

**BUILDING STUDENT SUCCESS AND ENSURING RETENTION:
THE ROLE OF THE ACADIA WRITING CENTRE**

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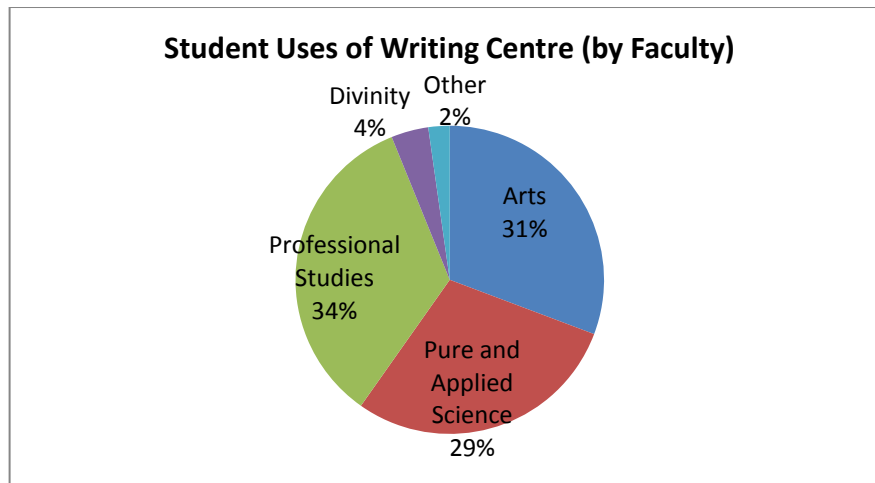
The primary mission of the Acadia Writing Centre is to help students at all levels of study and from every faculty to succeed: to complete academic courses, to graduate, and to go out into the broader professional world having learned how to communicate effectively. In order to achieve these goals, the Centre provides a range of teaching services, both extra-curricular (through tutorials, workshops, and presentations) and as part of credit course delivery (through in-class teaching modules). The Writing Centre serves students from their first year, through Honours, to the graduate level. The Centre also offers assistance to faculty members in the form of class visits as well as consultations on designing and evaluating course assignments.

The Acadia Writing Centre: Quick Facts

| | | |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
| Date opened | March 2005 | |
| Location | Fountain Commons | |
| Staff | Coordinator: Stephen Ahern, Ph.D. (in English) (also Professor in Department of English and Theatre) | |
| | ESL Writing Specialist: Fiona Inglis, M.A. (in Teaching English as a Second Language) | |
| | Secretary: Christina Mcrae, M.A. (in English) | |
| | Peer Writing Tutors: 8 senior students (7 Honours, 1 Master's) | |
| Student Traffic (Fall 2009) | <u>Student Visits to Writing Centre</u> Tutorials (non-ESL): 341 Tutorials (ESL): 58 Workshops/presentations: 157 Thesis consultations: 8 Drop-ins 17 ----- TOTAL 581 | Separate individuals served: 316 repeat visits: 265 (46%) ----- 581 |

Who uses the Writing Centre? A Current Snapshot

Data from the past term provide a clear picture of the students who use the Writing Centre to improve their writing. There were 581 student uses in a twelve-week period. These students come from a range of majors, and are evenly spread across campus, with an almost equal division from the three largest faculties: 31% came from Arts; 29% from Pure and Applied Sciences; and 34% from Professional Studies. The remainder came from Divinity or were classified as independent students.



