The F-Word: Perceptions of the University Writing Center and What We Can Do to Change Them
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The fear in the room is palpable. The first paper of the semester is due at the beginning of the next class, and the faces across the room project nothing but dread and apprehension, which the professor senses. She tries to console the room with strategies for improving papers before submission. “Give yourself at least a day to work on issues at the level of the sentence. If you need help, don’t be afraid to go to Sweetland.” I hear the words and they break my idealistic little heart; she has just undermined everything I know the writing center actually is, and has perpetuated the idea of it that I assume so completely pervades the student body. Though the comments are well intentioned and I’m grateful for the promotion of my school’s writing center, I can’t help but feel a little upset. I speak up to correct the error, but the damage is already done and I’m met with blank faces, mouths agape. Exiting the classroom, I wonder about why it is the perception of the center is so misinformed and what I can do to fix it.

From the time Stephen North first published the fundamental writing center theory article, “The Idea of the Writing Center,” to the present, not much about the perception of the writing center seems to have changed; my experience in the classroom is nothing out of the ordinary. The writing center, it appears, is still largely viewed as a resource a university provides to aid struggling or otherwise remedial writhers. To some extent, this is true, but only in an oblique way. The writing center exists to serve struggling writers because it aims to help every writer at the university, regardless of skill level. And interestingly, a large source of this misunderstanding seems to be held and disseminated by students who have neither been to the center, nor it would appear ever intend on going. The perpetuation of the view of the university writing center as the dreaded f-word—fix-it shop—is symptomatic of an issue that deals not so much with how the center conducts itself through tutorials and workshops, but how it presents itself within the context of the university.

In his ubiquitous writing center theory article, “The Idea of a Writing Center,” Steven North boldly proclaims, “Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing” (Murphy 38), creating a unified philosophy behind the writing center’s role in an academic institution. Spurred by what was on overwhelmingly negative or “remedial” perception of the writing center, North took up a pen and wrote what has become the theoretical foundation for the center. But, the idealism of North vision fades in his “Revisiting ‘The Idea of a Writing Center’.” “I do not believe it is finally a good thing for a writing center to be seen as taking upon its shoulders the whole institutions (real or imagined) illiteracy,” North says, countering the idealism of his original essay on the subject and later suggesting that the center is best administered through an English department (17). And, perhaps some truth rings in his words, but on the whole, I have to disagree.

With North’s reconsideration of “The Idea of a Writing Center” comes the implication that only English majors, specifically those interested in the writing-intensive track of the concentration, will genuinely seek out the writing center. This notion simply is not true, at least not at the University of Michigan. As a member of the recently launched Minor in Writing administered through the Sweetland Center for Writing (a division decidedly separate from the department of English Language and Literature), it is clear to me that students from a wide range of academic disciplines are interested not just their
own writing, but writing as a separate discipline. Of the sixteen student cohort, I am the only English major, with the rest of the members coming from programs of study such as psychology, international studies, political science, kinesiology, and history. And the sixteen members of the cohort are not the only students who expressed interest in the program. On the contrary, when asked how many applications the center received for admission to the minor, my professor (who also happens to serve as the assistant director of the writing center) responded that nearly 40 students applied. Judging by the diversity of the majors in my own cohort, I’m willing to guess that the majority of those applicants who were refused from the program came from academic disciplines outside of English.

Since the center obviously then exists to serve the entire student population at the university, we have to consider how the entire population is viewing us. After consulting Angie Smith’s “Non-Traditional Students in the Writing Center: Bridging the Gap from a Process-Oriented World to a Product-Oriented One,” I noticed a trend in perceptions of the writing centers from centers across the country. As a former non-traditional student, Smith recounts her apprehension about approaching the center: “I will never forget the first time I walked in the door. I didn’t want to admit that I was having problems” (12). Smith’s statement is easy to understand, but still indicative of a problem of perception surrounding the center and reiterates the idea of the center as resource strictly for the remedial writer. She continues to describe the attitudes toward the center of two of her long-term tutees: “Both Mary and Joan needed help getting started with their papers, but both believed the writing center was mainly available to help them with grammar” (13). Students seem predispositioned to viewing the center as a living spell-check and grammar machines.

To make sure I wasn’t making broad connections based only on a single piece of literature, I turned to other sources like Catherine Crowley’s “Are We on the Same Page? ESL Student Perceptions of the Writing Center” and Malcolm Hayward’s “Assessing Attitudes Toward the Writing Center.” Quoting Muriel Harris, Crowley explains the perception non-native speakers hold of the center: “Tutors are there to help with specific problems that a teacher might point out in a student’s work. They are secondary to the teacher, but should be able to help students ‘fix mistakes’ and ‘solve problems’ (Harris 223),” (2). Again, the center is just a fix-it shop that acts to clean up the product, and is never expected to reexamine the writer’s process. These sentiments are echoed in Hayward’s piece, which talks about the conflict between writing centers and faculty in charge of teaching writing:

I have found that the problem does not lie in a difference in goals. By and large, tutors and faculty evaluate goals the same way. Rather, the differences are found in assessing the competency of the writing center to reach those goals. Tutors feel they are able to work with primary objectives, while many faculty feel that the writing center should work with secondary goals.” (10)

By Hayward’s findings, not even university faculty members trust the writing center; it’s a place full of tutors only equipped well enough to tutor what most centers would call “low-order concerns.”

