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ANXIETY AT JOHN CARROLL: WHY DEVELOPMENTAL WRITERS AVOID THE WRITING CENTER

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ANXIETY AT JOHN CARROLL:
WHY DEVELOPMENTAL WRITERS
AVOID THE WRITING CENTER

An Essay Submitted to the
Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts & Sciences of
John Carroll University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
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By
Emily Tomusko
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The essay of Emily Tomusko is hereby accepted:

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Abstract

This paper describes the underlying issues and attempts to offer a possible remedy John Carroll University's developmental writing students' lack of engagement with the campus Writing Center. While developmental writing students across the United States visit their respective writing centers frequently, these students at JCU do not visit at the same pace. In this project, I draw from class surveys of student writers, from class visits, and from tracking student consultations at the Writing Center to learn why developmental writers do not visit as often as their EN 125 counterparts. In doing so, I argue that JCU's developmental writing students are faced with the following dilemma: JCU's developmental writing students, who are also primarily JCU's nontraditional students, struggle academically and emotionally with the environment JCU's traditional and primarily residential four year university provides. Many of JCU's students come prepared for the academic rigors of college studies, and as such, have little reason to feel that they may be unprepared for the academic rigor of college writing. JCU's developmental writing students, on the other hand, are typically at-risk students and struggle to feel as competent as their peers. The academic anxiety that many developmental writing students typically experience is only exacerbated by this environment, and the fixed mindset that developmental writing students possess compared to the growth mindset of their EN 125 counterparts only becomes stronger over their year-long progress through the developmental writing classe

Introduction

During a recent peer review session when I visited a developmental¹ writing class, I explained to these students why a group of the university's Writing Center consultants were visiting class that day. As I looked at each of the students, I simply said that they would be meeting with a Writing Center consultant for about fifteen minutes to talk about the writing they had brought with them to class that day. A student towards the back of the room offhandedly said to the quiet classroom, "Oh great, we're gonna get roasted!" The classroom tittered in the way students do when they are not sure if they should laugh or not. The student's reaction did not surprise me; in fact, I was quite used to those types of remarks that stem from negativity borne out of self-consciousness. This self-consciousness reared its head regularly as I worked in John Carroll University's Writing Center for two years. During my time in the Writing Center, I have heard all of those phrases from anxiety-ridden writers: "I suck at writing!" or, "Don't judge me too harshly, I'm not a great writer!" That anxiety is only natural when you are doing something as soul-baring as sharing your writing with a complete stranger. Yet, as I continued to work with the developmental writing students during my first year as a graduate assistant, I began to notice that the students in these classes took that anxiety to a level that I was not familiar with; I was stunned by how personally they took the feedback. The developmental writing students at John Carroll University saw their writing as something that would *never* improve no matter how much work and effort they put into it. In short,

¹ The terms "developmental writing" and "basic writing" are used interchangeably in the field of developmental writing studies. However, I prefer to use "developmental," although some scholars I cite prefer to use "basic."

they felt that their writing teacher or tutor's job was simply to tell them what they were doing wrong in their writing and how poor of writers they were.

So no, the student's reaction did not surprise me; in fact, it only solidified the reason why our Writing Center was becoming more involved in John Carroll University's developmental writing courses. While the student who jokingly said the class was about to get "roasted" most likely did not even realize it, their contribution to the classroom that day corroborated years of research on the subject of developmental writers as a group and their relationship to campus writing centers, and more specifically, how John Carroll University's EN 120/121 students interact with our Writing Center. The field of developmental writing studies is devoted to studying how developmental writers perceive themselves in the grander scope of the academy. In fact, Bartholomae's (1986) essay "Inventing the University," discusses the issues and anxieties that developmental writers face when forced to engage with the academy as a whole. Similarly to Bartholomae (1986), Adler-Kassner (1999) also explores developmental writing students perceptions of themselves and their writing in her work "Just Writing, Basically: Basic Writers on Basic Writing" and suggests that developmental writers' attitudes toward their own writing capabilities and where they fit within the university is unclear, and it is our job as scholars and instructors to strengthen their ability to perform within the wider audience of the academy. This anxiety and self-consciousness that Bartholomae (1986) and Adler-Kassner (1999) describe is something that is typically expressed only in the privacy of their own minds or in the tenuous relationships with their writing instructors. However, that writing anxiety is only compounded when confronted with an organization like a writing center—in the minds of many, writing centers are seen strictly as a remedial

service. How can we expect a student who is already anxious about their writing abilities to respond to someone that the student believes is employed to lecture them? This anxiety seeps into developmental students' writing center consultations: either they do not visit their writing center or are consumed with "lower order concerns," things like grammar, spelling, or assignment criteria.

That preoccupation with "lower order concerns" is indicative of the fixed versus growth mindset introduced by Dweck (2017) and that I suggest developmental writers inhabit. In a growth mindset like the one that EN 125 students possess, a student believes that they are capable of improving in subjects that they find difficult if they work hard. In a fixed mindset like the ones our EN 120/121 students inhabit, however, a student believes that there are subjects that they will perform poorly in no matter how much they try to improve. While Salem (2016) does not discuss fixed versus growth mindsets in her essay "Decisions...Decisions: Who Chooses to Use the Writing Center?," by arguing that a university's most at-risk students, similar to the students in EN 120/121, are most likely to visit their campus writing center, Salem raises an interesting question for my own study. If what Salem argues appears to be the norm across much of the United States, why do developmental writers at JCU respond to writing center help with the self-conscious proclamation that consultants are there to "roast" them? The answer may lie in the following circumstance: the academic and cultural background of JCU's first-year writers and the overall environment of the University. In short, it is difficult to fit in and

feel as competent as your peers who are typically well prepared and traditional students when you are labeled as an at-risk² student.

