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TRANSITIONING TO AN ONLINE WRITING CENTER: ENCOURAGING INCLUSIVITY AND ACCESSIBILITY THROUGHOUT THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND BEYOND

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TRANSITIONING TO AN ONLINE WRITING CENTER:
ENCOURAGING INCLUSIVITY AND ACCESSIBILITY
THROUGHOUT THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND BEYOND

An Essay Submitted to the
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By
Kennedy M. Westfall
2021

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic affected nearly every aspect of academic life since lockdown began in the United States in March of 2020. Faculty and staff at John Carroll University (JCU), for instance, worked tirelessly to restructure more traditional, in-person teaching styles due to the shutdown of campus and conversion to an online-only university. The work to restructure methods of writing instruction was no different, as first-year writing teachers also scrambled to adapt their in-person classrooms to new online realities. Indeed, so much of teaching writing requires personal contact and immediate face-to-face discussion—aspects of teaching and learning made much more difficult by working remotely. Remote learning altered face-to-face instruction in JCU’s Writing Center; instruction underwent many changes because face-to-face consultations have ceased since the advent of the pandemic, and as a result, these consultations must now rely on new strategies derived from remote learning to effectively assist students with their writing skills.

Before the pandemic, most writing center consultations at JCU took place face-to-face within a physical space on campus. Similarly, most writing centers across the country privileged face-to-face consultations over online interactions, so JCU’s standard method of tutoring was no different from most writing centers. This privileging of face-to-face consultations goes as far back as the pioneering writing center work by such scholars as Stephen North and Jeff Brooks, whose early work on writing centers in the 1980s favor face-to-face learning styles and have perpetuated face-to-face practices for decades. In his 1984 essay, “The Idea of a Writing Center,” North explains that a writing center should serve as a place for students to learn more effective writing strategies, focusing on the process of writing over the final product of a piece of writing. Likewise, Brooks argues in his essay, “Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Students Do

All the Work,” that various methods for face-to-face interactions define the effectiveness of a writing consultation. Based on the pioneering work of North and Brooks, face-to-face settings persist as the most common form of communication for writing tutors and students at various universities and colleges across the country. In the process, the field has privileged face-to-face settings over online settings, leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic.

John Carroll’s Writing Center is no different. The daily operations of the writing center, and the training students receive to become consultants, were all based on face-to-face encounters prior to the pandemic. Student writers could schedule appointments in advance or choose to walk-in for consultations by providing various information: their class (G, SR, JR, SO, FR), their written assignment or concerns for the assignment, or any accommodations the students might need, like a Reduced Distraction Environment that JCU’s Writing Center offers on campus. In the center, a staff of at least two or three trained undergraduate and graduate level consultants were on staff and ready to help their peers. These students, before becoming employees of the Writing Center, also enroll in EN 290: Tutoring Across Contexts, a 3-hour course in writing center history and pedagogy. In this course, students learn how to apply writing center theory and practice to consulting students at JCU. After completion of the course, the students earn the opportunity to work at JCU’s Writing Center, where they are referred to as “consultants,” rather than tutors because of the belief that the term “tutor” offers the connotation of “teacher.” Alternatively, the term consultant offers the connotation of a skilled peer who focuses on dialogue and working *with* the writer, rather than *for* them. Many writing center scholars use these terms interchangeably, but the most prevalent term in the field is “tutor,” regardless of perceived connotation, since students are expected to assist other students. In EN 290, then, students discuss effective practices for writers across the university by reviewing key

readings, working with sample texts, and listening to guest speakers who are well-versed in particular sub-fields within writing center studies. Furthermore, students engage with and work alongside trained consultants in a practicum throughout their course to learn best practices during consultations and, most importantly, become prepared and confident in leading their own consultations.

Therefore, writing consultants at JCU are expected to understand the nature of the writing process, along with how to work with a variety of students in multiple specific and complex writing situations. With these situations in mind, the consultants gain a deeper understanding of communication and how to establish a relationship with the students that they work with during a consultation. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the course focused primarily on interacting in a face-to-face setting, because at JCU, the Writing Center contains enough room with a specific design to accommodate three separate sessions at once. In short, consultants learn best practices and approaches for a more traditional setting—much of the dialogue regarding writing centers focuses on this face-to-face operation.

This recent focus on remote learning has suggested that online consultations, for both neurotypical students and for students with disabilities, can be a highly effective method of working with students on their writing. Although some contributions to writing center scholarship discuss the importance of online consultations, such as Beth Hewitt's *The Online Writing Conference: A Guide for Teachers and Tutors*, the field lacks a comprehensive analysis of its importance regarding accessibility and inclusivity. Almost all of this research, dated prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, argues that reliance on web-based technology would make writing center work less inclusive because it lacks physical interaction and communication. In reality, this shift to more online consultations actually led to increased inclusivity and accommodations

for some students, especially for those with disabilities. Similarly, in her article, “Learning Disabilities and the Writing Center,” Julie Neff offers explanations of and methods for working with students with disabilities but does not address the online aspects of tutoring—an intersection that goes largely unaddressed in most writing center scholarship. However, JCU students both with and without disabilities have found that adaptations from face-to-face consultations to remote interactions have allowed for stronger connections with consultants, as well as improvement in their writing, without being limited to a confined physical space.

