

Writing Center Decisions

ENGL 2795, Exploring Writing Centers, Spring 2026 Group Research Report



Figure 1. Student researchers from ENGL 2795, Exploring Writing Centers

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Executive Summary

In Spring 2026, eighteen undergraduate, service-learning writing tutors, who were enrolled in ENGL 2795, Exploring Writing Centers at the University of Vermont, conducted a group research project to investigate the educational decisions students make to use the writing center—or not. A decision to use academic support is made by an individual student, but it is also shaped by broader social forces. Our goal was to gain a deeper understanding of usage choices, find ways to improve our outreach to students and faculty, and make recommendations to our campus partners about how to effectively connect students to our services.

The class split into four groups. One conducted a literature review to contextualize our research within ongoing scholarly conversations about who chooses to use writing centers. Another focused on UVM faculty attitudes toward writing and the writing center and whether or how they encourage student use. A third group explored how the Undergraduate Writing Center promotes its services, and the fourth group asked UVM students to tell them more about their choices to use or not use the writing center.

Each group conducted research, analyzed results, and wrote up their summary report. The groups then reconfigured into synthesis teams to draft an executive summary, to prepare slides and present this research to an audience of UVM community partners, and to unify the summary reports into this final report. This comprehensive report aims to communicate our findings and recommendations to the UVM community and beyond.

Key Findings

Across the different research groups, we found that:

- The Undergraduate Writing Center is viewed positively by students and faculty as welcoming, friendly, and useful.
- Students who choose to use the writing center report that faculty encouragement and incentives matter, which contrasts faculty participants' beliefs about not having influence on student use of academic resources.
- Students who do not use the writing center report not needing writing support. In contrast, faculty believe that today's students are underprepared for reading and writing in college and need more support.
- Broad structural and cultural pressures shape individual decisions about using the writing center—such as time constraints, stigma, and preferences for individualist or informal approaches to navigating academic challenges over use of collaborative, institutionally sponsored support.
- While GenAI use was not yet shown to replace use of the writing center, faculty, students, and writing tutors all expressed concerns about its effect on students' ability to write and to learn.
- Inclusive systems and tutor training are important for making the writing center a space where everyone feels welcomed and served.
- Despite limitations on resources and time, writing center outreach has been effective but could be even more strategic.

Recommendations

More detailed recommendations from each research group are included in the full report below. Some shared recommendations include:

- Continue messaging in our promotional materials that we offer support for *all* writers, in *all* stages, with *all* genres, in *all* disciplines.
- Emphasize in our outreach and promotional materials that writing tutors undergo rigorous training and peer-to-peer support has proven benefits—even if writers are also using AI tools.
- Create a more cohesive, consistent visual identity for our posters, slides, and swag.
- Work with Howe Library to make the signage pointing to our Howe Library basement location more prominent.
- Continue to collaborate with campus partners to connect with underrepresented users.
- Explore the use of integrated institutional systems like Brightspace, myUVM, and Navigate to increase our visibility.
- Find and/or create opportunities to educate faculty about the impact they have on student support seeking habits, how to easily access and share information with students about writing center services and resources, and how to request class visits from writing tutors.
- Continue to offer and develop a robust curriculum for writing tutor education that includes universal design for learning, critical language awareness, linguistic justice, anti-racism, social identity formation, intercultural communication, and other strategies for providing inclusive support to all students and a welcoming environment while also developing reflective learning habits for all writing tutors.

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Literature Review

Educational Choices and Writing Centers

Writing centers are shaped by the tutors, staff, writers, and institutions in which they are situated. Who uses the writing center, and why, is a complex question that considers elements of personal identity, the material and structural elements of the writing center, and institutional and societal perspectives of writing and writing support. In “Decisions... Decisions: Who Chooses to Use the Writing Center?” (2016), Lori Salem found that educational choices are a “both/and” phenomena—shaped by individual preferences but also broader social forces. In this literature review, we seek to understand how writing center scholars have asked and answered questions about how students’ perceptions, writing center policies and organization, and student demographics impact decision to visit the writing center—or not.

