

International Students' Perspectives on Online Interfaces, Identity, and Environment in a U.S. Writing Center

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the perspectives of international students in the United States who use writing centers to support their identities and to meet their writing needs and goals. Using survey and focus group data to look closely at how students use one writing center's online Profile and more broadly at the accessibility and responsiveness of writing center services, this study found that students have much to say about their place within writing centers and how writing consultants can best support them. Listening to these international student voices reveals how writing centers and other student support services must take the initiative in opening up conversations with and among our students to create the conditions for their success.

Keywords: International students, writing centers, academic support, identity, technology, U.S. higher education

INTRODUCTION

Ubiquitous in United States colleges and universities and increasing worldwide (The Writing Center Directory, 2020), writing centers play an important role in supporting international students in their development as academic writers, particularly when their academic reading and writing is done in a language different than that of their home countries (Wang & Machado, 2015). Writing center scholarship has long explored the question of how best to teach and support multilingual and international writers (Bruce & Rafoth, 2016; Bruce & Rafoth, 2009; Hall, 2013; Severino, 1994; Thonus, 2004; Williams & Severino, 2004). Yet, the focus of most of this work has been on training and developing writing tutors/consultants/coaches, who are often assumed to be domestic students and native speakers of the target language, and rarely on the experience of international multilingual writers themselves. Responding to Shanti Bruce's call to writing center "directors and tutors to experience their writing center environments through the eyes of their second language students" (Bruce, 2009, p. 218), this study invited international students who use the University of Minnesota's writing center (known as the Center for Writing) to share their perceptions about the center and how they see their place within it through a brief survey and focus groups.

This research builds on a larger inquiry, started in 2013, into what clients want writing center consultants to know about them by examining the information students indicated in our voluntary Student Profile, an online interface, which is part of our center's home-grown web application used for scheduling appointments (Nichols-Besel et al., 2019). The Student Profile was developed to improve student and consultation interaction by enabling students to indicate a preferred name, how to pronounce their name, what pronouns they use, the language(s) they speak and write, any accommodations they might need using Google Docs, and "any additional information I would like SWS consultants to know about me as a writer/learner." Previous analysis of the information students chose to enter in the Student Profile during 2016-17 revealed their awareness of their identities as writers, students, and learners within a writing center context, while the complexity of their responses challenged our assumptions about both who visits our center and how our university classifies and constructs student identities (Nichols-Besel et al., 2019).

At our university, we enroll an average of 6000 international students (students who are on F or J visas) every year, making up 12% of the entire enrollment. Particularly for the undergraduate international student population, the number has drastically increased over the past 15 years, from approximately 250 to 2500 students, representing 8% of the entire undergraduate population. When an increased number of international students utilize campus resources, a welcoming and globalized environment offered by student services is essential (Yu et al., 2016). We found that international students make up about a third of our writing center clientele annually and are further overrepresented as more than half of the Student Profile users. Thus, we anticipated that international students would have important insights about the Profile specifically, and about the writing center more broadly, which led us to the following research questions:

1. How do international students use the Center for Writing's Student Profile?
2. How do international students use the Center for Writing's website, specifically the "consultant bios" pages that emphasize writing consultant identities (language background, major field of study, etc.)?
3. What does their use of these online interfaces reveal about what international students value about writing centers?

By listening to international student voices speaking about their use of the Student Profile, the website, and the writing center itself, we seek to understand how the writing center can better meet the needs of international students and contribute to their academic success. We hope this close look at a writing center and its clients offers insights into how writing centers and other student support services can create more welcoming, accessible, and responsive virtual and physical spaces for international students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies that focus on the academic needs of international students by and large find that language is students' primary concern (Banjong, 2015; Lee et al., 2019; Roberts et al., 2015; Sato & Hodge, 2009). Despite greater awareness and advocacy for the reality of multilingualism and global *Englishes* (English varieties in addition to "standard American" or "standard British") (Canagarajah, 2006), international students studying in the United States recognize the importance of knowing English as the dominant language of communication. Not surprisingly, studies have shown the correlation between English proficiency and academic success, and between English proficiency and social networking in higher education in the United States (Banjong, 2015; Lee et al., 2019; Martirosyan et al., 2019; Roberts et al., 2015). English language learning experiences vary by individual, but many international students are far less confident in English than in their home or primary language. Students who would be able to fully comprehend and explain difficult concepts in their home language may struggle to do the same in English (Leki, 2009; Sato & Hodge, 2009). Challenges with language encompass reading, writing, speaking, and listening - important skills for learning and for demonstrating one's learning.