This essay argues that, counter to what others have said about the limitations of remote learning, online consultations provide students with access to the writing center in ways that were not available prior to the pandemic, such as meeting remotely or sharing an assignment for asynchronous review. Therefore, writing centers across the country should acknowledge these benefits throughout the inevitable shift back to “normal” methods of instruction post-pandemic. To make this argument, I first briefly trace the history of face-to-face writing centers and examine why this type of consultation persists as so common and resistant to change in format. Then, I draw from scholarship that focuses on online writing center consultations to show how the field’s negative assessment toward online centers prevented further growth of the field, specifically in accepting and implementing online consultations. Finally, I gather and present information from a survey of students that visited the JCU writing center during the months of March to December of 2020 to demonstrate the wide variety of student perspectives and experiences in an online-only setting. These student voices show that once the reality of the pandemic asserted itself, writing center directors, including JCU’s, realized there was no choice but to convert to online-only appointments. This survey outlines both positives and negatives of an online writing center, but also demonstrates why writing center directors should continue with

online tutoring opportunities through a hybrid model of in-person and online tutoring even after the eventual end of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Understanding Writing Center History

Focusing on the future of writing centers calls for a review of the history; without acknowledging the past, moving forward in accessibility measures cannot effectively occur. According to Melissa Ianetta and Lauren Fitzgerald, in their overview for *The Oxford Guide For Writing Tutors*, writing centers have sustained significant development and progress since the early 2000's by focusing on the type of discussions that take place in a face-to-face setting, on how body language plays a role in tutoring sessions, and on how tutors should interact and engage with student writing, among other issues. However, these pervading ideas regarding the necessity of face-to-face interactions have also led to a mindset that resists change, especially within an online atmosphere. Based on this resistance, and since most of writing center discourse and history centers on face-to-face interaction, most writing center directors persist with a mentality of “if it’s not broken, don’t fix it” and continue to privilege face-to-face consultations. By reviewing the fundamental writing center scholarship, I demonstrate the problematic nature of this mindset, specifically during the pandemic in 2020, and why more focus should be placed on research for effective online consulting strategies, especially when considering accessibility issues for those with physical or learning disabilities.

Student tutors in writing centers, prior to the pandemic, became familiar with and accustomed to the expectations of an in-person writing center. Without a need for online centers, not many writing center scholars pursued the research—especially because many of the ideas that define the field came into focus before the internet became so heavily involved in daily

learning. North's "The Idea of a Writing Center" offers some of these ideas that have been perpetuated in writing center scholarship. In his article, North addresses his colleagues—most importantly, he focuses on a discussion with "those not involved with writing centers" at all (433). North explains that many people might believe that the writing center is "a fix-it shop," where students can receive editing work on their papers; this stands as a concern both in a face-to-face setting and an online setting (435). Rather than perpetuating these assumptions, North defines the primary goal of writing centers, which persists to this day: writing center tutors work to help improve the writer, not necessarily focus on a particular assignment. In doing so, writing center consultants hope to guide students in the process of writing and help form students that can effectively argue and discuss a topic of interest across the university. The goal for writing centers is that student writers leave the center taking knowledge with them that they can apply in future writing scenarios. North's article contributes to concerns about online settings because these ideas proved pertinent since publication—reinforcing that writing centers are not "fix-it shops" can become more difficult in an online setting. However, consultants must learn the ability to handle multiple types of situations or contexts for writing during their training period, and should be able to help students at any stage in the writing process; all stages stand as important in overall learning and comprehension. To effectively communicate these goals, consultants must learn how to engage with the student writers and encourage their growth, regardless of the setting where the consultation takes place.

To accomplish such a task, and to reinforce the goal of focusing on writers, Jeff Brooks' 1991 essay "Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work" remained paramount prior to the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, despite the publication date. Brooks explains how tutors "need to make the student the primary agent in the writing center session. The

student, not the tutor, should ‘own’ the paper and take full responsibility for it. The tutor should take on a secondary role, serving mainly to keep the student focused on his own writing” (Brooks 169). This concept should be kept in mind because this belief shifts responsibility onto the student—Brooks believes that the student must remain fully and visibly invested, in any type of tutoring scenario, to actually understand suggestions that might arise from the consultant. Therefore, Brooks outlines the various types of what he labels “minimalist tutoring,” including basic, advanced, and defensive methods. Basic minimalist tutoring primarily focuses on body language and how to encourage student involvement. In basic minimalist tutoring, the tutor should sit “beside the student” and seem to be “an outsider, looking over [the student’s] shoulder,” encouraging the student’s agency as the primary author of the work (169). He believes that this method of sitting next to the student reinforces a sense of comfort rather than intimidation. Face-to-face sessions encourage these behaviors; in an online setting, this type of interaction cannot occur. Similarly, advanced minimalist tutoring focuses on the actual interactions with the student (170). Discussion itself, and most importantly, the tutor asking the student open-ended questions, helps students to think more deeply about their work and their intention with the assignment, which applies in both face-to-face and online settings.