How Students’ Perceptions Shape Choices About Writing Center Use

Across the literature, research demonstrates that students’ perceptions of tutoring play one of the largest roles in whether they choose to visit the writing center. Studies consistently show that students leave their tutoring sessions feeling positive about their experience, often noting the helpfulness of the session and the friendliness of tutors (Clark, 1985). Despite these positive outcomes, utilization of writing centers continues to remain low, hovering around 10–20% at most colleges (Lundin & Lerner, 2025). Current research suggests that low usage rates may be correlated with students’ misunderstanding of the writing center’s purpose and the stigma associated with seeking and needing help.

Many students have misconceptions about what the writing center offers, such as believing it only focuses on proofreading or fixing grammar instead of addressing larger issues, like argument writing and organization (Buck, 2018). Misunderstanding of the writing center’s main function can be a barrier to usage, as some students may decide that scheduling an appointment is unnecessary. However, when students who hold beliefs about writing centers as “fix-it shops” actually visit the writing center, they often receive global-level feedback and realize the value of collaborative tutoring sessions. These students later expressed a positive experience and a desire to come back for future projects (Buck, 2018). Some students who expected their writing to be “checked” because it was “wrong” reported being relieved after experiencing writing tutoring (Lundin & Lerner, 2025). These findings indicate that misconceptions about the writing centers’ function can be a barrier to use, but first-hand experience can shift students’ perspectives and increase use.

Even when students do understand the breadth of writing center support, some still choose not to attend because of their perception that they do not—or should not—need help. In some studies students reported not needing help or believing their writing is already good enough as a reason not to visit the writing center (Cheatle & Bullerjahn, 2015; Clark, 1985). This perception may be further reinforced by stigma about seeking academic support. Students avoid the writing center because they do not want to be perceived as dependent or struggling, even if their writing could benefit from a tutor’s guidance (Lundin & Lerner, 2025; Salem, 2016). These beliefs indicate students’ perceptions of their own needs—not only their perceptions of the writing center—strongly influence their decision to meet with a tutor.

Examining the Writing Center as a Whole

The “functional” or “material” elements of a writing center play a role in constructing the “outward-facing” perceptions of the center. Decisions such as a physical location, the implementation of generalist vs specialist tutors, online writing centers or knowledge hubs, and the peer-to-peer tutoring model can affect the experience of both tutors and students (Walker, 1998; Carino, 2003; Trimbur, 1987). These elements contribute to a writing center’s culture and influence students’ decisions to utilize the center. Many scholars have argued for the benefits and drawbacks of having discipline-specific or generalized tutors (tutors who can help writers in all subjects, not just within their own discipline) (Walker, 1998; Kiedaisch and Dintz, 1993). When examining the quality of instruction and helpfulness of information shared by generalist tutors from the perspectives of both writing center users and university faculty, research has found that though staff felt hesitancy regarding the abilities of generalist tutors, students felt their learning was not affected by a tutors’ areas of expertise, finding their session helpful regardless (Kiedaisch and Dintz, 1993). Studies such as this bring into question how the perception of a writing center as either a “generalist” or “specialist” resource may shape students’ decisions regarding use.

Regarding appointment-making procedures and practices, providing a list of tutors’ interests and areas of concentration on writing center websites was found to make students more comfortable scheduling an appointment (Robbins and Wells, 2022). However, this information is often underutilized, as students are not aware of them, or are motivated by availability when scheduling. When presenting and sharing to prospective writing center users, centers that implemented classroom visits and engaged students in active learning better conveyed the effectiveness of the center, increasing use (Ryan and Kane, 2015). Less frequent in the literature are discussions surrounding online writing tutoring/center services and OWLs (online writing labs) (Denton, 2017). These ways of providing writing support are often not seen as the traditional “model” of the writing center; however, these alternative learning modalities could help increase accessibility and student use (Worm, 2020).