Producing U.S. academic writing takes considerable effort for international students. Students need to read and comprehend academic literature in English, synthesize information, cite sources, and often present a central argument or thesis. Furthermore, American readers often expect academic writers to structure their writing linearly, stating their argument or purpose at the outset and reiterating that argument as they present supporting evidence (Fitzgerald & Ianetta, 2016; Leki, 2009). These expectations explain challenges faced by international students as they adjust to academic writing styles in the United States, particularly for students who see writing in their home language as far less structured. Also, "lack of English-writing experience, vocabulary, and fluency may cause [international] students to have a hard time making their point clearly to a U.S. academic reader" (Leki, 2009, p. 9). Academic writing is difficult for most students, but it becomes even more challenging when students' backgrounds include writing in another language with cultural expectations different from those in the United States (Cox, 2016; Leki, 2009; Rafoth, 2015; Ravichandran et al., 2017; Wolf & Phung, 2019).

Identity

Many writing center researchers see connections between academic writing and identity, noting how U.S. academic writing both "reflects many of the values of its home culture, with its general emphasis on efficiency and directness" and "intersects with the identities of the student and faculty writers who try to succeed at it" (Fitzgerald & Ianetta, 2016, p. 133). As Rafoth (2016) explains, international students "carry with them a history of their experiences with English, when and how they learned it, the values they associate it with, and the parts of their lives it displaces" (p. 6). With American readers who are often intolerant of written accent (Cox, 2016), international students can feel the pressure to assimilate and "pass" as a native speaker (Rafoth, 2015), an ideal that leaves them feeling like failures even as they make progress as writers (Wolf & Phung, 2019).

Our previous study of Student Profile data reveals the power of negative self-critique,

with many students using the open “About Me” text box to “point out their failings as writers” (Nichols-Besel et al., 2019, p. 73). Both major themes identified in our 2019 study—“Who am I?” and “What might we do together?”—were often expressed in students’ negative assessments of themselves and their abilities: for example, “I’m not a very good writer,” “I am not good at logical transitions and connections between sentences and paragraphs,” and “I struggle with grammar and proper use of APA formatting for research papers” (Nichols-Besel et al., 2019, pp. 72-73). No students praised their writing strengths in the Student Profile, which seems to resonate with how writing is often taught in schools as eliminating errors in grammar and usage.

International students’ challenges are exacerbated by the view that, despite the wealth of knowledge and experience they bring to their education in the United States, being an English language learner is positioned as a deficit (Cox, 2016; Heng, 2017; Lee et al., 2019; Maringe & Jenkins, 2015). As Cox (2016) explains, a deficit perspective “focuses on what L2 writers cannot yet do with English and does not recognize these students’ strengths with language and literacy across multiple languages, including English” (p. 60). When faculty and peers focus on perceived shortcomings, English language learners experience alienation and isolation (Heng, 2017; Maringe & Jenkins, 2015). Surveys and interviews with international students show students’ desire for faculty and peers to understand and be less judgmental about culture and language differences (Heng, 2017; Lee et al., 2019; Maringe & Jenkins, 2015).

Space

Writing centers play a critical role in addressing both academic and affective concerns of international students and can work to challenge the deficit thinking in higher education about the writing abilities of international students. In many studies of international students’ use of campus resources, writing centers are identified as an important resource (Martirosyan, et al., 2019), influencing student success (Banjong, 2015) and being highly appreciated by students (International Student and Scholar Services, 2019). The customized and non-evaluative nature of a one-to-one tutorial focuses on an individual student’s needs, which could involve demystifying American academic expectations, clarifying writing context with cultural information, expanding vocabulary, or learning how to detect and remedy grammatical errors (Fitzgerald & Ianetta, 2016).

International students, however, may find it difficult to access and navigate writing centers and other support services on U.S. campuses if they are not familiar with American academic systems (Martirosyan et al., 2019; Banjong, 2015). Recent survey research on our own campus indicated that more than half of the support services have never been used by international students, who noted they were either “not relevant,” “relevant but unsure how to access,” or “aware but not used.” Yet, we often hear from students about the needs for these services that they just have never used (International Student and Scholar Services, 2019). This gap between demand and usage reveals the need for campus services to make their spaces more accessible and more convenient to international students. Without intentional student services that consider holistic student identity, universities miss opportunities to meet the needs of a diverse, heterogeneous population of international students (Ballo et al., 2019; Cong & Glass, 2019).

THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory in student advising and development (1977, 1979, 1992) illustrates how student support spaces are an integral part of a larger ecosystem where students explore themselves, others, and their environment so that they can develop and thrive over time in higher education. Research also reveals a positive correlation between students’ interaction with academic support resources, including writing centers, and student success, suggesting that centers should be highly promoted to help students achieve better academic

performance and higher satisfaction (Banjong, 2015).

RESEARCH METHOD

To understand international student experiences of the Center for Writing, we conducted a qualitative study utilizing focus group interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Participants

Research participants were drawn from the 2018-19 client pool of the University of Minnesota's Center for Writing, which includes all registered students, from first-year undergraduate students through doctoral candidates. The survey was sent to all clients whose citizenship status was "international" in the University's student data records. Focus group participants were recruited through the surveys.

Surveys

We administered an anonymous short survey during summer 2019 via email to gather initial information about students' awareness and use of the Profile (see Figure 1) and to garner interest in focus group participation. Recognizing that students who had not used the Profile might not even know what it is, we created two versions of the survey: one for "updaters" (those who had put information in the Student Profile) and another for "non-updaters" (those who had not). We sent emails to the 748 students who were returning in the fall; 153 students completed surveys, giving us a 20% response rate. Of our survey completers, 47 were profile users (updaters) and 106 were not (non-updaters).

Figure 1: Student Profile

The screenshot shows the 'Edit My Profile' interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links: 'View Walk-in Schedules', 'Make an Appointment', 'Access My Visits', 'Edit My Profile', and 'Logout'. Below the navigation bar, the page title is 'Edit My Profile' and a 'Welcome, [name]' message is displayed. The main content area is divided into several sections:

- Name:** A text input field.
- My preferred name:** A text input field.
- How to pronounce my name:** A text input field.
- Pronouns I use to describe myself:** A text input field with a small example: '(example: she/her, he/him, they/them, etc.)'.
- Language(s) I speak and/or write:** A text input field.
- Anything I'd like consultants to know about my ability to perceive color or other accommodations I might need when reading the standard Google Doc highlighting and commenting features:** A large text area.
- Additional information I'd like SWS consultants to know about me as a writer/learner:** A large text area.

At the bottom of the form, there are two buttons: 'Revert changes' and 'Update'. On the left side of the form, there are several informational messages:

- 'We want to call you by the name you feel most comfortable with.'
- 'Please help us pronounce your name by writing it phonetically.'
- 'It is common for everyone to make assumptions about people's gender, but we want to be sure to describe you using pronouns that align with your identity.'
- 'Language is an important part of people's identity, and we appreciate learning about the linguistic diversity of our clients. (Did you know that as of May 2013, our clients identified over 80 different languages spoken?)'
- 'Each SWS online consultant has different preferences for using a variety of features from Google Docs—highlighting, font changes, the "insert comment" feature, etc.—to provide feedback. We want to be sure that our feedback is as accessible for you as possible.'
- 'If you know that you are a visual learner, for instance, or that you like consultants to take notes for you when you talk, this is a great place to tell us that.'

Focus Groups

All of the students who indicated on the survey that they would or might be interested in participating in a focus group were invited. The days and times for each focus group were set based on student availability. Overall, we had 20 students participate across five focus groups:

undergraduate student updaters, graduate student updaters, undergraduate student non-updaters, graduate student non-updaters, and a mixed group. The purpose of this organization was to group students by common/similar experience to foster conversation. The mixed group, which included both undergraduates and graduates as well as updaters and non-updaters, was created because of scheduling difficulties. Each group had a mix of nationalities and languages spoken.

Data Analysis

Surveys

Although the primary purpose of the survey was to recruit students to participate in focus groups, we used the Qualtrics survey tool to run a descriptive analysis to see the aggregated data. The survey data revealed students' level of awareness of the Student Profile and, even if they were unfamiliar, whether or not they would consider using it to share information about themselves.

Focus Group Transcripts

In both crafting our focus group questions and analyzing transcripts, we were influenced by our previous study of Student Profile data from 2016-17, where we generated such codes as Writer Identity (most frequent), Consulting Preferences (second most), Student Identity, Learner Identity, and Type of Help Desired (Nichols-Besel et al., 2019). When students named examples of Consulting Preferences and Type of Help Desired in the Student Profile, we recognized that they were communicating directly to writing consultants, which encouraged us to ask our focus groups about both the Student Profile and our public consultant bios as parallel interfaces revealing identity. Thus, following Maxwell (2005), we designed the focus group questions with organizational categories in mind, specifically Identity, Profile use, Consultants, and Environment/space.