Ensuring Student Success: The Evidence

A) First-year students

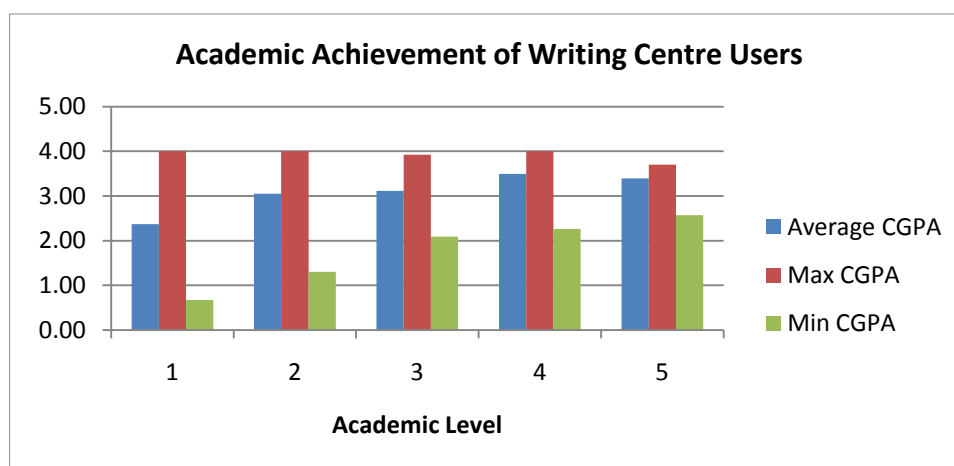
The clearest empirical proof we have of the Writing Centre's contribution to student success comes from administering the Assessment of Reading and Writing, a diagnostic test given to incoming first-year students during Welcome Week. This test gives new students and the staff charged with helping them to succeed a clear sense of how well prepared they are to cope with the demands of university courses. Test results provide a baseline sense of their knowledge of grammar and style as well as their level of reading comprehension. By the end of the first month of school each student receives an individualized report of the test score, and, if it is below an acceptable threshold, the student is given a strong suggestion that she visit the Writing Centre for assistance. Performance on the initial assessment is then compared to academic performance over each student's subsequent school year, in order to determine if there is a correlation between GPA and receiving help from the Writing Centre.

This assessment was administered to 507 students in Fall 2008, and then the academic performance of each student was tracked to the end of the year. The pattern that emerged was clear: if two students receive the identical score on the initial Assessment, and one visits the Writing Centre at least once while his or her peer does not, the student who used the Centre is likely to achieve a higher GPA by the end of the year (the positive correlation was statistically significant).

[for more detailed analysis, see "Report to Academic Council," Sonya Major and Stephen Ahern, July 2009]

B) Senior students

Another pattern that emerges from the data shows that student success is linked to Writing Centre use. The Centre attracts students with a wide range of academic performance in their first year (GPA from 0.5 to 4.0). As students progress in their studies, more and more of those who use the services of the Writing Centre do well in their courses – the trend is clear from first, to second, to third, to fourth year. These data show continuous improvement in the students who choose to seek out assistance, and thereby demonstrates the clear role of the Writing Centre in student success.



The other ongoing contribution the Writing Centre makes to the success of senior students is through the peer writing tutor program. Since the Centre opened in 2005, it has employed 40 senior students drawn from almost every department on campus. The training these students receive and the teaching experience they accumulate is, they tell us, a major part of their intellectual, social, and professional development here at Acadia. Many go on to win major academic awards, and go off into the wider world ready to take on leadership roles in whatever they choose to do.

Ensuring Student Success: The Writing Centre From the Student Perspective

Perhaps the most forceful evidence of the Writing Centre's usefulness to students is their own testimony, in their own voices, to how they found their experience at the Centre. As always, at the end of the term, the Writing Centre sent out a survey to every student who had visited, asking for their frank evaluation of the help they received. The pattern of response was overwhelmingly positive, as it has been every term since the Writing Centre opened in 2005. Here are some representative comments:

SURVEY RESULTS (Fall 2009)

**Please answer the following questions
about the writing tutor that you worked with.**

| | Not at All | | Somewhat | | Very Much |
|---|-------------------|---|-----------------|----|------------------|
| a) Did you find the tutor generally helpful? | 1 | 2 | 7 | 19 | 20 |
| b) Did you find the tutor knowledgeable? | 1 | 3 | 4 | 20 | 21 |
| c) Did you find the tutor organized? | 1 | 2 | 5 | 16 | 24 |
| d) Did you find the tutor clear/easy to understand? | 1 | 2 | 4 | 15 | 27 |
| e) Did you find the tutor friendly? | 2 | 1 | 3 | 13 | 28 |
| 12. Did you receive useful information and advice on the topic for which you requested help? | 2 | 3 | 4 | 21 | 19 |
| 13. Did you later use the information and advice that you received? | 3 | 1 | 6 | 16 | 23 |

17. Would you recommend the Writing Centre's services to a friend?

| | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | 60 |
| No | 0 |

19. Would you use the Writing Centre's services again?

| | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | 58 |
| No | 2 |

“They [the peer tutors] were both EXTREMELY helpful. The tutoring was great as it was one-on-one, and the tutor gave advice on how to write, not what to write. That was also very helpful, as I can now apply that knowledge to my future essays.