Therefore, my project attempts to answer the question: what keeps JCU's developmental writing students from visiting the Writing Center and what can be done to reverse this trend without reverting to requiring visits to the Writing Center since such an approach would not identify the reason EN 120/121 students choose not to make such visits on their own? I argue that developmental writers begin their academic journey with a fixed mindset when compared to their counterparts in EN 125, who typically inhabit a growth mindset. In doing so, I show how students who are classified as at-risk are more likely to fall prey to a fixed mindset compared to students from more traditional educational backgrounds. Drawing from observations and surveys of both mainstream writers and developmental writers, this essay shows how a fixed mindset deters developmental writers from visiting the Writing Center. This research is significant because there is little research currently in existence on developmental or academically at-risk students at private four year universities, and the precedent this essay serves opens the door for further research to be done on the subject. Developmental writing students' fixed mindsets are only exacerbated by being surrounded by peers that they see as more academically prepared than they are nearly 24/7 on this primarily residential campus, and, in fact, worsens over their first year at John Carroll University. This exacerbation over their first year only serves to deter the students from the Writing Center; visiting a "remedial" service like the Writing Center would only serve to further their alienation

² By "at-risk," I mean students who can potentially fail out of school. EN 120/121 students are classified as "at-risk" because they are in danger of performing poorly in their foundational writing courses

from their peers who, at least in the developmental writers' eyes, do not have to visit the Writing Center.

Literature Review

Recent scholarship on developmental writers and writing centers tend to address the following: developmental writers' perceptions of themselves and their writing abilities; how developmental writers engage with writing centers and who writing centers primarily serve across the nation; and how developmental writing students engage with embedded tutoring programs similar to the one implemented for this essay. This literature review will discuss each of those topics in turn to shed light on how that research has shaped this essay.

The Anxiety of Developmental Writers

Much research has been conducted on developmental writers' self-perception in the context of the academy and their peers, and that scholarship nearly always begins with Shaughnessy (1976). Her piece "Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing" (1976) is typically seen as one of the first pieces of contemporary developmental writing scholarship, and the field has been rife with ideas and arguments ever since. Shaughnessy (1976) is famous for her arguments that criticize how the academy sees developmental writers, stating that developmental writing students are commonly seen as "remedial...or handicapped" (p. 234). Bartholomae (1986) continued to bring attention to the attitudes, anxieties, and perceptions of developmental writers in his influential piece "Inventing the University," and to this day the article remains one of the most important pieces of scholarship on developmental writing in the field. Bartholomae's primary concern in the

article is the struggle developmental writers face when attempting to engage with the language of the academy, a language with which they are unfamiliar.

The question of how developmental writers see themselves that both Shaughnessy (1976) and Bartholomae (1986) attempted to answer persists into current scholarship on developmental writing as a whole, and the intersection of Bartholomae (1986) and contemporary Adler-Kassner's (1999) work presents itself in the ambiguous way developmental writers describe themselves and their writing identity. Adler-Kassner (1999) builds on this previous scholarship by supporting the aspects of developmental writing students' identity that many scholars are concerned with. Displayed previously in Shaughnessy's (1976) words from "Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing," developmental writing instructors and administrators have attempted to remove negative terminology such as "remedial," and replace it with words like "basic" or "developmental." However, Adler-Kassner (1999) says that we do students a disservice by not defining the identity of developmental writers to our students, because then it is the students' responsibility to "figure out what basic writing is, and what makes them basic writers" (p. 76). Essentially, how can we expect developmental writing students to engage with their identity, either positively or negatively, if they are not aware of that identity in the first place? Developmental writing students are either aware of their negative perception by their peers and the academy and are too discouraged to engage with academia further; or, developmental writers are aware that something is deficient, or lacking, since they know they are in a separate class from their peers. However, they are not sure of what that might be or how that relates to a developmental writing class in the first place.

Whereas Adler-Kassner (1999) argues that developmental writing students are negatively affected by their lack of awareness of their identity, other scholars note that the students' environment can greatly affect the student's perceptions of themselves. Wenner and Palkovacs (1997) discuss students in two developmental writing classes at the University of Cincinnati: Developmental Writing for the Baccalaureate College (DWBC) for four year students and English for Effective Communication (EEC) for two year students. Wenner and Palkovacs (1997) found that students in DWBC felt comfortable with the academic work they were being asked to do as they felt that they had been introduced to similar work in high school. The two year students, on the other hand, came from under-privileged areas and their high school did not have the funds for college preparatory classes, resulting in the EEC students feeling significantly less prepared for college writing. Yet it was not just the students' academic background that affected their perceptions of self and the academy; the students' current economic status also affected those perceptions considerably. Many of the students in DWBC came from privileged backgrounds and could afford to live on campus, and being able to live on campus and "feel [an] even more uninterrupted sense of academic life" positively affected the DWBC student's relationship with the academy, whereas the EEC students, who were primarily commuters (p. 22).

While Wenner and Palkovacs (1997) do not mention Dweck's (2007) Mindset Theory, the growth versus fixed mindset is quite common in developmental writing students. There are two mindsets that one can have: a growth mindset or a fixed mindset. Students with a growth mindset "believe that they can develop their abilities through hard work, good strategies, and instruction from others," whereas students with fixed mindsets

“believe that they have a certain amount of ability and they cannot do much to change it” (Haimovitz and Dweck, 2017, p. 1849). While Wenner and Palkovacs (1997) do not mention a growth or fixed mindset in their students, it is possible that the students in the two year student developmental writing course possessed a fixed mindset over their peers in the four year student developmental writing course. As John Carroll University’s developmental writing courses house a large amount of the university’s at risk students, it is possible that JCU’s students, similar to Wenner and Palkovacs’ (1997), feel less prepared for college writing classes, and as such, struggle to take ownership of their writing and engage with the academy.