In analyzing the focus group transcripts, we approached our data much like Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest: our research questions guided the process of determining units of data and assigning them to categories. From our first reading of the five transcripts, we determined that relevant units of data were (1) answers to our direct questions about the Profile, (2) places where identity, either writer or consultant, came up in the conversations, and (3) suggestions on how to improve the writing center. Our methods for analysis of this qualitative data were inductive, in that we let the codes emerge from the data, and iterative, in that we made multiple passes through the data before settling on the codes described below (Patton, 2002). From our first reading, we identified 24 initial codes. We then applied these codes to one transcript, each coding on our own, and then together going through each unit of data, discussing the code, and coming to a consensus for each. For the second transcript, we verified each unit of data and its assigned code, after which we returned to the first transcript to verify coding in light of the decisions we made while coding the second transcript. We followed a similar process for coding each transcript.

As we refined our codes, we began to group them under the four broader organizational categories that influenced our focus group questions, leading us to drop the rarely used and less relevant codes, such as the one noting when students were discussing other forms of writing support on campus (their professors, other tutoring centers, etc.). From this process of grouping and removing codes, we created a master list of 13 codes relevant to our research questions (see Table 1 in the next section).

FINDINGS

The data collected in both our initial surveys and the focus groups reveals that student

clients have much to say about their identities as writers, the value of the Profile, and how the writing center and its consultants can best support them. Although students had differing awareness of and interest in the Profile itself, their responses revealed their intentional use and savvy understanding of the writing center as a resource to support their development as academic writers.

When asked in the updater survey why they put information in the Profile, 39% of those 47 students selected “I wanted consultants to know something about me that fit into one or more of the Student Profile questions,” the option most aligned to our purpose in creating the Profile. Yet, as revealed in Figure 2 below, students also didn’t remember why or thought it was required. They did not elaborate in the optional follow-up part of this question, and only 21% indicated that they ever went back to the Student Profile to revise or update their information, despite the fact we had designed the Profile to be editable and have included an “Edit My Profile” button on our scheduling interface.

Figure 2: Why Students Used the Profile



Of the 106 students who had not used the Profile (and thus completed the non-updater survey), 74% admitted they were not aware of the Profile prior to taking the survey. However, when shown an image of the Profile in the survey and asked if they would consider putting information about themselves in the Profile, 39% said yes, 29% said maybe, and only 33% said no. When asked to explain those answers, non-updaters noted time, effort, and privacy concerns in comments such as “Just too lazy,” “Privacy,” and “I didn’t feel the need of filling out the profile. The writing center always was so great without this information.” Nonetheless, with two-thirds of these students open to sharing identity information, we found that several of their brief responses previewed what we would later hear in the focus groups about more comfort and connection during consultations, the consultant being more able to meet their needs, and mutual benefits. For instance, one student mentioned, “I think those information will make the consulting session be more comfortable.” Another stated, “I think those information will help the consultant to better accommodate my needs.” Additionally, as illustrated by the following quote, students

appreciated the potential for reciprocity: “I believe that matching students with the mentors should be two sided where we view their profile and they view ours to ensure the best experience for both parties.” With these brief responses in mind, we were eager to hear more from both Profile updaters and non-updaters in our focus groups.

Through our analysis of the focus group transcripts, we identified 13 relevant codes, which are defined, illustrated, and counted in Table 1 below. We grouped these codes into four larger categories, moving inward to outward from the students’ comments about their own identities, to their comments about the Profile, to their views about writing center consultants, to the environment and space of the writing center itself. We found when comparing the transcripts from each group, the 11 most frequently used codes appeared across all the transcripts.