Research has examined writing centers’ inclusivity practices, such as having space on pre-session forms for writers to share preferred names, pronouns, languages spoken, and gender—which help reduce assumptions regarding identity and make sessions more comfortable (Hopkins, 2018; Jansen et al., 2019). However, these practices can fall short or backfire, pressuring students to disclose information, create an idea that identity is static, and assert that parts of one’s identity are always relevant in writing and tutoring (Alexander and Gibson, 2004; Denny, 2010). At the tutor level, writing centers whose staff span a diverse range of identities can further facilitate students’ growth as individuals, writers, and thinkers (Valentine and Torres, 2011). Yet, individual and structural-level beliefs surrounding personal identity and diversity can place tutors in a “double-bind” regarding how much they center their identity in a session and can place them in a position of over-sharing parts of themselves they otherwise would not disclose (Simpkins, 2013).

Demographic Matters: Gender, Class, and Race

Research indicates that writing center policies and perceptions matter in decisions students make, but decisions are also heavily influenced by pervasive social beliefs about gender, class, and other demographics, which writing centers don’t control (Salem, 2016).

Studies show that women visit writing centers more frequently than men. Gendered ideas of writing seem to be a large factor in this divide. Denny found assumptions about “masculine” and “feminine” ways of writing and learning writing are pervasive in men’s decisions of whether to utilize a writing center (Denny, 2010). Masculine ways of learning are often seen as independent, while feminine ways can be seen as more collaborative. Men may see a writing center as “not for them.” Furthering this idea,

Tipper finds that when writing centers are viewed as “nurturing” and “caregiving,” men may consider use of writing support as emasculating and avoid writing centers to protect their masculinity (Tipper, 1999).

Class also matters. Salem (2016) notes, “By and large, students with greater social and economic privilege make educational decisions that maintain or increase their privilege, while students with the least privilege make decisions that limit their economic and social mobility” (150). Salem describes these as decisions made by students who have access to more information, resources, and expansive views of what they can hope to achieve. This echoes Harry Denny observation from “Facing Class in the Writing Center” (2010) that “if a person is never mentored or encouraged to aspire for any possibility... sustaining oneself becomes a life passion.” Students with the least privilege are most likely to have to prioritize obtaining and holding a paying job, not accessing support that will improve their writing skills (Denny, Nordlof, Salem, 2018). Different priorities and decisions can lead to writing centers serving economically privileged students more than working-class students.

Race can also impact writing center usage. In predominantly white institutions (PWI), students of color may avoid the writing center. Barron and Grimm (2002) suggest that for a student to write “like a black person” (56) when in a predominantly white academic context requires the courage to take risks “to possibly sever ties, to insult, to ostracize oneself, not only in the classroom, but in all aspects of campus life” (57) or to “split off aspects” of identity and suppress one’s subject position and stance as a strategy for “managing academically on a campus that pretends to be colorblind” (58). Oliver (2021) also uses the concept of “writing white” to both explain that writing is sometimes viewed by Black peers as an activity for white people, as well as to describe the pressure people of color often feel to “protect” white people’s feelings (29). This double consciousness can result in steering clear of conflict as a defense mechanism. Garcia (2017) examines Mexican-American students’ aversion to writing centers, as related, but also points out that even when writing centers are actively anti-racist in their pedagogy and outreach, oftentimes Black students are the only racial group considered, which can push non-Black students of color further away from writing center support (Garcia, 2017).

Recommendations

Improve Student Perceptions

Scholars’ recommendations focus on student perceptions about the purpose of the writing center and correcting common misconceptions. Since assumptions are often corrected after a student attends a session, students may benefit from being introduced to writing tutoring early in their academic career, whether through required writing center visits, tutor-led workshops in introductory classes, or in-class presentations about what the writing center offers and how sessions are conducted. Getting students more comfortable with peer support at the institutional level may also reduce the stigma around seeking help.