Developmental Writers in the Writing Center

John Carroll’s developmental writing students are an outlier when it comes to demographic and writing center research, as scholars like Salem (2016) and Wells’ (2016) research suggests that developmental writing students frequently take advantage of their campus writing centers’ services. Salem’s (2016) article “Decisions...Decisions: Who Chooses to Use the Writing Center” provides an in-depth view of who actually chooses to use writing centers at Temple University. By collecting data from university administrators on the incoming freshmen class, Salem (2016) kept track of which of these students visited the writing center over the next four years. She determined that “22% of these students visited the writing center at least once, while the 78% did not visit...of the 22% who visited, 16% came for the first time in their first year at the university” (Salem, 2016, p. 154). Furthermore, both gender and the students’ parent’s educational attainment affected the student’s choice to use the writing center; women were more likely to make appointments than men, and students whose parents did not attend college

were more likely to seek out the writing center. The incoming students SAT scores also correlated with writing center visits; the lower the SAT scores, the more likely the student was to visit the writing center. Thus, the more historically underprivileged the student, the more likely they were to visit the writing center.

Salem (2016) also found that students had essentially already decided that they would take advantage of their university's writing center services before they enrolled in classes. Incoming freshmen took a survey before registering for classes, one of the questions asking if the student was considering using any learning community or tutoring services offered by the university. How the students answered this question on the survey essentially determined if they would use these services, as most students remained true to the answers they supplied to that question. While Salem (2016) does not explicitly mention developmental writing students, she does say that "SAT scores don't just reflect things about students, they also shape how students see themselves, and therefore the choices they make," an academic self-esteem issue that developmental writing students suffer from as well and, arguably, keeps them from the writing center (p. 159).

In addition to Salem's (2016) work, Wells (2016) has attempted to analyze the choice of visiting a writing center in her article "Why We Resist "Leading the Horse": Required Tutoring, RAD Research, and Our Writing Center Ideals." To determine how students reacted to mandatory writing center visits, Wells (2016) performed a study to gauge developmental writer's perceptions of mandatory tutoring. Wells (2016) found that most developmental writing students actually preferred having a mandatory writing center requirement. However, she makes no mention of the statistics of appointments made by developmental writing students before her study. Yet, Wells (2016) certainly

does raise some interesting questions regarding mandatory requirements and writing centers: would our Writing Center benefit from such an initiative, and is this the reason that developmental writing students do not visit our Writing Center in the first place?

Furthermore, Wells (2016) also says a shortcoming of writing center studies is the lack of research and statistics that support our field. While not explicitly relating to the study of developmental writers, Wells' (2016) criticism certainly relates to the study of writing centers and writing center administration, and this project attempts to fill the gap that writing center studies commonly avoid; numbers and definitive research I realized that Wells' (2016) formula for her own RAD criteria could be used to find definitive numbers for how JCU's developmental writing students engage with our Writing Center, as this intersection between developmental writing and the embedded tutoring programs is an intersection of research that is not widely studied.

Developmental Writing Engagement with Writing Centers

As seen by Salem (2016) and Wells' (2016) research, some work is being done on developmental writing or underprivileged students visiting campus writing centers. However, what is less widely researched is the relationship between developmental writing students and embedded tutoring programs or learning communities as a way to increase appointments in campus writing centers. For example, McKinley (2011) of Sophia University found great success by implementing workshops and small tutorials for Japanese students struggling with the English language in order to increase appointments made at their failing writing center. While McKinley (2011) works with students learning English as a foreign language, the motivation behind his study is similar to ours: institute collaborative learning activities in order to increase appointments at the

writing center. Parisi and Graziano-King (2011) seem to have implemented a similar program to ours at Kingsborough Community College, but just more in depth; they provide each developmental writing course with an in-class tutor who attends every class and works specifically with those students. However, their research focuses on the ambiguity of the role of tutor in each class and how said tutor could best be utilized. Thus, they do not address an increase in motivation or appointments made at their specific learning communities. Sacher (2016) of Bloomsberg University also found that collaborative learning activities with low achieving and at risk students such as one on one conferences and group work increased the motivation and interest of these student's in their academic work. Yet similar to the above-mentioned studies, Sacher's (2016) study does not directly engage writing centers or how these implemented initiatives may have affected the student's relationship to their campus communities.

An overview of the current research shows that John Carroll University is an outlier. JCU students fit the mold of the standard academic anxiety that developmental writing students feel that Wenner and Palkovacs (1997) and Adler-Kassner (1999) discuss. Our EN 120/121 students suffer from writing anxiety and, perhaps, struggle with fitting in or "measuring up" to JCU's traditional campus community where many of the students feel prepared for college writing courses. Yet, as Salem (2016) and Wells (2016) show, universities commonly do not have issues getting their developmental writing students through the door of their writing centers. However, we seem to be facing that issue in our Writing Center. This project attempts to find answers through the implementation of an initiative similar to an embedded tutoring program—as Sacher (2016) and Graziano-King (2011) implemented projects to answer similar questions at

their own universities, this project attempts to answer a question specific to our university as well.

Methodology

My methodology involved surveys, class visits, and the tracking of writing center visits. I surveyed and tracked students from EN 120/121 and students from mainstream EN 125. Before I specify these surveys and visits, I first need to provide further institutional context. John Carroll University features two possible tracks for First Year Writing: a one semester long seminar-style course titled EN 125, and a two semester long developmental writing course titled EN 120 and EN 121, which are typically taken in succession. While the First Year Writing classes are taught by a variety of professors and are run quite differently from each other, the goal for both courses is the same: to introduce writers to academic and argumentative writing. Many of the EN 125 courses require their students to visit the Writing Center a certain number of times throughout the semester (typically only once or twice), and as such, the Writing Center largely helps EN 125 students who typically account for between 20-30% of the visits per semester. None of the EN 120 courses currently have a required Writing Center visit built into their syllabus.

I visited the participating EN 120 courses for the first time at the beginning of the Fall 2017 semester to distribute the preliminary survey to begin the study (see Appendix A). The surveys were completely anonymous and the only somewhat identifying information asked for was their major. While the survey had a variety of questions, at this stage, I was primarily concerned with seeing what range of majors the students hailed from, whether they had writing centers or writing labs at their high school, if they were

familiar with our Writing Center, and whether they thought they would visit the WC for their EN 120 class or their other classes. I was also interested in seeing an overview of the students' chosen majors. For questions that asked the students to rank their answer, they were able to circle a response from 1 to 6, 1 being "not very familiar" and 6 being "very familiar."