Table 1: Codes Generated from Focus Group Transcripts

	Codes	Definitions	Examples	Totals
Categories				
	Identity			27% of all codes
	Writer/client - needs/goals	Goals for consultations, requests for help with grammar or other writing issues, cultural expectations	“...gain another set of eyes on the paper. Crucially a different set of eyes that are not the graders...”	60% of Identity
	Writer/client - diverse learning preferences	Preferences about mode of consultation (face-to-face vs. online, walk-in vs. scheduled), mentions of own learning style	“I prefer walk-ins... I've always used it as a walk-in because I just sit there and put my name on the list, and I continue my own work.”	17% of Identity
	Languages/ country	Languages spoken/ country of origin	“I’m used to write essays in Korean. Because I’m from Korea.”	12% of Identity
	Student	Areas of study, year of standing, college enrollment	“[I’m] in CLA [College of Liberal Arts] and I’m majoring in sociology and I’m a junior. I actually changed/ transferred to UMN this January”	11% of Identity
	Profile use			24% of all codes
	Student use/ appreciation	Positive responses to having the Profile available for use	“I think it's helpful because most people find my first name difficult to pronounce. So, if knowing that, I have a place to tell them how to pronounce my name upfront, I would feel more comfortable.”	45% of Profile use

Consultant use	How consultant might use the Profile information to prepare for consultation/ connect with students	“I think like this part is a bit important. Like, so if let’s say we have students that are coming in who are not native English speakers. We would probably use more generic words or vocabulary to help just communicate better.”	29% of Profile use
Student critique/ suggestion	Critique of and skepticism about the Profile and suggestions to improve the and its use	“...you might have the information, but it doesn't mean that you, as a consultant, you should not start a conversation about it and just move quickly into the writing process... even if you have the information, it doesn't mean that the first stage of just checking in and asking [isn't important].”	26% of Profile use
Consultants			21% of all codes
Identity	Information about consultants (major, languages, preferences)	“It's extremely beneficial to me. I use this one [consultant biographies page] a lot to choose the consultant. Their major, their strength.”	45% of Consultants
Facilitation	How the consultant coaches and/or is supportive/respectful—or not	“Consultants are really good at finding something that you're good at, and encouraging you in that thing. So, you don't leave there depleted and feeling frustrated...”	22% of Consultants
Relationship	Referring to specific consultant and relationship with them	“What I do is have the same person the whole semester. You don't have to start over and over again... if we have the same person, she or he already know our weakness and how to improve.”	20% of Consultants

Knowledge	Consultant expertise	“There are some people who understand the difference between languages, like English and Korean.”	13% of Consultants
Environment/ space			28% of all codes
Suggestions for improvement	Suggestions to improve student access and experience	“So, my last suggestion would be, track the data, you know, see the traffic, right? ...I want to make sure that there's a consultant there...[t]hat day at that time when I really needed it.”	58% of Environment / space
Availability	Times available, length of appointment, locations, experience of being in the space	“People are really diverse. ...like international students going there, undergrad, grad students, American students, So, I think it's just, I always experienced it as a really open space and a welcoming space.”	42% of Environment / space

Identity

Student responses categorized as Identity were elicited from focus group questions probing why and how they use our writing center. In response, students most often described their needs and goals as academic writers (60% of all the responses in this category), sometimes noting salient aspects of their identity as international students (home country, first language, year in school, major, enrollment in specific courses, etc.) as context for those needs. One student explained, “I use, let's say, twice per week because I am writing a lot now. So I think it's very important to have this chance to check the English. And the reason I use it is because my English will never get at the level as a native speaker.” Another student mentioned, “I also worried about my grammar errors because I came here just one year, so I worried a lot.”

Although we did not ask explicitly about learning preferences, something that the Student Profile prompts tend to elicit since “visual learner” is used as an example (Nichols-Besel et al., 2019), we found students often indicated such preferences in their descriptions of how they used the center's services, whether face-to-face or online and whether making appointments or just walking in. One focus group had a particularly lively discussion about their different approaches to getting started on writing assignments and when to seek support, with some students waiting until the last minute and others visiting the center as soon as a paper is assigned.

Profile Use

When looking at images of the Profile (their own Profiles for updaters and an empty

version for non-updaters), students gave an overall positive response, whether they used it or not. As one student stated:

I would [use it] because every time I go, I see a different consultant because I don't go that often. So I could see this being very helpful to me and the consultant as well." In another focus group conversation, a student explained how the Profile would make them feel more comfortable using the center: "So if the consultant can directly use the right pronouns, I think it's appreciated.

Student discussion of the Profile explored not only how it would make them more comfortable as individuals using the center, but also how it might make consultants more comfortable. One student explained, "I think [the Profile] can help the consultant and us feel more comfortable when communicating and we can feel more welcome." Additionally, students mentioned that the Profile could serve as a means for building writer–consultant relationships, as illustrated by the following participant's statement: "I would [use the Profile] to fill out [the question about language]. Obviously I speak Korean. Probably fall semester, there was a Korean speaking consultant there and she helped me a lot in terms of comparing two different structures."