Further, and more problematically, Brooks determines that certain students force the tutor into a role of editor and warns tutors not to “underestimate the abilities of these students; they will fatigue [the tutors] into submission if they can;” thus, he advises tutors to use defensive minimalist tutoring by mimicking the students body language and responding in a way that reverts the issue back on the student (172). This ideology and application of minimalist tutoring can be helpful in situations with students who behave “uncooperatively” in a face-to-face scenario, or with students who have the expectation that the writing center is a “fix-it shop”

(172). These situations do occur from time to time; however, consultants should then explain the overall goal of working on the process of writing rather than focusing on the final product for a particular assignment. Even so, this behavior can become problematic in certain situations, especially for students with disabilities. For example, consultants might perceive a student as being disconnected or uninvested, but might not realize that students could be dealing with a mental health issue or type of disability that makes both verbal and non-verbal communication difficult.

To offer Brooks the benefit of the doubt, awareness of these issues might not have been as prevalent in 1991, but the benefit does not negate the idea that all students who act differently should be labelled as uncooperative. Brooks initially created this concept as a discussion point, rather than a field-defining text in writing center studies, but the latter took precedence, and this article helped to guide tutor training for the past 30 years. With these characteristics in mind, conversion to an online writing center becomes difficult. The methods of minimalist tutoring are no longer plausible when working completely online, or even in-person while maintaining proper social distancing guidelines. This calls for a reexamination of how to tutor and reinforce the student's role, specifically in asynchronous appointments. Considering the age of the article, Brooks makes important suggestions; 30 years later, those training new writing tutors may want to rethink the use of this article, especially in a hybrid model of tutoring. One cannot employ these methods of minimalist tutoring when working online in their own personal environment, or with students with disabilities and, therefore, must be taught new methods of successful interaction.

Literature Review

Much of what student tutors learn in a training course for working in a writing center comes from this foundational scholarship, as well as the works that built on it. Although the articles remained effective for many years, the onset of online requirements at the hands of the pandemic emphasized that these methods of tutoring cannot remain as effective. This calls to question how much scholarship on online writing centers existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic—in short, resources do exist on the topic. However, based on the preference for face-to-face consultations, writing center scholars have not dedicated enough attention to online options, especially when considering inclusivity and accessibility for students with various disabilities.

Focusing on Integrating Online Tutoring

More recently, writing center scholarship has focused on the role of online tutoring opportunities. For instance, *The St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors*, published in 2008 and edited by Christina Murphy and Steve Sherwood, offers explanations about the role of a writing center tutor and information regarding writing center history. The sourcebook includes three parts: Part I, written by the authors focused on “The Tutoring Process;” Part II, which includes essays from writing center professionals; and Part III, which outlines resources for further information. A section within Part I, labelled “Tutoring Online,” focuses primarily on challenges and ethical concerns regarding online consultations. In defining working online, the authors state: “the interaction consists of exchanges of e-mail text messages—disembodied language—with the accompanying danger of misinterpretation,” (Murphy and Sherwood 22). This language—primarily the use of words like disembodied, danger, and misinterpretation—

implies a negative connotation that would consciously make anyone working in a writing center uninterested in attempting to conduct online consultations, further explaining why so many writing center directors looked down upon the use of online platforms for so many years. The authors also acknowledge positives about an online writing center, but immediately follow the positive ideology with even more concern, specifically, “ethical concerns about whether an online tutor, unable to engage in a timely dialogue, might simply revise student writers’ papers, making [the online writing lab] a drop-off editing service” (23). While this is a completely valid matter, the remark about ethics in particular immediately raises a red flag in the minds of writing center tutors and directors: why create a possible ethical dilemma when the system that has worked for so long still works? The history documented thus far, including ethical concerns from Murphy and Sherwood, indicates why the “if it isn’t broken, don’t fix it” mindset has persisted throughout writing center history and prevented outreach into online territories.

Further, Murphy and Sherwood’s section on online tutoring refers to articles written in the 1990’s and early 2000’s in spite of significant technological progress since then, and even more reliance on technology has been established since the beginning of the pandemic. To give credit where due, the authors acknowledge that digital technology was becoming more relevant in an academic setting but obviously lack the foresight to see how important technology really would become in the 10+ years to follow. Even the language used indicates the chapter’s outdated nature—the authors express that “if both tutor and writer are experienced computer users, accustomed to chatting online, such ‘emoticons’ as wink or smile symbols can replace some of the interpersonal features of face-to-face tutorials” (24). Terms like “emoticon” have been phased out and replaced with “emoji,” and almost everyone in the university setting in the 2020’s feels completely familiar with and comfortable using a computer. Although the authors

could not have anticipated the quick rise of reliance on technology, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, the language and content regarding possible online consultations needs improvement while updating the guides that still teach writing tutors to this day.

The most comprehensive guide for online writing instruction for tutors to date is *The Online Writing Conference: A Guide for Teachers and Tutors* by Beth L. Hewitt. Including eight separate chapters, the text guides both teachers and tutors through the most effective practices for tutoring online. Published in 2015, this comprehensive and helpful guide contains outdated language regarding technology, but regardless, serves as a basis for how to understand online writing centers today. Early in the text, Hewitt acknowledges an important idea regarding online tutoring, specifically for writing centers. She explains that “the literature tends to focus on how online interactions should mirror the most popular of onsite tutoring practices, and tutoring online typically has been linked to an occasionally necessary but substandard method for reaching students who cannot get to the brick-and-mortar (onsite) writing center” (Hewitt 2). Her explanation reinforces the debates of earlier writing center focused publications—how to effectively tutor writing without being in a face-to-face setting. This explains why the types of appointments offered online becomes important. Throughout the history of writing center dialogue and research as discussed, the face-to-face consultations stand as the consistent point of comparison for any type of online appointment.