The next step in the initiative involved actually bringing Writing Center consultants to the two EN 120 courses and single EN 125 course in order to provide mini-consultations. The primary goal of these class visits was for the consultants to provide mini-consultations, roughly fifteen minutes for each student; a full consultation in our Writing Center takes thirty minutes. A group of Writing Center consultants and I visited two EN 120 classrooms midway to the end of the semester for all classes. The three classes we visited in Fall 2017 were 50 minutes, so each consultant met with three students for roughly fifteen minutes each while I observed and kept time. Spring 2018 was quite similar, the primary difference being that the EN 125 course we visited was 75 minutes rather than 50 minutes, giving each consultant more freedom with the length of their consultations. During the in-class visits, I passed out a modified Writing Consultation Record (WCR), a form we also ask students to fill out when they visit the Writing Center (see Appendix B). I removed most of the identifying information we normally ask for on WCRS; the only semi-identifying information left on the form asked for their major and what year they were currently in. Additionally, we only had four volunteer consultants for one EN 120 class visit, so I stepped in to participate in the mini-consultations and asked the class instructor to keep time. Following the in-class visit, I

asked each consultant to send me a brief email or have a brief discussion with me about their experience in the classes.

The last means to collect data for this initiative was in the final survey (see Appendix C). I was primarily interested in seeing two things on the final survey: first, how they felt about the in-class experience with the Writing Center Consultants; and second, if they had chosen to visit the Writing Center following the class visit and how they ranked that experience. There were two differences in the surveys for the classes between the Fall and Spring semesters. For the Spring semester, rather than the survey being sent at the end of the semester, it was sent midway through Spring 2018 so that the results could be included in this paper. Additionally, rather than asking the students to rate their experience on a one to six scale as with the preliminary survey, the post-experience survey asked the students to rate their experience during the mini-consultations, a rating of ten being “very effective,” and 1 being “not very effective.” Simultaneously with the final surveys, I also tracked the Writing Center visits of EN 120/121 and EN 125 students to gain an accurate view of who chose to visit the Writing Center following our in-class visit.

Overall, this chosen methodology was able to give me a comprehensive view and understanding of our EN 120/125 students relationship with the Writing Center and their writing as a whole. Furthermore, this methodology also allowed a variety of ways for the students to express themselves either anonymously or publicly but without consequence. The surveys were completely anonymous, and while the in-class Writing Center consultations were not anonymous, they were private with their peer consultants and anything that was shared with either the consultant or myself was not shared with the

instructor. Both of these methodologies proved effective in receiving results and were illuminating in how the EN 120 writers viewed themselves in comparison to their counterpart, the EN 125 students, which I will discuss in the following section.

Discussion

Now I would like to share some of the results from my visits to the EN 120 courses in Fall 2017 and my observations of writing center consultations. In general, what emerges from these surveys and consultations suggests that EN 120/121 students do inhabit the fixed mindset that Wenner and Palkovacs' (1997) two year students also possess. While both the EN 120/121 and EN 125 students were willing to talk about their writing, what was actually discussed in the consultations varied, at times drastically. The EN 125 students were more concerned with the quality of their argument and how they could improve it, whereas the EN 120/121 students were largely concerned with lower order concerns like their grammar and mechanics. Furthermore, as the developmental writing students progressed from EN 120 to EN 121, their views of both themselves as writers and of the class as a whole worsened, and the students seemed to be aware of the negative perceptions that they felt their peers in EN 125 felt towards the "remedial" class of EN 120/121.

Fall 2017: Preliminary Survey

I began by reflecting on the EN 120 students' responses to the preliminary survey from the beginning of the Fall 2017 semester. One of the questions I asked was if the students had a writing center or writing lab at their high school; only five students reported that their high school offered such services. The fact that so few of the students' high schools had a writing center or lab is not surprising, given that writing centers in

high schools are only recently becoming more widely researched and used. Out of those five students, three chose to use those services. I also asked the students if they had heard about JCU's Writing Center, and out of the total, 22 of the students said that they had. The students were allowed to choose multiple answers for who they had heard about the WC from; 55% of students reported hearing about the WC from a professor and 45% reported hearing about it from an orientation leader. Students were less likely to hear about the WC from an RA or academic advisor (27%), classmate (14%), or a source not listed (18%). None of these results were surprising, as it is common for professors to have a section of their syllabus devoted to student support services such as the Writing Center, and it is even more common for First Year Writing instructors to have required visits to the WC. The responses to these questions corroborated what I had expected; students, and most likely, their writing instructors, knew that JCU had a Writing Center and had even heard about it from multiple sources even this early in their academic journey.

Yet while most of the respondents knew of the existence of the John Carroll Writing Center, many of them were unaware of the specific services the center offers. One of the questions I posed was, "How familiar are you with JCU's Writing Center services?" When asked if they were familiar with the WC, out of the 23 students, 71% circled a three or less on the one to six scale identifying that they were not familiar with the services the WC offers. One student mistakenly circled the words "not very familiar" rather than circling a number. However, amongst the students who said that they were not familiar with the WC's services, 57% gave a score less than three. This lack of student awareness in regards to the services that the WC corroborated my initial suspicion for

why our developmental writing students do not visit our WC. What these statistics showed was that, while instructors and orientation leaders are informing students about the generalities of the Writing Center, EN 120 students were still unclear as to what the Writing Center can actually offer them; while developmental writing students know that the Writing Center is there, they do not know how such a service could help someone “like them.” Salem (2016) argues that, while we who work in writing centers may not advertise as being a remedial service, this mindset does not prevent other instructors, administrators, and peers from doing so, and the same mindset seems to be at play at John Carroll University. In short, the lack of awareness that students have about the services the Writing Center offers enforces my argument that students are less likely to visit the Writing Center because they see it as a remedial service, and they do not want to perpetuate that stereotype further in the minds of their “regular” peers.