Another way to better align student perceptions and actual writing center services is to clearly communicate the types of support they offer. Writing centers should investigate which services students are most interested in and emphasize these in their promotional materials. Equally conveying the messages that writing tutors can support writers who may be struggling but can also facilitate the development of higher order skills for more experienced students can shape perceptions of the writing center as a useful support for all types of writing and writers.

Writing Center Spaces, Policies, and Pedagogy

Providing engaging class visits from writing tutors can introduce students to writing center services and promote the ability of writing tutors to adapt their support to the needs and goals of all writers.

Furthermore, the image of the writing center as a useful support for all students can be increased when centers are staffed by tutors from across disciplines.

Keeping disclosure of identities (like disability, translingualism, culture, gender, sexuality) optional while still providing space to share by choice can foster inclusivity and increase comfort for all. Centers should invite writers and tutors to share personal information when they deem it important. Additionally, the curriculum used with writing tutors should focus attention on how writing tutors' identities can matter in their interactions with writers. Having regular check-ins and conversations with writing tutors around how identity may (or may not) matter helps to foster an inclusive writing center and make everyone feel heard, understood, and supported.

Inclusive Support

To reduce gender discrepancies and encourage more men to use the writing center, in addition to conversing and offering advice for what a writer might do outside of an appointment, writing centers can consider offering supervised writing time as an option and can encourage writing activity in appointments, which may feel more tangible and productive (Tipper, 1999).

Addressing the ways that class and race can give rise to complex fears and societal pressure, is also challenging. Garcia argues that writing tutors need training to be able to recognize, analyze, and address everyday racism—which can include assigned readings and reflecting in tutor journals that explore theoretical concepts about race in writing centers in connection to writing center practice and what it means to engage in anti-racist work (“Unmaking Gringo-Centers”, 2017). The combination of assigning scholarship and requiring writing tutors to reflect on how theory intersects with their practical experience can also foster class consciousness and promote better experiences for all writers.

UVM Writing Center Perspectives

Introduction

Writing center pedagogy values adaptability—we can always change and improve. This group researched how the writing center—embodied in writing tutors, outreach coordinators, and the program coordinator—viewed the writing center and promoted it in ways that shape student perceptions. We reviewed promotional materials, and we conducted two focus groups with student employee tutors and interviews with each outreach coordinator (who are student employees) and the program coordinator (who is professional staff). Our questions focused on how outreach is developed and implemented. We also wanted to know how these people perceived the center before they became employees. Finally, we wanted to hear about areas where participants felt promotion and outreach could go further or be more effective.

Promotional Materials

Undergraduate Writing Center posters and orientation slides present the Center as intentionally warm, approachable, and nonjudgmental (Figure 2). The use of humor, seasonal puns, and reassuring language like “Writing doesn’t need to be scary” or “Leaf your worries behind” aims to counter anxiety writers may feel about writing or seeking support. The messaging works rhetorically to frame the center not as a place of remediation or for judgment, but as a normal and friendly part of the writing process. This reflects what writing center scholarship often emphasizes: the importance of reducing affective barriers like fear, embarrassment, or impostor syndrome.

