." *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2014, pp. 9-14, <http://www.praxisuwc.com/121journal>
- Denny, Harry et al. "'Tell me exactly what it was that I was doing so bad': Understanding the Needs and Expectations of Working-Class Students in Writing Centers." *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2018, pp. 67-100, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26537363>
- Dvorak, Kevin, et al. "Getting the Writing Center into FYC Classrooms." *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2012, <http://rapidintellect.com/AEQweb/5243NEW.pdf>
- Driscoll, Dana Lynn and Roger Powell. "States, Traits, and Dispositions: The Impact of Emotion on Writing Development and Writing Transfer across College Courses and Beyond." *Composition Forum*, vol. 34, 2016, <https://compositionforum.com/issue/34/states-traits.php>
- Engle, Jennifer, et al. *Moving Beyond Access: College Success for Low-Income, First-Generation Students*. Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, 2008. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED504448.pdf>
- Gardner Institute*, 2018. <https://www.jngi.org/>
- Gentile, Francesca. "When Center Catches in the Classroom (and Classroom in the Center): The First- Year Writing Tutorial and the Writing Program." *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2014, pp. 33-38, <http://www.praxisuwc.com/121journal>
- Gorbman, Laurie. "Building Bridges to Academic Discourse: The Peer Group Leader in Basic Composition Courses." Spigelman and Gorbman, pp. 44-59.
- Hall, Emily, and Bradley Hughes. "Preparing Faculty, Professionalizing Fellows: Keys to Success with Undergraduate Writing Fellows in WAC." *The WAC Journal*, vol. 22, 2012, pp. 21-40.

- Hannum, Dustin, et al.  
“Shifting the Center: Piloting Embedded Tutoring Models to Support Multimodal Communication across the Disciplines.” *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2014,  
<http://www.praxisuwc.com/hannum-et-al-121/>
- Haring-Smith, Tori. “Changing Students’ Attitudes: Writing Fellows Programs.” *Writing Across the Curriculum: A Guide to Developing Programs*, edited by Susan H. McLeod & Margot Soven, Sage, 2000, pp. 123-131.
- Henry, Jim, et al. (2011).  
“Course-Embedded Mentoring for First-Year Students: Melding Academic Subject Support with Role Modeling, Psycho-Social Support, and Goal Setting.” *International Journal for the Scholarship on Teaching and Learning*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2011, pp. 1-22.
- Hodges, Russ, and William G. White. “Encouraging High-Risk Student Participation in Tutoring and Supplemental Instruction.” *Journal of Developmental Education*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2001, pp. 2-43.
- Liu, Barbara Little and Holly Mandes. “The Idea of a Writing Center Meets the Reality of Classroom- Based Writing Tutoring.” Spigelman and Gorbman, pp. 87-100.
- Mullin, Joan, et al. (2008).  
“Challenging Our Practices, Supporting Our Theories: Writing Mentors as Change Agents Across Discourse Communities. Rewriting Across the Curriculum: Writing Fellows as Agents of Change in WAC [Special Issue].” *Across the Disciplines*, vol. 5, 2008,  
<https://wac.colostate.edu/atd/special/fellows>.
- Pagnac, Susan, et al. “An Embedded Model: First-Year Success in Writing and Research.” *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2014, pp. 39-44,  
<http://www.praxisuwc.com/121journal>
- Regaigon, Dara Rossman, and Pam Bromley. “What Difference do Writing Fellows Programs Make?” *The WAC Journal*, vol. 22, 2011, pp. 41-63.

Salem, Lori.

“Decisions...Decisions: Who Chooses to Use the Writing Center?” *Writing Center Journal*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2016, pp. 147-171.

Severino, Carol, and Megan Knight. “Exporting Writing Center Pedagogy: Writing Fellows Programs as Ambassadors for the Writing Center.” *Marginal Words, Marginal Work?: Tutoring the Academy in the Work of Writing Centers*, edited by William J. Macauley and Nicholas Mauriello, Hampton, 2007, pp. 19-34.

Solórzano, Daniel, et al. *Pathways to Postsecondary Success: Maximizing Opportunities for Youth in Poverty*, 2013, <https://pathways.gseis.ucla.edu/publications/PathwaysReport.pdf>

Spigelman, Candace, and Lori Grobman, editors. *On Location: Theory and Practice in Classroom-Based Writing Tutoring*. Utah State University Press, 2005.

Titus, Megan L., et al. “Dialoguing a Successful Pedagogy for Embedded Tutors.” *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2012, pp. 15-20, <http://www.praxisuwc.com/121journal>

Vance, Lara Kristin. *Best Practices in Tutoring Services and the Impact if Required Tutoring on High-Risk Students* [online dissertation]. Eastern Kentucky University, 2016, <https://encompass.eku.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1439&context=etd>

## About the Author



**Candis Bond** is an Assistant Professor of English and Director of the Writing Center at Augusta University. Her research, which focuses on supporting marginalized student populations and dimensions of writing center professional labor, has appeared in journals such as *The Writing Center Journal*, *WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship*, *The Peer Review*, and *Feminist Teacher*.