Assessment Findings from Tutors:
Helping Students in Written Communication

Introduction:

The General Education Assessment Team conducted an original, in-depth scientific study to determine how to better support our students in achieving the core competency of Written Communication (WC).[1] This report conveys the results from tutors who specialize in helping students gain writing skills at the Academic Success Center (ASC) and/or as tutors embedded in English courses that contain a writing lab. Results from instructors of writing courses will be delivered separately, as those investigations are still underway.

Executive Summary:

     Tutors were strongly unified[2] in expressing **value** for:

1. their role in encouraging students with the writing process, particularly through the strategy of providing specific, positive feedback to students.
2. their role in advancing students' higher order writing skills, and the expressed goals of the Academic Success Center more generally (e.g., focusing on the intended audience, organization of ideas, or developing an argument, over requests to simply proofread a student's work).

     Tutors were strongly unified in their **desire** for:

3. more communication with writing faculty, including access to written assignment guidelines and personalized feedback from instructors to guide a student's tutoring session.
4. more opportunities to meet with writing faculty to discuss instructor expectations for assignments.
5. more opportunities to attend workshops with writing instructors, and/or workshops conducted by writing instructors.
6. more opportunities to collaborate with the library in helping students.
7. more texts on hand at the ASC for other courses, in addition to the one they have for ENG 101, especially readings for the Hispanic American Literature course and the Hemingway Anthology. The notable exception to this request is ESL texts, as ESL students tend to bring their textbooks with them.
8. Finding ways to help students get the most from their tutoring sessions by communicating the following tips to students:
   1) Read the source material in advance,
   2) Bring a draft of work in progress,
   3) Bring a written description of the assignment,
   4) Plan to do more work after the tutoring session.

   However, care must be taken to share these tips in a way that allows students to feel welcome to come for tutoring even if they have not addressed these issues.

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[1] See appendices for a description of the research design, implementation schedule, and scientific methods used for this study, including data collection instruments. For example, the WC rubric was developed by the Assessment Team to assess student performance on writing skills across disciplines.

[2] Any use of the phrase "strongly unified" in this document refers specifically to any issue where there was agreement among at least 9 of the 10 tutors who participated in the focus group sessions.

Summary of Findings:

Dynamics of Tutoring Sessions:

All ten tutors in the focus groups identified **encouraging students** as a key strategy that they employ in helping them to acquire skills in written communication. Furthermore, nine of the ten reported that aimed to provide **specific, positive feedback** to students regarding their efforts as a strategy they employ in the service of encouraging students. According to tutors in the focus group sessions, the challenges they commonly face in being able to provide specific, positive feedback include:

1. Many times students come to the ASC because they are having trouble getting started on their papers. The focus on getting these students ready to begin planning their papers doesn't provide nearly as many opportunities to provide specific, positive feedback, compared to if the student had arrived with written work that the tutor could react to.

   a. Among students who arrive for tutoring, reading comprehension skills tend to be low, and knowledge of the historical context of the source material tends to be very limited. They often don't understand the source material they are asked to respond to in the writing assignment. Therefore, they may arrive not having read the source material at all or they've misunderstood it, which means the bulk of the tutoring session is then devoted to reading the source material with the student, rather than planning or drafting the paper.

   b. Frequently, students don't arrive with a draft, so tutors spend much time brainstorming ideas for paper topics with them, and coaching them on narrowing down their options. But even this strategy can be further complicated when students don't understand what a thesis statement is, or that they should be making a claim about the topic that they are writing about.

2. Sometimes it is difficult to find something positive to say, due to the poor quality of the writing. In these cases, after reading the student's draft, tutors will often ask the student questions to understand the content of the paper, then compliment the idea and steer the student toward communicating it more effectively.

ASC within the College:

A. Tutors emphasized that ASC goals need to be clearly communicated across the college.
   Recommended Actions for Publicizing ASC Goals:
   1. Increase awareness of the goals of the ASC through simple, brief messages posted around the college and on the website.
   2. Include a brief presentation of ASC Overview & Goals at the Adjunct Orientation Meeting / Dinner in August each year.
   3. Increase the number of class tours of the ASC (increase participation among faculty).
   4. Increase the number of tutor visits to classes to make brief presentations about the ASC's services.

ASC within the College, Continued:

B. Throughout the focus group sessions, tutors repeatedly expressed their **desire for establishing a stronger connection to faculty.** All ten tutors expressed that they would like faculty to share more information with the ASC about their classes, meet with instructors to discuss instructor expectations for assignments, and attend professional development workshops with writing instructors.

Recommended Actions for better communication with faculty:

1. All ten tutors prefer to have personalized feedback from instructors on student work to guide a tutoring session. They would like to see professors' comments on student papers. While students rarely come for tutoring after the first draft is developed in the writing process, tutors report that sometimes the only comment on a student's paper is "See the writing center." Tutors also report that tutoring prescriptions are not being used, but would be helpful in identifying a fruitful topic of focus for the session.