Hewitt notes that two types of online conferences exist: synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous conferences, though unable to completely replicate face-to-face consultations, allow for immediate interaction between the student and the tutor. These synchronous sessions, Hewitt argues, seem more desirable to writing center tutors because they allow for the direct communication of questions and discussion topics regarding the writing process. Synchronous

video conferences allow for verbal affirmation, but also, nonverbal communication in terms of facial expressions and demonstration of engagement. Synchronous appointments allow student writers the same encouragement and discussion that they would attain in a face-to-face consultation without being together in a physical space. Providing a setting where students can immediately interact with a writing consultant offers access because students do not have to travel to campus to gain assistance with their writing, and they can choose to work in an environment most conducive to their own learning—these opportunities were not available when writing centers offered only face-to-face consultations.

Hewitt also notes that, on the other hand, asynchronous writing conferences allow students to submit their writing drafts via a web-based service or sharing a Microsoft Word document via email. She shows how consultants take the time to go through the document and leave in-text suggestions and comments that the student can then read later and use when making the appropriate revisions to their draft in their own time. Conversation does not take place in a traditional manner, and questions that the tutor might ask for clarification cannot be answered right away. She explains that writing center tutors can struggle in terms of wanting communication to feel similar to a face-to-face conference and feeling a lack of interaction; therefore, Hewitt wrote a chapter titled “Why Online Conferencing is Hard to do Well,” where she addresses the issues present with asynchronous sessions.

Although this project places more focus on the necessity of online appointments as an option for students beyond their immediate necessity during the COVID-19 pandemic, these concerns, in time, need to be addressed on a large scale within academic discourse. Hewitt explains that “quite often online conferences are asynchronous, which can give the appearance of being somewhat one-sided, hardly a conference at all. Yet whether asynchronous or

synchronous, there are always at least two participants struggling to communicate about an activity that feels of great consequence” (21). Hewitt argues her point well—regardless of format, the activity of writing feels of great consequence, because it *is* of great consequence for students. Tutors working independently to help students by leaving comments on a document means that the session is “removed from the oral nature of talk and the spontaneity of synchronous interactions because they occur over a longer, less immediate period, with unspecified time gaps between the participants’ speaking (writing) and listening (reading)” (27). Because writing feels of great consequence, tutors must learn productive practices to work with students successfully in any online setting, and with any student. Asynchronous appointments might be difficult, as Hewitt explains, but a lack of research or scholarship on the topic prevents the creation of effective strategies to make the appointments seem more manageable.

In addition to offering a comprehensive collection of information for preparing writing tutors, *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors*, by Melissa Ianetta and Lauren Fitzgerald, includes a chapter on “New Media and Online Tutoring.” Published in 2016, the chapter offers essential information and tips for navigating an online tutoring session. Ianetta and Fitzgerald reiterate Hewitt’s most important points, offer a definition of various types of online tutoring and, overall, discuss online options for writing centers in a more positive way. Hewitt’s work proves paramount in this sense—becoming adaptable demonstrates progress in terms of accessibility and opportunity for tutors and students. The authors explain that “the great advantage of online tutoring...is that it provides more opportunities for tutoring to a broader and more diverse range of clientele—including people who aren’t on campus because of work or family obligations or people who do better working with a tutor online and face-to-face, perhaps because of learning styles or certain disabilities” (Ianetta and Fitzgerald 167). Instead of beginning the chapter with

the negatives of online consultations, the authors offer positives first, which creates a more accepting mindset for the reader. The authors also demonstrate through this statement that instead of viewing these sessions as sub-par in comparison to face-to-face sessions, they can stand as *more* helpful in many instances. In a subsection titled “Advantages of Online Tutoring,” the authors detail why access becomes so important, especially considering how students can always refer to notes and comments from the sessions, or even a recording of the session—these opportunities are not always present in a face-to-face session. Ianetta and Fitzgerald also offer a discussion about the possible disadvantages, such as unintentional “limits on the information that can be shared between tutor and writer. Consequently, the writer might not be able to fully articulate what she needs help with, and the tutor might not know for sure whether the writer understands his questions or suggestions” (178). Reiterating these issues, more information about how to communicate effectively should be established to help tutors and students alike in navigating these difficult encounters.

The most influential factor of the research here that addresses online writing center consultations remains clear: the focus and intention of this research points out that technology evolves and becomes increasingly relevant as time continues. However, no one could anticipate a global pandemic that forced a shift to technology becoming the sole mode of writing instruction. The primary goal should be to consider how these sudden shifts have lasting impacts, especially for working online in the future and, in particular, for students with disabilities.

Students with Disabilities and Writing Centers

While considering members of a learning community with disabilities, visible or invisible, Julie Neff's article "Learning Disabilities and the Writing Center" remains a significant piece of scholarship within the discussion of tutoring writing with students with disabilities. Beyond Neff's article, little research has been published regarding both writing centers and disabilities in conjunction—especially when it comes to invisible disabilities—demonstrating a lack of awareness and acknowledgement of these issues.