Yet several students wondered if consultants would actually read their Profiles and noted that the Profile would not be a substitute for conversation about their identities and needs in the consultation. In one focus group conversation, a student indicated, "I just felt that most of these things that, they'd figure it out as we speak. And I don't even know if they actually read it before they see us. ...If I knew that it was helpful to them, then I would do it." Another student stated, "I think it's a tool to an end to communication, but I think it's not because some information are there that there should not be conversation about them. It's not because someone's wrote out [how] to pronounce their name that the person shouldn't ask, maybe." This interest in how the consultants use the Profile was one small part of larger discussions about writing center consultants, who they are, and how students interacted with them.

Consultants

Focus group questions about consultants centered around whether and how participants interacted with the Center for Writing website page showing photos and brief biographies of each writing consultant ("consultant bios"). Most of the participants indicated that they did read the bios and found them useful. Participants mentioned the bios were "interesting to read," useful to "learn about different people's life," and "extremely beneficial" for finding a consultant's major or their strengths as writers. One participant gave a detailed explanation of their process for using the bios:

First, I look for someone in terms of what they, obviously, what they're busy doing. And then I look at what it is they like to help us with. And then the last thing that I check is would I be comfortable sitting next to this person, and working with them closely. Yeah, that's also something. So that's why I know that the hobbies and the things are, they seem silly, and they seem extra, but that's nice for me to know in terms of that.

Participants appreciated reading the available information so that they could see the consultants as people they would want to meet with. They also stressed the importance of being able to choose who they want to work with based on their area of study and/or their strengths as consultants.

In fact, being able to work with a consultant from a different field was identified as a strength, as illustrated by the following participant's comment:

What's also nice about them being from a different field is you feel a little bit more confident to go to them. It's almost like a non-judgmental space where it doesn't matter what you're coming with, they're going to help you... Sometimes, I've even found that

going from brainstorming to putting things into paragraphs, knowing which paragraphs to put what idea into. Yeah, sometimes they even add some ideas, and that's been super helpful.

Participants valued the knowledge consultants brought to the sessions as outside readers positioned to help them with their writing. As outside readers, consultants are non-judgmental and look to writers for their expertise in the discipline, which can help writers to feel more confident. Furthermore, participants appreciated the encouragement they received from consultants. As one writer stated, “So it’s just more than just the writing; it’s also that encouragement.”

In the first few minutes of one focus group conversation, the participants quickly shifted to the benefits of meeting with the same consultant. One participant jumped right in—“Sorry to interrupt this”—and stated, “I think good approach, what I do, is have the same person the whole semester.” Two others chimed in to agree, and one explained,

It’s the best way because you don’t have to start over and over again...this is the topic, this is the issue... If we have the same person, she or he already know our weakness and how to improve, and what to check. So I think it’s very important to have the only one person.

This focus on the writer-consultant relationship was repeated across focus groups with statements such as “[Consultants] care about you so much, they really want to help you out” and “[the] bond, interaction between you and the consultants, [it’s] not just about you.” Participants appreciated the chance to work with the same consultant over time and the care they received during their sessions. They indicated that a writing center session is about more than writing instruction. Who the consultants are and the ways they encourage consultees contribute to the sessions and the participants’ continued visits to the center.

Environment/Space

Although students were largely positive in their assessments of consultants and the writing center generally, they had specific suggestions about how to improve structural aspects of the center, often about the center’s scheduling availability. International students want more appointments available to them, and different timing options than the traditional 40-minute consultation, such as 20- or 70-minute appointments and shorter walk-in options. For instance, one participant shared, “There was one time where I did a walk-in and I finished consultation and I had a quick question and then to go back I have to like re-register even though I had like a five second question.” Many students shared their own experiences interacting with the writing center space and feeling welcomed. As noted in Table 1, they connected that sense of openness and welcome with the fact the space held people from different cultural backgrounds and academic levels. When asked what could be improved, students noted the empty walls, which could have better signage and decoration.

Participants offered constructive suggestions (58% of comments in this category) to improve student access and experience at the writing center. For example, many students mentioned that it would be beneficial for the center to track appointment traffic and increase consultation appointments and consultants’ hours accordingly during peak times. As one participant explained,

During the rush time, for instance the end of semester, I think it should be able to have more consultants available. Because sometimes you have to wait like 45 minute, and... So especially the last part of the semester, it's very crowded. So instead of having five, maybe you can have... I know it's difficult because there is no more room there, but you can have, I don't know, two or three more.