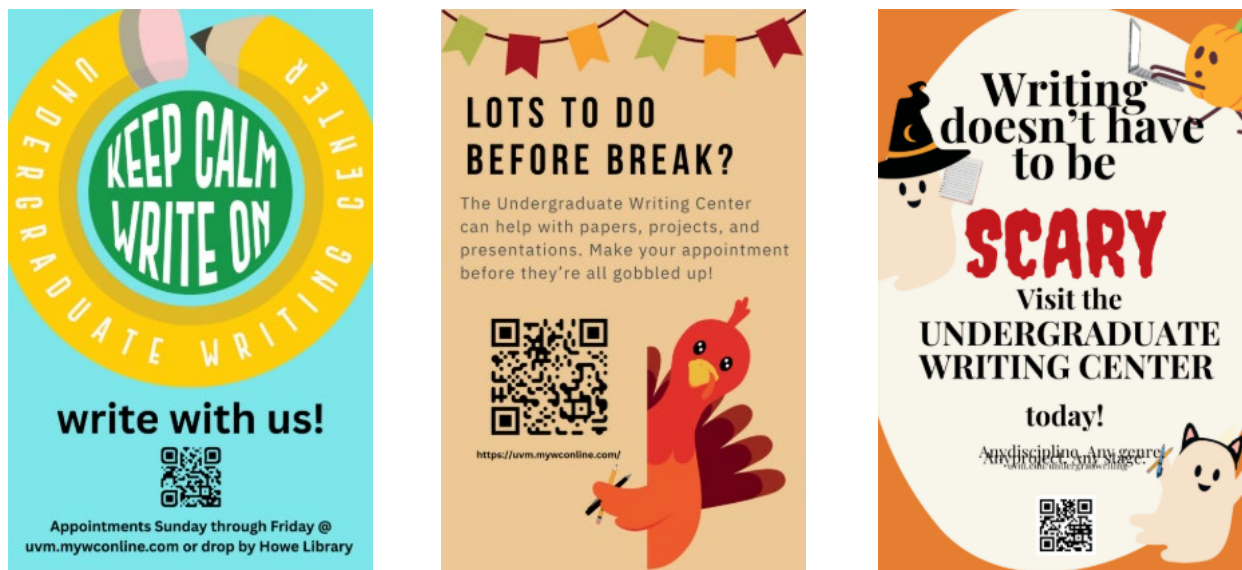


Figure 2. Three examples of undergraduate writing center posters.

Promotional materials also tend to emphasize “any project, any stage, any discipline, any genre,” often explicitly naming lab reports, presentations, and other non-traditional writing tasks, to push back against a potentially narrow definition of writing and where writing happens. The slide deck used for a presentation the Director makes during new student orientation in August and January especially strengthens this message by highlighting tutor training, peer collaboration, and adapting instruction to

writer needs and goals, presenting the center as a site of intellectual exchange rather than just proofreading.

However, the visual and rhetorical presentation across these materials could limit how effectively students recognize or trust the Writing Center as a consistent resource. The branding varies significantly, ranging from bright, playful graphics to more subdued or institutional PowerPoint slides. While each piece works individually, together they lack a strong visual identity. From a writing center studies perspective, this matters because engagement often depends on repeated low-stakes exposure; if students do not immediately recognize materials as belonging to the same service, opportunities for recognition and trust-building may be lost.

Writing Tutor Focus Groups

We asked the writing tutors who participated in our two focus groups about their experience promoting the writing center. Many had made writing center classroom visits. Several had tabled in the Davis Center. Their perception was that students had heard about the writing center, but many did not know exactly where it was located and thought the Howe Library signage pointing students to the ground floor could be improved.

Many reported informal promotion efforts, including encouraging friends to visit the writing center. One joked that their friends were “sick” of hearing about it. This was a consistent throughline; even if a tutor was not engaged in official writing center promotion, they would often promote it unofficially as an academic aid in a multitude of social situations, from friendly conversations to group work in classes. Overall, tutors felt the writing center was effectively promoting itself.

We also asked about their experience in sessions that were either required for a class or incentivized with extra credit and whether they viewed these as productive for students. Participants reported that while required or incentivized visits might affect the dynamic of a session, the overall quality of student participation was not diminished. One tutor noted that one of their personal favorite sessions was with a student who had been required to visit and left newly converted to how effective working with a writing tutor had been. While tutors said some students may not be as motivated to work collaboratively in a required session, getting students in the door was beneficial, and others noted that every session was different, making it hard to generalize about required or incentivized visits or compare them to other visits.