Without more scholarship on the topic, Neff's ideas must be transferrable when considering accessibility in an online platform. She acknowledges that "though their particular disabilities vary, these students need a different, more specific kind of collaboration than the average student who walks through the doors of the writing center" (Neff 237-8). Although students can, and often do, have significant interactions with a tutor in a face-to-face or synchronous session of tutoring—thanks to the immediacy of discussion and the establishment of a working relationship—for students with various mental health issues or disabilities, this sense of distance can become a crucial factor in attending a writing center consultation. Students with autism, ADHD, severe depression or anxiety, or any other possible mental illnesses or physical disabilities, are not required to disclose any disability they may have to anyone. Offering accommodations without knowledge of these various issues becomes the responsibility of those both leading and working in a writing center.

Even though consultants may not be educated on various types of disability, they do receive the training necessary to be able to change the method of instruction or course of a session to help students that might need it. Even the Conference on College Composition and Communication, the major professional conference in writing studies, expresses that their

primary principle for Online Writing Instruction revolves around inclusivity and accessibility. This principle takes precedence because it connects to every other principle, and “the needs of learners with physical disabilities, learning disabilities, multilingual backgrounds, and learning challenges related to socioeconomic issues (i.e., often called the digital divide where access is the primary issue) must be addressed in an OWI environment to the maximum degree possible for the given institutional setting” (Position Statement). If online writing instruction should be inclusive and accessible according to this national conference, then each writing center, and writing center tutor, should make this a top priority moving forward, whether in person or online, or both. Therefore, empathy and understanding are important qualities in a writing tutor—they can offer support to students in different ways. Writing tutors have the opportunity to help normalize students with disabilities by being flexible in conversation and methods of offering assistance, along with recognizing that learning or physical disabilities do not impede the efforts or intention of any writer.

Being able to shift the focus of a session or explain a suggestion in multiple ways becomes important because, as Neff explains, “although many people overcome their learning disabilities, they do so by learning coping strategies and alternate routes for solving problems. People with learning disabilities cannot be ‘cured.’ However, with help, those with learning disabilities can learn to use their strength to compensate for their weaknesses” (238). Considering that learning disabilities can affect so much of the process of gaining an education, the need for inclusivity and accessibility proves immense. For example, if a student who has a cognitive processing disability, or a student who struggles with executive dysfunction, is asked what *they* want to work on, they might not be able to answer that question; some students come

for help in writing centers for this reason—they seek guidance in setting and following an agenda while working in a method effective for their learning needs.

Overall, most of the recent scholarship on students with disabilities does not integrate a discussion of how online tutoring offers different methods of access; therefore, the question persists as to whether the directors of writing centers will choose to continue with the options of online sessions following the eventual end of the pandemic. Synchronous and asynchronous consultations should remain an option because they will allow for students who feel uncomfortable participating in a face-to-face session—for any reason—to learn effective writing practices. For the foreseeable future, these more intimate interactions do not seem like a probable thought; therefore, methods of online consultations must remain relevant in writing center discourse. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected so much, the pandemic will also have helped to change writing centers for the better. Online writing center consultations allow for inclusivity and further accommodations that allow for a more successful session of tutoring writing for those who need it—however, only students can determine the effectiveness of such sessions.

Methodology: Preparation of the Student Survey

To help me learn more about how students responded to the transition to an entirely online writing center, and how online writing centers can offer opportunities for access, I designed a student survey that traces student experiences and how they felt about their writing center visits, whether synchronous or asynchronous. With the awareness that only student writers can determine the effectiveness and importance of offering online tutoring, I created a survey to document what students noticed and believed about their experiences working in an

online setting in comparison to their experiences with consultations in the writing center in a face-to-face setting.

Since the Writing Center at John Carroll University uses Google Forms as a means for students to request appointments and detail their specific requests, the Writing Center has direct access to a spreadsheet of all the students who requested appointments from the beginning of lockdown to the present. However, for the sake of this research, I chose to send a survey, through Google Forms, to JCU students who requested appointments from the switch to an online format at the beginning of March 2020 until the end of the fall semester in December 2020. Surveying these students in particular, all from multiple disciplines and years of experience at JCU, allows me to trace their insight and find out their opinions on the shift to a completely online writing center.

I hoped to discover that students found JCU's Writing Center more accessible in an online setting, as compared to the writing center scholarship that perpetuated negative perspectives on the online setting for so many years. Therefore, I plan to address whether the prior negative assumptions of what online tutoring constitutes, and whether these assumptions proved to be true or false in a real-world application based on the survey responses. Further, I will be able to note whether the shift allowed for more accommodations for students with disabilities. Considering the sensitivities that often accompany learning disabilities, I ensured the students through the consent agreement that their responses would remain confidential, and through Google Forms, their responses were completely anonymous.