Another participant shared, “For me, the thing is the time, right? If it just open from 9AM to 5PM, or 3PM, because sometimes I need to have classes, also meetings. So the time's not available for me sometimes.”

Some other useful suggestions for improving access acknowledge the way the center has set limits on numbers and appointment making as well as the need for marketing. One participant suggested letting students schedule appointments further in advance:

You can only book twice a week, and I think you can only do it a month in advance. If they took those restrictions off, I know why they do that, but if there's some sort of improvement, like if you can book for, I don't know, six weeks or something like that, that would be more helpful.

Another participant shared an idea for marketing the center:

[The International Student Office] may include information about the writing center in the weekly newsletter. Like, ‘Did you know that the writing center is located in Nicholson Hall, in Appleby. You can set the appointment...’ every week. Because I know that I have used some services of the university...because another international student recommend it to me...

There were also suggestions regarding online consulting, which has been available for more than ten years but now has become the new normal due to COVID-19. Some students would like their paper to be reviewed and co-edited via Google Doc, whereas others prefer synchronized sessions and more close interactions with the same consultant. As one student stated, “Some new international students, they might prefer to use keyboard, not just like talking directly like this.”

International students’ interactions with the Profile, the consultants, and the writing center environment are holistic, interrelated, and in alignment with their own identity and writing goals. No matter if they have extensively used the Profile or not, students are seeking opportunities to express their identity preferences, build reliable writing relationships with consultants, and experience an accessible and welcoming environment for writing consultations.

DISCUSSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

In this section, we explore how participant responses—which often took our questions about the Student Profile and writer identity and ran with them to talk more about their interactions with writing consultants and the center space more broadly—give us a fuller picture of how writing centers and other student support services can create more welcoming, accessible, and responsive spaces for international students.

Writer Identity

Our survey and focus group findings confirm our initial understandings of the Student Profile as a space for students to express their identities as writers (Nichols-Besel et al., 2019), a space that may be of special importance for international students. Our annual snapshot and analysis of what students choose to reveal about themselves in the Profile reveals that international students use the Profile at higher rates than their domestic student peers: over three years, international students averaged 52% of Profile users, although they averaged only 37% of the Center’s clientele during that same time. Similar to what we found in our previous study coding student responses to the Profile’s open “About me” text box (Nichols-Besel et al., 2019), our focus groups revealed that students are willing to share with us very explicit goals, concerns, and experiences related to writing, revealing their awareness of their own agency as learners. In all the focus group transcripts, we were struck by the knowledge the students had about how the center worked and the specific strategies they used to ensure they were able to schedule the consultations they wanted.

Our participants' comments identifying their specific needs and goals echo previous studies of international graduate students in the United States where students describe their significant writing challenges and a desire for extensive feedback, particularly around American expectations for academic writing and use of sources within one's field of study (Wolf & Phung, 2019; Ravichandran et al., 2017). Our participants valued consultants' academic, cultural, and linguistic expertise when it aligned with their own (for example, a consultant studying in one's own field or a speaker of their same first language), but also, importantly, when it did not. Several of our students appreciated having a consultant who was outside their field and outside the traditional academic hierarchy.

Consultant-Writer Relationship

Because our focus group questions addressed the consultant bios, it was not surprising that a majority of comments related to consultant identities. Our intent was to connect the Profile, where consultees provide information, with the consultant bios, where consultants provide information. Participants did see the connection: many wanted to read the bios to choose their consultant, and they commented that they did or would add information to their own Profile if they knew the consultants would read it. These online descriptions of the consultants (bios) and the writers (Profile) were seen as beginning the conversation for the human interaction that would take place in the session. Students recognize the two-way street of consultations, or "communication both ways" (Kahu & Picton, 2019). They benefit from knowing more about the consultants before beginning a session, and they understand that consultants could benefit from knowing more about them. One student imagined themselves both in the consultant's and student's position: "I see it mainly as that the consultant [has] a chance to get ready... So can be a nice thing, I think, for the consultant to [think], 'Oh, I'm going to support another student now.' ...And, I think, it's, well, from the student perspective, you don't necessarily want to share the same information every time."