I then asked the students how likely they would be to visit the Writing Center for their EN 120 class and for classes outside of EN 120. The question was similar to the question that was just discussed; the students were directed to choose a number on a scale of one to six. Two students did not answer these two questions, presumably because they did not realize that the survey had a back. That being said, out of the students who did answer these two questions, 81% scored above a three when asked if they would bring their work for EN 120 to the WC. The score was exactly the same (81%) when asked if they would bring in work from classes other than EN 120. Only one student recorded a one for both of these questions, saying that they were not very likely to visit the Writing Center for either EN 120 or their other coursework. Since Fall 2017 was the first semester of this project, we have no way of knowing if previous EN 120 classes would have

responded similarly. All in all, however, the results to these questions were promising in spite of our Writing Center's history of not seeing a high amount of EN 120/121 students walk through our doors. In spite of our Writing Center's averages, the results the EN 120 students provided on these initial surveys inspired me to think that we might see similar results to Wells (2016) and Salem (2016); namely, that their developmental writing and underprivileged students would flock to the writing center.

In addition to scoring whether or not they would visit the Writing Center, I also asked the students to explain these last two answers. The comments the students made began to show a pattern; many students identified the incentive of raising their grades as a particular motivation to visit the Writing Center. One student said that "I think my grades would be higher" after visiting the WC. Another student said that they "will need help for my papers to get good grades." A different student said "I want to get the best grades possible," and, because of that, they would be very likely to visit the Writing Center. However, another second pattern emerged in the comments; many students were quick to identify that they considered themselves poor writers. An undecided student said that "I'm not the best writer and want to improve my writing skills." An education major said that they would be likely to visit because "I am a weak [sic] writer and it will help me a lot [sic]." One student very candidly said they would visit "because I really suck at writing papers." While it was disheartening to read students so early in their academic journeys to be so quick to shame their writing ability, at times vehemently, these two developments also corroborated what I expected to see as I began the initiative.

Not only did these students' answers uphold the self-esteem issues developmental writing students commonly suffer from, their answers also explicitly showed evidence of

Dweck's (2017) Mindset Theory. More specifically, their answers displayed a developmental writer's tendency to inhabit a fixed mindset over a growth mindset. Instructors very commonly come across students with fixed mindsets in terms of skills like math and writing, and the EN 120 students upheld those expectations in the survey and later in our class visits during peer review. While two students said that they felt visiting the WC would help improve their skills, the word "improve" identifying a growth mindset, another student definitively said that they "sucked" at writing. However, even the students who made no mention of their writing ability also seemed to inhabit a fixed mindset by being focused on their grades. A student with a growth mindset will identify the work itself put into learning a skill as a benefit of the learning process. However, students with fixed mindsets will commonly be completely focused on their grades; since they do not see themselves as capable of actually learning something at which they perform poorly, they are primarily interested in receiving the highest grade they can in spite of this perceived poor performance. The EN 120 students initial surveys showed that the students in these classes were primarily motivated by higher grades rather than improved writing.

Fall 2017: In-Class Visits

The next step in the initiative involved bringing the Writing Center consultants to the classes, and through discussion with the EN 120 instructors, I decided to wait to bring Writing Center consultants into the classrooms for three reasons: one, all of these students were first semester freshmen, so I wanted to let them get a feel for a standard, instructor led peer review before we started the initiative. Two, I wanted to see if any of the students would seek out the Writing Center before any classroom interaction with

WC consultants. Three, most of the classes in our First Year Writing Program run relatively different, so I wanted to have a chance for the students to have at least one paper written, graded, and returned to them so that they had an idea of what to expect from their instructor in terms of college writing.

Out of the 23 total students across both EN 120 classes, 17 elected to give me permission to observe their mini-consultations and use their experience in this essay. I collected their WCRs and analyzed what the EN 120 students checked off as to what they were primarily concerned with in their papers. A pattern emerged with what the EN 120 and EN 125 courses were concerned with: 47% were concerned with following an assignment's criteria, the grammar and mechanics of their paper, and receiving help with brainstorming for ideas for their paper. A close second in the students' concern was in receiving general feedback on their draft; 41% of the students checked this box on their WCR. Considerably less EN 120 students were concerned with seeking help on their thesis or with the development or support of their thesis, with 24% concerned with their thesis and 17% concerned with the development and support of their argument. Again, these results only further solidified the fact that the EN 120 students inhabited a fixed mindset similarly to the students from Wenner and Palkovacs' (1997) study. The EN 120 students were primarily concerned with the aspects of their paper they believed would get them the higher grade; making sure they understood what the professor wanted from their assignment sheet and their grammar and mechanics. This is in comparison to what we would consider higher order concerns, being their thesis or argument and how they defend said argument—very few of the students were actually concerned with *what* they had to say, they were concerned with *how* they were saying it and if it was technically

correct. The one surprising element of these class visits was the concern with brainstorming; however, when compared to the EN 125 students in Fall 2017, considerably less EN 120 students actually came to the peer review with text to work on, so they were looking to brainstorm ideas for when they began their papers.

All 15 of the EN 125 students elected to participate in the initiative, and the answers on their WCRs displayed quite a different pattern in terms of what they were primarily concerned about in their papers. The EN 125 students were primarily concerned with the development and support of their argument, with 87% of the class checking it on their WCRs. The EN 125 students were also concerned with their organization/coherence/transitions (67%) and receiving general feedback on their draft (60%). The EN 125 students were less concerned with their use of grammar/mechanics (33% compared to the EN 120's 47%) and brainstorming ideas or development (less than 1% compared to the EN 120's 47%). These results were quite different from the EN 120 students because they show that the EN 125 students, for the most part, possessed a growth mindset in regards to their writing. Where the EN 120 students were concerned with *how* they were saying something, the EN 125 students were concerned with *what* they were saying. More specifically, the EN 125 students were concerned that they were accurately and comprehensively portraying their argument, and many of the EN 120 students were not concerned if they had an argument in the first place. Through their responses, the EN 125 students showed that they believed they could improve their papers through "good strategies," such as improving the development of their main points, and "instruction from others," namely, their Writing Center consultants (Haimovitz and Dweck, 2017, p. 1849). The EN 120 students, on the other hand, felt that

the actual content of their paper had reached capacity for how strong it could be and were primarily concerned with changing the surface level aspects.