The first section of the survey (Appendix A) listed questions and answers regarding the switch from an in-person writing center to a completely online one. I intentionally made the questions broad to allow students to feel more comfortable answering in a direct manner. This

section asked questions regarding student use of the Writing Center prior to the conversion to an online-only setting, to gauge whether the answers to the following questions would be based on prior experience with an in-person writing center or solely based on experiences online, mostly for first-year students who have not yet had the opportunity to attend a writing center consultation in a face-to-face setting. The second section of the survey (Appendix B) focuses on the types of writing center consultations that students desire and why. The final question of this section asked: “Do you have a diagnosed learning or physical disability that has affected your experience in the Writing Center?” If the student selected “No” or “I prefer not to disclose,” the survey was complete. However, if the student answered “Yes,” they were directed to the third and closing section (Appendix C), which focused primarily on students with disabilities. The responses to these questions were left completely open-ended so that students could determine what they preferred to share or keep private.

I created the series of questions to gain a deeper understanding of the student perspective at JCU. Based on my experiences as a graduate assistant working as both a student and a professor, I have personally witnessed both positives and negatives of working completely online. Even so, students each have their own unique perspectives and experiences that can inform how university-offered support works in the future.

Survey Results

The major results from the survey show that students would prefer to proceed with a hybrid model post-pandemic, given the option. Based on the survey, 77% of the student participants visited JCU’s Writing Center prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Forty-seven percent of the students surveyed stated that they visited JCU’s writing center more frequently once it

switched to a completely online format. Because of the percentage of students who visited the Writing Center after the switch to an entirely online platform, I was able to compare their experiences in both face-to-face and online settings. Sixty percent of the students who visited the Writing Center prior to the COVID-19 pandemic agreed that their visits became more frequent because of the online setting and the promise of ease of accessibility. This difference suggests that accessibility took precedence during these months.

The last question of the first section (Appendix A) asked students to elaborate on why they visited more frequently post-pandemic. Although students showed a wide range of responses to this question, many of them used the following word for visiting the center online: “easier.” A few of these responses, with my emphasis, explains these students’ reasons for finding online access easier:

- “The online format made it *easier* to find a time that fits in my schedule and to work with specific consultants.”
- “It was *easier* on my time schedule being at home to visit the writing center asynchronously.”
- “It was *easier* to get an appointment, and I could do it asynchronously while working on other content, then come back and see the comments made without having to go through it with someone in person.”
- “I felt it was *easier* to access. Instead of always having to visit the office, I could either email my paper or just do a zoom.”
- “I think it’s *easier* to submit work for review online. I much prefer the format of being able to have someone review your paper and make corrections so that you can edit on your own time.”

Most students found that working on an online platform aided their writing in ways that they may not have expected. Students explained many reasons that they visited more frequently, but the idea that an online-writing center provides an opportunity for stress relief stands out as a primary factor. One student explained that they did not have to worry about maintaining a conversation over Zoom because Zoom fatigue becomes difficult to avoid when working in an online-only setting. Many explained that the engagement from consultants, even throughout an asynchronous session, helped to “bridge the gap” in terms of feedback because of decreased engagement from professors.

Further, 26% of students agreed that they felt some type of judgement in a face-to-face, or synchronous setting. Though a seemingly small percentage, over one quarter of the students who participated in the survey felt judged in a setting where they had to immediately discuss their writing in conversation with someone else. Alternatively, the opportunity to receive and reflect on feedback, in their own time, from asynchronous sessions, allowed students to feel that these sessions improved their writing more obviously than synchronous or face-to-face sessions had in the past. Based on the responses, 38% of student respondents chose to elaborate on why asynchronous sessions improved writing skills. Many of the answers included factors such as being able to take more time to contemplate and reflect on the consultant’s feedback, being able to quickly refer to errors (especially for visual learners), having direct visual evidence of various mistakes to watch for in the future, feeling able to recognize mistakes that could have been overlooked in a synchronous appointment, and more. These multiple factors indicate that previous concerns with asynchronous consultations might not have needed so much focus in the past; therefore, the elaborations from JCU students show that more positives about asynchronous

sessions should be considered within writing center scholarship, rather than focusing on negative perspectives.

Even while considering these positive perspectives, some students also demonstrated a desire for face-to-face consultations, when they become possible again. When asked whether the students would “prefer to continue working with the Writing Center online, even if the opportunity were to arise to have face-to-face consultations again,” 35% of students completely agreed, 25% somewhat agreed, 18% neither agreed nor disagreed, 10% somewhat disagreed, and 12% completely disagreed. The wide variety across the scale shows that some students still prefer a face-to-face scenario—I expected a variety of responses to this question because although asynchronous opportunities would seem more helpful and accessible to some students, other students would understandably prefer face-to-face writing center consultations for immediacy of communication or for other reasons. Some students explained that they prefer writing corrections on a hard copy of their papers, or being able to ask questions, and thus preferred face-to-face consultations.

To these students, face-to-face consultations may feel more helpful because of the immediacy of interaction with their writing consultant. Awareness of this possible perspective led to my question for students about whether they felt that asynchronous sessions improved their writing skills, to which only 3% of student respondents completely disagreed and 10% somewhat disagreed. All students were invited to elaborate on why they believed that asynchronous sessions were less helpful, and 13.5% of student respondents took the opportunity and explained concerns similar to one another. Some explained, in their own words, that the asynchronous appointments seemed more like an editing service rather than a conversational

interaction; further, other students felt more difficulty in recognizing the larger patterns of error in their writing in favor of making quick corrections based on consultant feedback.