In an attempt to gauge my own university’s student perceptions our writing center, I composed a six-question survey and distributed it to 105 students spanning a number of different schools, majors, and grade levels within the university. The survey was purposefully not distributed to students I knew who were affiliated with the writing center
and its peer tutoring program. The survey asked whether the student had ever been to the Sweetland Center for Writing, if so why, if not why not, what they thought the center’s goal was, and if they would be offended if someone suggested they seek the center’s assistance. Of the twenty-six responses I received, only four had ever been to the center, and one of those respondents admitted to having visited for a purpose unrelated to her writing. Many indicated also that they felt that they didn’t need the center’s services because their writing was already “good enough” and that the center exists only to help students who are “struggling” with writing or need help fixing “stupid mistakes” (Kim). Every single one of the respondents who made it clear they were under the impression that the center exists solely for remedial writers had never even once been to the center, even just to investigate how it works. Though there were glimmers of hope in my data, with nine respondents saying they would in no way be offended if someone suggested they go to Sweetland with help on a writing assignment, eleven respondents (over a third of the data collected) said they would absolutely be insulted were the same to happen to them. While it was encouraging to here perception of the center wasn’t universally uninformed, I’m still not comfortable with the size of proportion of the student population that views the center as merely a fix-it shop.

But how can we change the culture of the university? My suggestion is that the center start making an impression on university students and faculty as soon as they start their lives and careers here. Though it’s been awhile since I’ve personally attended freshman orientation, I distinctly remember a number of presentations that showcased university resources and gave suggestions about how to succeed in college. Absent from this list of resources, was any mention of Sweetland. Why? If we as an educational institution want our students to succeed, and we concede the point that writing is crucial for fostering critical thinking and analytical skills, then why aren’t we making them aware of every possible resource we can? Sweetland’s website has a short video (no longer than five minutes) that explains what exactly it is the center does and how it does it that would be perfect to show at a freshman orientation presentation. The video interviews not only Sweetland faculty, but student staff in the peer tutoring center, and students who have made use of both faculty workshop appointments and the peer tutoring center. Among the myriad of resources this university offers to its students, it astounds me that the writing center wasn’t showcased.

It would also help to give tours of the writing center during First Year Writing Classes. I realize that Sweetland is already integrated into the writing curriculum here at the university on an administrative level, but providing visibility in the classroom and publicizing the services the center offers doesn’t seem like it could hurt either the students or the writer center—one group is opened to an entirely new resource and given an opportunity to view and understand how the center works firsthand, rather than through the eyes and misunderstandings of fellow students and faculty members; the other gets free exposure and advertising across the university. While the center may send representatives to classrooms in an attempt to advertise Sweetland’s services, the presentations usually happen once a semester and last between five and ten minutes—not enough time unfortunately to make students actually care. Angie Smith noted that one of her tutees, Norma, was made aware of the center by way of a tour, and immediately recognized it as a “safe haven” where she could receive the help she needed to succeed at her own pace and frequency (13). Making students more aware of the services the center
provides then seems unlikely to hurt the image of the center, and in all possibility could actually better the reputation of the writing center across the campus. We need to make our presence better known and our goals more clear.

Which brings me to my final strategy for repairing the image of the center at the university: implement student volunteers from the peer tutoring center as course assistants in introductory writing courses. The idea came from the University of Michigan’s Summer Bridge program, in which qualified applicants are selected to assist in the facilitation and management of introductory writing courses over the summer term. Though North has a point in “Revisiting ‘The Idea of a Writing Center’” when he says that it’s absurd to expect the writing center to be able to cultivate a relationship with an entire university (17), the idea implementation of the program would not be exactly that of the Bridge program. With 70-some odd sections of introductory writing offered every semester through the English department alone, it would be impossible to assign a tutor to each class. But, a volunteer tutor could potentially take on multiple sections and only be asked to show up on crucial class days (first day of class and paper workshops). Tutors would also have incentive to elect this position for potential extra credit, as a type of mini-practicum or as part of their paid tutorly duties.

This essay started as a criticism of the university structure, as a way to question why universities tend to favor English departments over writing centers when it comes to questions about writing in the curriculum, as a way to ask, “Why don’t you trust us?” But after researching the topic further, I realized I was asking the wrong people. The university doesn’t trust the center because the students that compose it don’t trust the center. And that upsets me. The most disturbing response I received back from the survey came in response to question six, asking students if they would be offended if an instructor suggested the student visit the center with their paper. “Yes,” answered the student, “I would be offended. I don’t hold Sweetland in very high esteem.” That alone was enough to hurt and infuriate me, but to my dismay that was not the end. In parentheses, at the end of the response, the student annotated the answer with the phrase “for no good reason.” For no good reason did this person seem to think of the center here as lowly and incompetent.

But what reason do I have to blame her? There’s no good reason to hold Sweetland, or really any writing center in poor esteem, but has the center or the university given this person much of a reason to think otherwise? After all, I used to be exactly the same way. “Awesome,” I thought when I was elected to be a peer tutor, “I’ll get to teach people how to write and show them how to edit their papers.” My seminar in peer tutoring helped me change this view, but the vast majority of students at the university don’t have that luxury. The responsibility falls on our shoulders as tutors and lovers of writing to promote Sweetland, and other writing centers, in any way we can, and educate an otherwise misinformed majority about why we exist, and more importantly, why we deserve to exist. We provide an important service for all writers at the university, and we need to help those writers realize it any way we can.
Works Cited
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Works Consulted