Furthermore, discussions and emails that I had received from the consultants who visited the EN 120 and EN 125 classes validated some of the patterns I saw occurring in the students' WCRs. Following our EN 120 visits, I received emails from each of my consultants, and nearly every email discussed the fact that, in their written work, the EN 120 students were hesitant to include their own perspective even in terms of an argument and relied strictly on summary. One consultant mentioned that in her first EN 120 mini-consultation, the student "had cut her own thoughts very short," and during her second one, the student kept "cutting their thoughts short or summarizing." The consultants also repeatedly mentioned a lack of a thesis statement and how that seemed to contribute to the students' frustration with their writing. As this particular essay assignment related to interpreting a text and incorporating their own experiences in that interpretation, one consultant said "neither of the students had considered the relationship between their chosen texts and the prompt yet. I believe the disconnect occurred because they did not have arguments related to the essay assignment guiding their interpretation of the texts."

I participated as a consultant in one of our class visits to an EN 120 class, and the observations the consultants made following both sessions largely corroborated my own. One of my volunteers said that the students they worked with "basically had 'list summaries'--'this happened, then this happened, then this.'" In their writing, EN 120 students were very tentative in making any form of argument definitive statement other than summarizing. However, in discussion, I also noticed that the students were quite active. One consultant said that "the students in the EN 120 class seemed very eager to

work on their writing.” However, that eagerness to talk was a double-edged sword, as commonly, the first words out of the student’s mouth was that they were a poor writer. The student in my first mini-consultation mentioned that he “really wanted” to talk about grammar because he “absolutely sucked at it.”

The EN 120 students were very overt in criticizing themselves and their writing, more so than the EN 125 students. Similarly to Adler-Kassner (1999), the students never explicitly said “I am a poor writer and that’s why I’m in EN 120,” or even said anything that made reference that they knew there was a difference between EN 120 and EN 125. However, the EN 120 students were certainly aware of the fact that they saw themselves as bad writers, which translated into their concerns with what they wanted their Writing Center consultants to focus on in their mini-consultations. Furthermore, similarly to famous developmental writing scholars like Shaunassey (1976) and Bartholomae (1986), the students were quick to tell their Writing Center consultant that they were terrible writers and had nothing to say; in the grand scope of the academy with its renowned scholars and professors, what could they, a “bad writer,” have to add that could possibly be of any interest? Again, all of these responses corroborate Dweck’s (2017) Mindset Theory. All of these EN 120 students felt that they had reached their capacity in terms of writing. For them, this was as good as it was going to get, so it made no sense to focus on their argument or personal experience; no matter what their consultant did or said, the paper would still not improve.

The consultants who visited the EN 125 classroom noted that they were also quite eager to talk about their writing. One consultant mentioned that the students she worked with were “extremely eager and open to discussing their essays...and were very quick to

give their own insights and take questions I asked seriously.” Another consultant even mentioned that the energy in the EN 125 classroom was “really collaborative,” an interesting choice of words that I thought was notable, as the EN 125 classroom was certainly “louder,” for lack of a better term, than the EN 120 classrooms. The primary distinction between the two classes and the pattern that emerged was that both students from EN 120 and EN 125 are open to talk about their writing. However, similar to what they checked on their WCRs on what they were primarily concerned with, the students in EN 120 were more concerned with what we might call “lower order concerns” than the EN 125 students. Furthermore, the EN 125 students were quick to show that they inhabited a growth mindset, not just in their answers on the WCRs, but in their discussions as well. They were eager to get their consultants’ opinion on their papers and arguments, and less concerned about what they should say. They knew what they wanted to say, and now they just wanted to know how to improve it.

However, all of the concerns that this discussion raises are why I brought the Writing Center consultants into the classroom; while the consultants certainly discussed grammar when the issue or question arose, they also talked to the the EN 120 students about their ideas. One consultant said that they “asked the student their opinion of the prompt in relation to the plot [of the story].” Another consultant mentioned that “one of the students I worked with started off with five general bullet points, and bashfully admitting, ‘I’m not sure what to do so I don’t have much.’ After we talked through it, he left smiling, saying that the wanted to go write it all out, and that he ‘will definitely be going to the Writing Center because this was so helpful. Like...really helpful.’” In the end, the EN 120 students were able to gain a clearer understanding, not only of their

papers and the valid arguments they had and could write about in their papers, but a clearer understanding of what services the Writing Center could offer outside of being a remedial service for “bad writers.”

Spring 2018: In-Class Visits

The Spring 2018 semester was different in terms of what the students were primarily concerned with in their papers. Out of the total 27 students across both EN 121 courses, 22 elected to participate, and their concerns were much more diverse than the Fall 2017 semester which was strongly concentrated with grammar, instructions, and brainstorming. For the Spring Semester of 2018, 54% of students wished to receive general feedback on their drafts. However, their second highest concerns were focused on organization/coherence/ transitions, grammar and mechanics; and brainstorming, about which 31% of students were concerned. . While there was a change in students’ interest from the Fall semester, all of their strong concerns remained the same, they were just adjusted from first to second place. The EN 125 students experienced a greater change in interest; 67% noted that they were concerned with their usage of grammar and mechanics, and 58% marked that they were also concerned with their organization/coherence/transitions and wished to brainstorm/develop their ideas.