This two-way street of consultations was evident in participants' conversation about the relationships they formed with consultants. In four out of five focus groups, participants mentioned the importance of finding one or two consultants to work with consistently over time. Writers want to find consultants they work well with and who get to know their writing/project so they don't have to "start over" every session. Additionally, they appreciate the encouragement they receive from consultants. Even though our participants did not specifically connect the impact of their relationship with their consultant on their writing improvement, research has shown the positive effect tutor-tutee relationships and the frequency of interaction have on student learning (Kahu & Picton, 2019; Marx et al., 2016). When we asked questions about the consultant bios, we didn't anticipate that the conversation would shift to the importance of finding a specific consultant to work with over time. But in the four focus group conversations where someone mentioned this relationship, most of the participants chimed in to agree. Relationships between writers and consultants clearly matter, and the Profile and bios are useful to initiate these relationships.

Consultees' comments about the importance of bios indicating consultants' area of study as well as strengths and personality mirror Xiao's (2012) findings where 93% of tutees indicated that tutors' personal characteristics influenced their motivation in tutoring sessions and 70% indicated the same for tutors' subject matter expertise (p. 369). These motivating factors also surfaced in our focus group discussions, with both updaters and non-updaters articulating the value of the Profile and the consultant bios as a means of building rapport with writing consultants. Some mismatches between student and tutor perspectives in Xiao's study, however, suggest that tutors "should adopt a more positive attitude to drawing on students' prior knowledge

and experience,” take “extra care” to meet students’ affective needs, and “take the initiative in approaching and accepting students” (p. 376). This conclusion echoes our participant, quoted above, who reminded us that filling out the Profile is not enough; writing consultants must check in and ask about the student and their needs.

Writing Center Environment

As noted in the Findings, a welcoming and open space created at the writing center is critical to international students’ experience. Supported by Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory in student advising and development (1977, 1979, 1992), students’ experience on campus is a complex, multi-faceted, and ever-changing system, involving the exploration of self and others, interrelational interactions with peers and professionals, and navigating U.S. academic culture. In a writing center, international students not only seek transactional writing support but also appreciate a space where they can learn, thrive, and build long-term academic relationships.

Based on the participants’ understanding of the “welcoming” environment, availability is a very critical aspect and was the first thing they discussed across all the focus groups. A majority of students confirmed that our writing center is creating a welcoming environment for international students but is not fully meeting their needs. With 42% of comments under the “Environment/space” code category related to consultant availability and time available for students, we recognize that demand is higher than supply. Therefore, we need to review the availability of appointments and be creative in fulfilling international students’ needs.

In addition, students suggested how our writing center can better advertise its services. However, they acknowledged the danger that increased visibility might reduce their own access, or as one student asked their fellow focus group participants, “If they were to advertise, do you think... we’d never get appointments because everyone knows about it?” Others agreed, replying, “That’s the only thing I’m worried about if they do that. But I want everyone to know, but I don’t” and “Keep it secret in between us.” As Banjong (2015) indicated, some international students might not be aware of where the student services centers are located and how these centers can help them. Encouraging international students to visit the campus resources will improve student experience and their academic performance (Banjong, 2015).

International Students and Writing Centers in a New Global Context

Analyzing data collected from international students in 2019 via face-to-face focus groups during the 2020 COVID-19 world-wide public health crisis gives us a greater appreciation for the space of our writing center to support international students and the writer–consultant relationships formed in that space. International students and student services providers on campus have been suffering from the uncertainty of instruction and services delivery modes during the pandemic. Our writing centers and other student services must accommodate how we offer and market our services to satisfy international students’ current concerns.

CONCLUSION

Our findings reveal that international students have many important and specific insights about our writing center and how it can best meet their needs. With the Student Profile as the touchstone for this research, we expected to see differences between Profile updaters (those who used the Profile) and non-updaters (those who did not) and between undergraduate and graduate students, but the codes and categories we identified in Table 1 were present in all the focus groups. All five focus groups included people from a variety of countries and languages, and unless a student shared that information, we did not know those demographics.

We built the Student Profile and embarked upon this research to hear the voices of our international students, who have deepened our understanding of their self-aware and strategic

approaches to higher education. With only 20 focus group participants, all writing center clients, in this study, we recognize the need for future research to hear more international student voices on our campus and on other campuses, including those unfamiliar with writing centers. In an era of isolation and division, writing centers and other student support services must take the initiative in opening up such conversations with and among our students to create the conditions for their success.

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