Tutors had concerns about the proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI) changing the way students view writing. One participant felt that some sessions are now with students trying to test if AI-generated papers sound “human enough” to turn in. Tutors regretted that these suspicions feature in some sessions and believed that generative AI, when used alone, was antithetical to writing center pedagogy of collaboration and fostering rhetorical agency. They recognized grade pressure as a major factor in students’ choices to use AI or not before or instead of visiting the writing center.

Themes from the two writing tutor focus groups included:

- Student employee writing tutors describing making formal class visits and promoting the writing center informally and socially. They felt these strategies were effective.
- Many thought that even though instructor-required visits can feel more transactional, they can also be an effective way to promote use and to counter misconceptions about the writing center.
- Writing tutors wanted to see more robust signage in Howe Library directing students to our basement location as they enter the building.

- Writing tutors were concerned about the impact of Generative AI, especially if the desire to receive high grades that could motivate students to use the writing center might make the immediacy and ease of accessing AI more attractive in comparison.

Outreach Coordinator Interviews

We conducted separate interviews with each of the undergraduate writing center's two student employee Outreach Coordinators to learn more about what they consider most important when promoting the writing center and what their perspectives were on broader outreach strategies, the intentions behind their efforts, and whether they targeted specific demographics or groups. They emphasized the writing center's goal to be open and inclusive. For example, class visits highlight the wide variety of writing projects brought to the writing center. When asked about demographics and outreach to identity-based groups and centers, the coordinators described efforts to connect with different communities, including collaborations with organizations like the Prism Center, Honors College, and First Gen. Overall, these interviews confirmed that the primary goal of writing center outreach is to increase awareness that the writing center offers inclusive support and to ensure that students understand the center is a free, welcoming, and useful resource.

A final theme that emerged was the coordinators' belief that improving awareness of the writing center's physical space could strengthen outreach efforts. For instance, they also suggested that additional library signage directing students to the basement of Howe basement, where the center is located, could make the space more visible and accessible at point of need for writers entering the Howe Library.

Program Coordinator Interview

Our final interview was with the program coordinator, a professional staff person with half of her full-time workload assigned to supporting the writing centers. She noted that posters are the easiest promotional material to create and share across campus, but there is not clear evidence to show they are effective in getting students to the writing center. However, faculty and student orientation events are important in promoting the writing center, as is evident in the data collected from a question in our scheduling system ("How did you hear about the writing center?" Top selected choices: faculty, orientation, and class visits from writing tutors.) Finding ways to build and maintain strong relationships with faculty is a priority. During new faculty orientation, information about the writing center and how to connect students to it is provided. New student orientation is also an opportunity for the writing center to connect with incoming students, and the highest number of students report hearing about the writing center during orientation and from faculty. Lastly, even though tabling events at the Davis Center lead to student awareness and engagement, these events take more time and effort to arrange. At these events and on posters, students can scan a QR code to get more information about the writing center or to book an appointment.

Finally, the program coordinator spoke to the popularity of events that include food, especially when these take place in Howe Library or in the writing center's space. She mentioned an event featuring giving away slices of cake for the center's 40th anniversary that engaged well over a hundred students in less than an hour. Even when events do not result in increased appointment bookings that same day, ongoing reminders and awareness of writing center services, and where it is located, help keep the writing center visible to students.

Overall, the program coordinator described in-person, interactive events such as tabling, in-class visits, or food events at the library, as well as promotion through faculty, as most effective. While these

promotional strategies take more effort and require more funding than creating posters does, the effort matters for student engagement and awareness.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Outreach

Not surprisingly, writing tutors largely viewed the Undergraduate Writing Center as an open and welcoming environment, which their promotion efforts emphasized. Outreach materials effectively communicate this message but could be improved. Focus groups and interviews confirm that promotion of the writing center by faculty and student writing tutors has been effective. During focus groups, writing tutors described initial doubt about whether required visits would not be effective, but in their experience, these sessions go as well as other sessions. They leaned toward encouraging faculty to require students to visit the writing center as an effective way to get students in the door. Additionally, tutors we interviewed emphasized their success in outreach via word-of-mouth. A final success that was evident in our research was that most students at tabling events and in class visits had heard of the Writing Center before. To continue these outreach efforts, adequate funding for supplies, food, and student employee hours is necessary.