This survey revolves around whether writing centers should offer multiple forms of consultations after the eventual end of the COVID-19 pandemic, primarily focusing on offering accessibility for students with disabilities or a need to work remotely. The final question of the second section asked, “Do you have a diagnosed learning or physical disability that has affected your experience in the Writing Center,” and 99% of students selected no. However, one student did vote yes, and proceeded to the third and final section of questions focused on disabilities. This student explained that they were diagnosed with “autism which affects [their] ability to concentrate with loud noises.” The student explained that distractions were not as much of an issue in an online setting, because they could choose the time and location for their consultation. Since only one student replied with a confirmed diagnosis of a learning disorder, one might say that the need for inclusion or accessibility is not an issue at JCU. However, there would be a few topics to keep in mind: first, students were not required to answer questions that they were not comfortable with, so if a student did have a learning disability and chose to answer “no” anyway, there is no problem with that. Next, the survey was sent within an email to the students with the option to navigate to the survey. Students who struggle with executive function likely could have ignored the email. Third, and most importantly, even if these reasons are not applicable and students with learning disabilities did not frequent JCU’s Writing Center from March to December 2020, the accommodations provided *did* help one student and encouraged their best writing practices. Even if it only helped one student with a disability, the option to continue in a hybrid model should persist to allow more students the aid, if they should need it.

With only one known response from a student with a diagnosed disability, one can see why the writing center scholarship lacks sufficient research on this group of students. Without a demonstrated need, scholars rarely pursue these issues—nonetheless, the awareness of these issues becomes more prevalent as time continues. With awareness, people can recognize that disability affects everyone, whether or not they directly experience or are familiar with disability. Even so, students without disabilities demonstrated, through their survey responses, the overall benefit of creating greater accessibility through offering online consultations.

Recommendations for Writing Centers Moving Forward

Ultimately, the survey results recognize and reflect on both the aspects about online consultations that students find beneficial, along with the issues students find problematic. These include concerns about communication, dialogue, and levels of investment that have always been valid issues for online consultations. Based on the student surveys, and how the results of these surveys build on previous writing center scholarship, my recommendations suggest the following: one, writing centers should continue offering online consultations even after the eventual end to the COVID-19 pandemic for the benefit of students with disabilities and neurotypical students; and two, writing center scholars need to further explore online consultations to revise previous assumptions about online learning.

First, offering online writing center consultations should persist even post-pandemic because, in the words of Julie Neff “by changing the picture of the writing conference, the writing center director can ensure that learning-disabled students, no matter what the disability, are being appropriately accommodated. The writing advisors still need to be collaborators, but

they may also need to help the students retrieve information and shape an image of the product” (243). Here, Neff suggests that all students can benefit from accommodations and various learning opportunities. As demonstrated through the survey, even though some students look forward to a complete return to campus and face-to-face interactions in the future, many other students have found that working from home has allowed them to better manage their time, or even to have the privacy to process their thoughts in their own way. Better yet, since synchronous writing center visits can be recorded, students have the option to refer to the recording in case they missed important information or need further assistance. All these added aids, especially for students with disabilities, demonstrate the positive changes that an online writing center can offer. The changes that have been made at JCU’s Writing Center during the conversion to an online setting did not cost money or require additional resources from the university. The switch did require both time and effort to restructure the means of requesting an appointment, to create training materials for consultants who had no prior experience with tutoring online, and to establish methods that would work for this particular university. These were small prices to pay, considering the fact that students have gained greater access to the Writing Center and visited more frequently.

Next, since communication issues were a shared sentiment among student respondents, writing center directors need to focus on training consultants in methods of asynchronous review that allow the student to effectively reflect on their work. Concerning the various issues and benefits within online consultations, the only answers offered based on this survey come directly from the word and experience of students. Without witnessing an actual consultation, or speaking to both the student writer and the consultant, one cannot assume the successful or unsuccessful factors about a consultation; nor can one truly know where and why such

disconnections exist, based on miscommunication or misunderstanding on either end. Even with proper training and offering proper suggestions and comments, some students may feel that asynchronous consultations were less effective simply because of the lack of communication or entering the session with a negative mindset. Being open to growth and learning is a key factor for both the student writer and the writing consultant.

Another major takeaway from the survey shows that writing centers, in general, along with individual consultants, must take accountability for what can be done in terms of offering accessible and inclusive online tutoring for those with disabilities. While training future consultants, a major focus of writing center directors should revolve around the avoidance of making assumptions about students, methods, or even writing center history, while simultaneously encouraging access and opportunity. The history and scholarship that defined the field for so many years focused on face-to-face settings without much progress in moving forward with other avenues of learning. Research on, and accommodations for, students with disabilities in a writing center setting are unfortunately few and far in-between. Therefore, focusing on aspects of inclusivity allows writing centers to offer more learning opportunities for all students.