It was in the actual mini-consultations themselves where I saw the greatest amount of change and variability. As far as the EN 121 mini-consultations, the consultants seemed split on whether or not they felt that the consultations were productive. One consultant mentioned that the EN 121 student they worked with “thought he should have been in EN 125...his attitude toward the course was clearly holding him back.” One of the EN 121 assignments involved analyzing sources and evaluating

whether they were reputable or not. In terms of that assignment, a consultant mentioned that the students they worked with struggled with the assignment in terms of “distinguishing between summarizing the content of the sources as opposed to evaluating the sources themselves.” Another consultant mentioned a similar concern in their mini-consultations, and they spent their time talking about “the distinction between analysis and summary.” Again, from the Fall 2017 to Spring 2018 semester, the EN 121 students still primarily leaned on summary rather than argumentation; argumentation would mean actually putting a bit of themselves and their own perspective in their paper, something that they are not comfortable with.

However, another pattern emerged in this set of mini-consultations with the EN 121 classes; both groups mentioned that engaging the students in discussion on their writing was difficult. One consultant said “I felt like I had to push kind of hard to get the students moving. They didn’t have a lot to say, and while they weren’t reluctant to engage, exactly, it felt like they also didn’t have a lot of questions or want to go very in depth.” another consultant said that during one of his consultations, “it was clear that he was not interested in what I had to say. I tried to engage him in more of a [sic] outlining process, but he just nodded along.” This was a decidedly different reaction than our Spring 2018 mini-consultants with the EN 125 students. I had two consultants who visited both an EN 121 class and an EN 125 class and I asked them to reflect on the similarities and differences between interacting with both groups of students. One consultant mentioned “[The EN 125 mini-consultations] did feel a little different from the EN 120 [sic] class. The students felt a little more interested and open in the consultations...the energy felt different. I also felt like I wasn’t scrambling for something

to say as much; it was easier for me to identify areas to help the students.” I chatted with another consultant who had been to both classes after visiting the EN 125 class, and they mentioned that the EN 125 students were “more open to talking about writing” whereas the consultant felt that the EN 121 students were more likely to say “tell me what to write.”

Despite the changes in answers on the EN 121 and EN 125 students’ WCRs, there was either no change or a negative change in how the EN 121 students actually engaged with their writing. Whereas the EN 120 students in the Fall 2017 semester still exhibited the same writing anxiety that Shaunnasey (1976) and Bartholomae (1986) discuss in their research, they were still open to discussing their writing, even if it was just the grammar. However, even the the EN 121 students in the Spring 2018 semester were largely the same students, they became much more closed off to discussing their writing, and at times were even resentful of their label as an EN 121 student. In other words, while the students in EN 120 in the Fall semester seemd to display Adler-Kassner’s (1999) own experiences with developmental writers where they are, for the most part, unaware of the negative classification, the students in EN 121 in the Spring semester display the opposite. They were now aware of the negative baggage that comes with being in a class like EN 120/121 and they resented it. It is unclear why that change occurred. However, I would argue that this returns us to Wenner and Palkovacs’ (1997) research once again. While the EN 120/121 students were relatively unsure of their place at JCU during their first semester on campus, the two year student mentality is only exacerbated through their first semester on a four year campus. The students now know that they are classified as

“bonehead English” students, making them either more resentful or more reluctant to engage with their writing.

Results: Did Developmental Writing Students Visit the Writing Center?

Fall 2017 Semester

In the end, the primary concern with this project was to try to get developmental writing students through the door and give them a broader understanding of the kind of services that the Writing Center provides while also attempting to decipher why these students did not want to visit in the first place. When I asked the students to consider their experiences during the mini-consultations, everyone who replied to the survey rated their experience a seven or above. However, when asked I asked the EN 120 students if they sought help from the Writing Center at any point later in the semester, every EN 120 student who responded to the survey said “no.” One respondent rated the mini-consultation experience as a nine out of ten and said that “[the experience] was very helpful to me and showed me a lot.” However, when asked if they visited the Writing Center later, that same student said no, citing that they “just did not have the time.” Another EN 120 student also rated the experience a nine out of ten, but said that “I was going to plan visit center during the semester, but I was busy doing my major homework which was a complete waste of time. which lead a difficult time for preparing making drafts to make my writing clear and fluent...later in next semester, I’m going to start to visit more often in the writing center.” An EN 125 student also rated their experience as a 9 because “it helped me realize what I needed to fix in my essay and gave me a clear idea of how to go about this.” However, they also said that they would have sought out the Writing Center even if it were not required, because “I also wanted to go to ensure that

my essay was meeting all the standards. It really helped me feel more confident about making my ideas clearer.” The EN 125 students who visited the Writing Center for their required visit said that they would visit the WC again for future papers.

As I tracked the students’ visits to the Writing Center, I found that 14 out of the 15 EN 125 students visited the Writing Center. Since the EN 125 students had a mandatory requirement in place by their instructor that they visit the Writing Center at least once by the the end of the semester, I was primarily looking to see if the in-class initiative had any affect on *when* the EN 125 students chose to visit the Writing Center. More specifically, I was looking to see if the EN 125 students chose to visit the Writing Center after our in-class visits. In the Fall 2017 semester, the EN 120 courses had no required visit over the semester. All in all, 12 students from the three classes involved in the initiative visited the Writing Center, and out of those 12, 25% were from the EN 120 classes, presumably students who had not filled out the final survey. While the students from EN 120 had a higher return rate of visiting the Writing Center, the EN 125 students had a higher correlation between what assignments they wanted to work on and why they were visiting the Writing Center. For example, the students from EN 120 all visited the Writing Center at least twice throughout the semester; one EN 120 student even visited five times. However, their visits had no correlation with the Writing Center in-class initiative, and it is unclear whether they were visiting specifically for EN 120 or for their other classes. The students from EN 125, however, primarily chose to visit the Writing Center to work on the assignment that they discussed during their in-class consultation. Out of the 75% of EN 125 students that came to the Writing Center, 56% of them chose

to work on their research paper and continue discussing the topics they had with their in-class consultant.