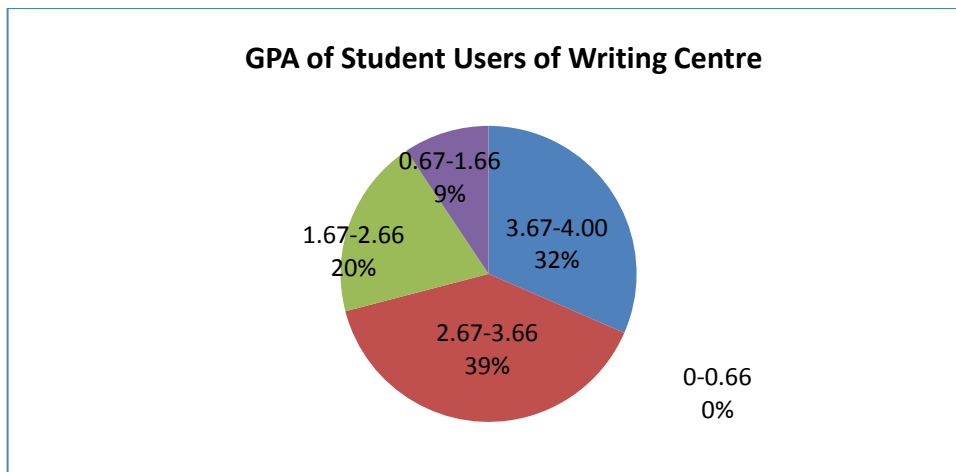
“The workshops I attended were presented in a straight forward non specific format making it easier to apply to my courses. I found the confusion I experienced trying to determine what exactly my professors were asking me to do were answered in the workshop. I think student GPA's would increase just by sitting through a couple of the workshops I attended. Thank you for providing this service.”

“I really think that this is a unique program that speaks volumes for Acadia. I really liked how open and helpful that the tutors were: they were excited to help me! As well, I feared that they may make me feel a little slow in the head, but they treated me with the most respect. Thanks.”

Improving Traffic, Improving Retention

The evidence is clear: students who visit the Writing Centre find it helpful, and those who decide to come to the Centre tend to return (50% of the students who visited last term came back by the end of term). And the pattern over the four-year cycle of a student's progression from first year to graduation is clear: the students who visit the Writing Centre after first year get stronger and stronger as the years go on.

The reverse part of this trend is also clear: while successful students seek out additional help to get even better, after first year those who are struggling (or not paying much attention to improving) are less likely to seek out the help that could turn things around for them. This chart shows the unequal distribution of visitors by cumulative GPA:



The challenge the Writing Centre faces is one shared by any academic support service that aims to help all students succeed, and in the process to remain enrolled. Because such services are not a compulsory component of a degree program, we rely on students themselves to seek out our assistance.

In order to best serve those at risk of failure and of leaving the University, we need to focus on getting the message out to them about our services. Some strategies to increase participation:

- **Increase collaboration with faculty members.** Students tell us that the biggest reason they first visit the Writing Centre is: “My professor told me to go.” This year the Centre wrote to all course instructors to ask them to add a message to course outlines explaining the services offered by the Writing Centre and providing a hyperlink to sign-up pages – this strategy appears to have had a big impact on increasing our traffic. For the coming year, we will contact every department and school to consult on how best to encourage their students to take advantage of the academic supports available to them on campus.
- **Improve communication with students.** Getting the message out to students about how useful a visit to a Writing Centre can be has become increasingly difficult in a fragmented media environment. A newly redesigned website was introduced this year to ensure that when a student first comes to the site, the relevant services are immediately apparent. Over the coming year we will explore new means of communicating (such as social networking) in addition to sending out emails and posting publicity on campus.

- Build on current collaborations with other academic support services. The Writing Centre will continue to work with the Academic Support Program, the Library, and the Wong International Centre to ensure the academic and cultural integration of all students on campus. Likely avenues for expanded collaboration include additional in-class teaching of Academic Support students, expansion of the new drop-in tutorial service at the Library, and additional workshops for students for whom English is not a first language.
- Continue to build a national network of Writing Centres. As a member of the executive of the Canadian Writing Centres Association, the Coordinator of the Acadia Writing Centre is charged with helping to build a national network among the more than 100 college and university centres across the country. Facilitating exchange of best practices is key to improving writing centre work both locally and nationally. In addition to building a resource library for writing centre managers on a new CWCA website, the Acadia Coordinator will finalize plans to host a panel at the STLHE conference in Toronto on a topic that is of pressing interest on many campuses: “From Transition to Graduation: The Writing Centre and Student Retention.”