To show consideration for all students, whether neurotypical or neurodiverse, future writing center consultants should also keep in mind that they should not make assumptions about a student's behavior or needs right at the beginning of a meeting. Consultants should take the time to communicate and use their skill to create a consultation that can help any student. Writing center consultants and directors should try to avoid making neurodivergent people feel "separate" from neurotypical people. All students maintain equal importance and focus—the goal should be to encourage learning in whichever way is most effective for each and every

student. By accomplishing this goal in any type of session, whether online or face-to-face, writing centers succeed in their efforts to create better writers and to place focus on the writing process rather than on a single written product. As noted throughout this project, writing center history and scholarship up to this point has privileged face-to-face consultations, alongside the privileging of neurotypical students. These points have been abundantly clear. However, as noted in the above survey and recommendations, greater online accessibility can clearly benefit all students. In short, the lack of scholarship on the correlation between students with disabilities who visit writing centers and the preference of most students for online tutoring must be addressed moving forward.

Conclusion

We all wonder what the future will look like post the COVID-19 pandemic. When will a full return to campus, without social distancing measures in place, be safe? When will operations return to “normal?” While a sense of normalcy will be welcomed by most, others might hope that some changes from the pandemic remain the same, creating a new form of normal. Writing centers seem to be an area on campuses where the pandemic may lead to a change for the better. As this essay has argued, and as voices from JCU’s students suggest, increased access and opportunity for JCU writing students seems much more likely in an online, post-pandemic reality. The student respondents revealed the possibilities for online access that the switch to an online-only writing center encourages. Therefore, in a real-world application, the freedom to choose the modality of a consultation can make a significant difference for all students, but especially for students with disabilities.

In the context of John Carroll University's Writing Center, beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, consultations should be offered in the form of a hybrid model moving forward. This essay shows that while many students still prefer to attend an in-person facility, many also prefer to work remotely, and synchronously with a consultant. Additionally, many students prefer to submit an assignment for asynchronous review, should they have the opportunity to do so. Most importantly, while removing opportunities for online consultations might not seem like a significant issue to neurotypical individuals, it could negatively impact a neurodiverse person who has become accustomed to this kind of accessibility. Thus, despite the COVID-19 pandemic bringing so much strife and devastation to the world, various positive opportunities were born from the unfortunate events that took place. Bringing awareness to a large group of neurodiverse people demonstrates how these issues went ignored for so long within writing center history but can be remedied through offering accessible options far into the future. This hybrid model of consulting opportunities will create and emphasize a culture of welcoming, understanding, and most importantly, inclusivity in writing centers.

Appendix A – Questions with Answer Options

1. Did you visit the Writing Center on campus when appointments were completely in person, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Not in person, but I did visit online.
2. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, how often did you use the services offered at the Writing Center?
 - a. Once a week
 - b. More than once a week
 - c. Once a month
 - d. Once a semester
 - e. It depends
 - f. I never visited the Writing Center before the pandemic
 - g. I'd prefer not to answer
3. Once the Writing Center switched to a completely online format during the Spring 2020 semester, did you visit the Writing Center more frequently?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
4. If you chose yes to the previous question, please feel free to elaborate on why. If you chose no, skip to the next questions.
 - a. Long answer text-box

Appendix B – Questions with Answer Options

1. Your professor required a Writing Center visit for a grade—otherwise, you have never been to the Writing Center.
 - a. Linear Scale: 1 (Completely Agree) – 5 (Completely Disagree)
2. You would prefer to continue working with the Writing Center online, even if the opportunity were to arise to have face-to-face consultations again.
 - a. Linear Scale: 1 (Completely Agree) – 5 (Completely Disagree)
3. You fear judgement in face-to-face, or synchronous, consultations. [Please select option 3 for “I choose not to answer.”]
 - a. Linear Scale: 1 (Completely Agree) – 5 (Completely Disagree)
4. Synchronous Writing Center consultations (via Zoom) have improved your writing skills.
[Please skip if you have never had a synchronous session, or select option 3 for "I choose not to answer."]
 - a. Linear Scale: 1 (Completely Agree) – 5 (Completely Disagree)
5. Asynchronous Writing Center consultations (via Google Docs) have improved your writing skills. [Please skip if you have never had an asynchronous session, or select option 3 for "I choose not to answer."]
 - a. Linear Scale: 1 (Completely Agree) – 5 (Completely Disagree)
6. If asynchronous consultations improved your writing, please elaborate on how the consultation was useful to you.
 - a. Long answer text-box
7. If asynchronous consultations were less helpful in improving your writing, please elaborate on why they were less helpful.

- a. Long answer text-box
8. On the Writing Center's appointment request form, the accommodations offered have helped you during your online consultations. (Ex: Enabling the chat box on Zoom during a synchronous session, turning on closed captioning, etc.)
- a. Yes.
 - b. No.
 - c. I choose not to answer.
 - d. I did not request any accommodations for my session.
 - e. Add other (Long answer text-box)
9. Do you have a diagnosed learning or physical disability that has affected your experience in the Writing Center?
- a. Yes.
 - b. No.
 - c. I prefer not to disclose.

Appendix C – Questions with Answer Options

1. If you feel comfortable sharing, please explain your disability and how it affects your learning experience. Remember, your responses are completely confidential.
 - a. Long answer text-box
2. How did synchronous and/or asynchronous consultations aid or hinder your learning experience? Please specify the type of consultation you discuss.
 - a. Long answer text-box
3. Based on your experiences from March-December 2020, would you prefer the Writing Center to be completely online, hybrid, or back to in-person only? Please elaborate.
 - a. Long answer text-box

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