Spring 2018 Semester

The EN 121 and EN 125 students also received a survey for the Spring 2018 semester, and I also tracked their visits to the Writing Center. There was one difference between the EN 125 classes we visited between the Fall and Spring semesters; the students in the EN 125 class of the Spring 2018 semester only had to visit the Writing Center for their research paper, which was the third assignment; the Writing Center consultants and I visited their class for their second assignment, so I was primarily looking to see if our class visit encouraged the EN 125 students to visit for their second assignment rather than the third.

Similarly to the Fall 2017 semester, the students who responded to the final survey also rated the in-class consultations highly, as there were no scores beneath a five. However, when asked if they had visited the Writing Center following their experiences with the in-class consultations, 50% of the EN 121 respondents said that they would not, citing that they “did not have the time.” Furthermore, after looking through the WCRs for the Spring 2018 semester, the students who did choose to visit the Writing Center following our in-class visits were from EN 125. 15 students from the three classes involved in this study visited the Writing Center following our in-class visits; out of those 15 students, 20% were from an EN 121 course; the remaining 80% were all students in the EN 125 class. Additionally, out of the 80% of EN 125 students that visited, 42% chose to visit to work specifically on the assignment the consultants visited the classroom for. The other EN 125 students who visited the Writing Center either visited before this

initiative or visited for the required appointment for the third class assignment. There was no correlation between the 20% of EN 121 students who visited and the Writing Center's class visit.

Conclusion

The results of this study show that many EN 120/121 students at John Carroll University suffer from a fixed mindset. The fact that EN 125 students chose to visit the Writing Center an additional time outside of their mandatory visit for their next assignment further displays the growth mindset that the EN 125 students hold. Following their experience with the Writing Center class visit, the EN 125 students felt there was more that could be worked on within their papers, and more importantly, there was more they could learn in order to strengthen their work. Combining the EN 121 students' reactions towards their writing abilities during the Writing Center class visits and the fact that they chose not to visit the Writing Center is unsurprising. While this may not corroborate Wells (2016) and Salem's (2016) statistics, these results do corroborate the notion that developmental writers at John Carroll University avoid the Writing Center because they inhabit a fixed mindset over a growth mindset similar to the peers in EN 125.

So what does all of this mean for First Year Writing at John Carroll University? There is little that we as administrators and teachers can do to change our incoming students' mindset before they get to us; that is another much larger discussion for high schools across the country. However, we certainly have the opportunity to affect and change our developmental writers perceptions of themselves while they are here. So this conclusion, more than anything else, is a call to action. While implementing a mandatory

Writing Center requirement in the EN 120/121 classrooms may be one solution, such a solution would merely function as a bandaid fix and would not uncover why developmental writing students are uncomfortable visiting the Writing Center in the first place. As a university, we should see the importance in recognizing our at-risk students, especially since John Carroll University is a largely traditional campus, and attempt to understand why our at-risk students choose not to take advantage of campus services. As instructors, we tell our students that they will use writing in any career they choose as they continue their academic journey for the next four years at JCU, and for them to see that benefit and see their writing improve, we need to invest our time and attention in our developmental writers.

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Appendix A
Preliminary Survey for EN 120 Courses

Writing Center Survey

MAJOR: _____

Instructions: Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey! Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability. All responses answers will be kept anonymous.

1) Did you have a writing center or writing lab at your high school?

YES NO

2) Did you use your high school's center or lab?

YES NO

3) Why or why not?

4) Did your classes in high school use peer review in the classroom?

YES NO

5) If so, how effective were these sessions?

NOT VERY EFFECTIVE 1 2 3 4 5 6 VERY EFFECTIVE

6) Have you heard about JCU's Writing Center?

YES NO

7) If so, from who?

PROFESSOR ORIENTATION LEADER

CLASSMATE RA/ACADEMIC ADVISOR

OTHER

8) How familiar are you with JCU's Writing center services?

NOT VERY FAMILIAR 1 2 3 4 5 6 VERY FAMILIAR

9) How likely are you to visit the Writing Center for your EN 120 class? (If you have already visited the Writing Center for EN 120, please answer "6" and explain your answer below).

NOT VERY LIKELY 1 2 3 4 5 6 VERY LIKELY

10) How likely are you to visit the Writing Center for a class other than EN 120? (If you have already visited the Writing Center for EN 120, please answer "6" and explain your answer below).

NOT VERY LIKELY 1 2 3 4 5 6 VERY LIKELY

10) Depending on your last two answers, why or why not?

Appendix B
Modified Writing Consultation Record (WCR)

Writing Consultation Record

Date: _____

Major: _____

Year in School (circle): Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior Masters
Other

Is English your first language? Y N

Assignment Due Date: _____

Instructor: _____

What kind of project are you working on (research paper, persuasive essay, lab report, etc.)?

What would you like to focus on during this session (select a *maximum* of 3)?

- An assignment's instructions/criteria
- Choosing or focusing a topic/thesis
- Check development/support
- Check organization/coherence/transitions
- Check grammar/spelling/mechanics
- Check research/documentation
- Get general feedback on a draft
- Brainstorm ideas/development
- Other (please describe)

Appendix C
Post-Class Visit Survey

Writing Center Survey

MAJOR: _____

Instructions: Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey! Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability. All answers will be kept anonymous.

- 1) On a scale of one to six, how effective was your experience with the in class peer review lead by the Writing Center consultants?

NOT VERY EFFECTIVE 1 2 3 4 5 6 VERY EFFECTIVE

- 2) In a few words, explain why or why not this experience was effective:

- 3) Did you visit the Writing Center following your experience with writing consultant in class peer review?

YES

NO

- 4) In a few words, explain your decision to visit (or not visit) the campus Writing Center:

The following questions apply *only* if you visited the Writing Center for any class following the WC/in class peer review:

- 5) On a scale of one to six, how effective was your appointment in the Writing Center?

NOT VERY EFFECTIVE 1 2 3 4 5 6 VERY EFFECTIVE

6) In a few words, explain why or why not this experience was effective:

7) Would you visit the Writing Center again?

YES

NO

8) Why or why not?