2. Allow tutors to access written descriptions of assignments. All ten tutors agreed on this point. Often students arrive without a written description of the assignment from their instructor, so when they ask the tutor to clarify the assignment, the tutor is unable to do so. Also, knowing when an assignment is due can help tutors to set a realistic goal for the session. Posting assignments and syllabi on Blackboard Learn would enable students to look them up during a tutoring session if they didn't remember to bring them.

3. Allow tutors "Read Only" access to documents within the networked folder where syllabi are collected each semester.

4. Allow tutors access to rubrics for each assignment. Four tutors agreed that access to a rubric would be helpful, in that it allows them to infer a particular instructor's priorities for the written work.

5. Include tutors (especially embedded tutors) as Teaching Assistants in Blackboard Learn so they can have access to assignments, syllabi, and announcements, in addition to the ability to follow up on student work.

6. Ensure that instructors know they will have an embedded tutor in ENG 101P courses before the semester begins.[3]

7. Provide sample papers for tutors and students to refer to as models (in the ASC and on Blackboard Learn).

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[3] In Personal communication via email from the ASC Director to Assessment Team Members on Sept. 14, 2016, she explained that her access to anonymous responses to the Tutor Survey has already enabled her to make changes to the ways that embedded tutors work with course instructors: "This semester, we are sending tutors to the lectures as well as the labs during the first two to three weeks. This change has helped tutors become more familiar with course expectations and has resulted in a stronger connection with students and instructors."

ASC within the College, Continued:

B. Establish a stronger connection to faculty:
   Recommended Actions for collaboration with faculty:
   1. Schedule meetings where tutors and faculty can discuss assignments and instructor expectations for student work.
   2. Schedule professional development opportunities with writing faculty.
   3. Devote a Professional Development Day to familiarizing faculty with the goals, layout and procedures of the ASC. Include meetings among faculty and tutors to clarify expectations for assignments, how to prepare students to get the most from a tutoring session, etc.

C. Tutors report that **students struggle with reading comprehension**. Tutors identified a specific English instructor whose reading assignments are consistently at a reading level that doesn't provide an additional barrier for engaging in writing assignments, and implored faculty to incorporate more reader-friendly assignments, and to become sensitized to the need for a more accessible vocabulary. Tutors request that instructors clarify definitions more frequently (assuming students will be unfamiliar with more terms) or using a more basic vocabulary while communicating in the classroom and in selecting assigned readings.
   Recommended Actions for Reading Comprehension and Vocabulary Deficits:
   1. Advise writing faculty that students who go for tutoring often do not understand vocabulary that they use on a regular basis in class, and that these students struggle to understand many of the assigned readings.
   2. Build questions regarding perceptions of student reading comprehension and vocabulary usage into the Interview Guide for the WC Faculty Focus Groups to further probe this issue of student needs and yield a faculty perspective.

D. Writing tutors would like to **establish more connections with the library.**
   Recommended Actions Involving the Library:
   1. When relevant to the goals of a tutoring session, encourage appointment tutors (as opposed to drop-in center tutors) to bring students to the library to show how to use its resources during their appointment time. Encourage drop-in tutors to access the library's electronic resources during sessions.
   2. Schedule more professional development opportunities for tutors with a focus on library resources. (The Director of Library Services has recently provided a workshop on library databases, which was reported to be "very helpful"[4] by the Director of the ASC, with plans to coordinate a similar workshop in the near future.)
   3. Schedule more meetings with library staff to collaborate on how to help students with their research and writing assignments.

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[4] Ibid.

Tutoring Issues Within the ASC:

Overview: Tutors provided much feedback on the day-to-day operations within the ASC. As the ASC Director has been serving on the Assessment Team and has been privy to anonymous data for the past year, she has already addressed a number concerns and suggestions for innovations that the tutors shared, including: "Longer appointments, daily team huddles, the addition of greeters, and the creation of a centralized information center…[and] a leadership development program specifically for peer tutors, [having] included these plans in the ASC's Operational Goals for the Strategic Plan last year."[5]

Other Tutor Recommended Actions:
 A. Specific topics of interest for professional development, provided that the workshops fit into their various schedules and would be considered on-the-job training, include workshops on:
      1) pacing student instruction
      2) enhancing student writing skills
      3) enhancing student reading comprehension skills
      4) library resources (one workshop has already taken place, described above)

 B. Specific ways to make the ASC a more welcoming space, including structural issues such as providing more private stalls for students who desire confidential feedback from tutors, ways to reduce the noise level in the Writing Center, clearer signage to orient students to the center, and general interior decorating improvements to make the space more inviting and stimulating.

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[5] Ibid.