Writing tutors and outreach coordinators felt that the signage pointing students to the UWC's physical location was insufficient. Because of its basement location in Howe Library, tutors shared concerns that potential tutees might see the space as intimidating or "off limits". We recommend, if possible, working with Howe Library on posting a more-prominent sign directing students to our location.

Lastly, while generally effective in countering misconceptions and stigmas about writing support, the writing center's promotional materials could be less wordy and thematically scattered. More consistent visual identity and brand cohesion could increase student recognition and engagement.

UVM Student Perceptions of the Writing Center

Introduction & Methods

Writing centers are designed to support students' development as writers and aim to remain accessible, effective, and responsive to student needs. This research group explored undergraduate students' perspectives of the writing center, how they experience its services, and what attitudes and beliefs they hold about writing and support by designing and distributing a student survey and conducting two student focus groups. The survey and focus group results indicate that students hold positive attitudes toward the writing center and value writing support, while also illustrating a significant gap between perception and actual usage.

We designed an IRB-approved student survey aimed at collecting undergraduate perspectives on awareness, usage, and experience with the writing center. We distributed the survey by tabling in high traffic student spaces (the Davis Center for six hours and Howe Library for two hours), interacting directly with students to describe the project and invite them to participate. We also distributed it digitally through email to the various student communities and campus groups we participate in. The survey remained open for approximately one month, allowing students ample opportunity to respond. Over the course of this period, 167 students started the survey, and 132 submitted a response, providing a substantial dataset for understanding student perspectives of the writing center. Students who had completed the survey and indicated a willingness to participate further were invited to take part in student focus groups and provide qualitative feedback through discussion, as participants expanded on their writing center decisions and experiences. We had hoped that we would be able to involve more than the five students who participated in the two focus groups.

Survey Results & Analysis

The student survey consisted of two sections. The first focused on writing center use or non-use, overall perception of the writing center, attitudes toward asking for help, and general impressions of the usefulness of writing tutoring. The second section asked about demographics to contextualize our data.

Use of and Attitudes toward the Writing Center

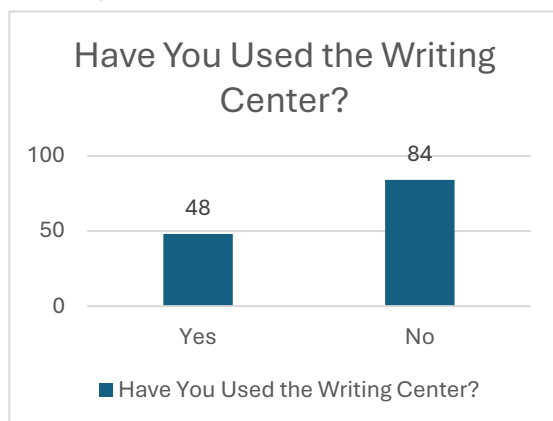


Figure 3. Reported usage percentages

Only 36% of survey participants reported having met with a writing tutor, while 64% indicated that they had not (Figure 3). Our usage data shows that in a typical academic year, fewer than 10% of undergraduate students use the writing center, which means that our survey data disproportionately reflects the perspective of users, even though more non-users participated.

Survey responses from students who use the writing center overwhelmingly show that faculty advocacy matters (Figure 4). Many students report visiting

because the resource was recommended by a faculty member (42%), encouraged through extra credit in a class (29%), required for a class (23%), or introduced through a class visit from a writing tutor (21%). Peer influence plays a positive role as well, with 19% reporting that a peer recommended it and 10%

reporting meeting with a writing tutor because they enjoy talking about writing with their peers. The 10% of users who chose “Other” shared that they needed help with a writing assignment.

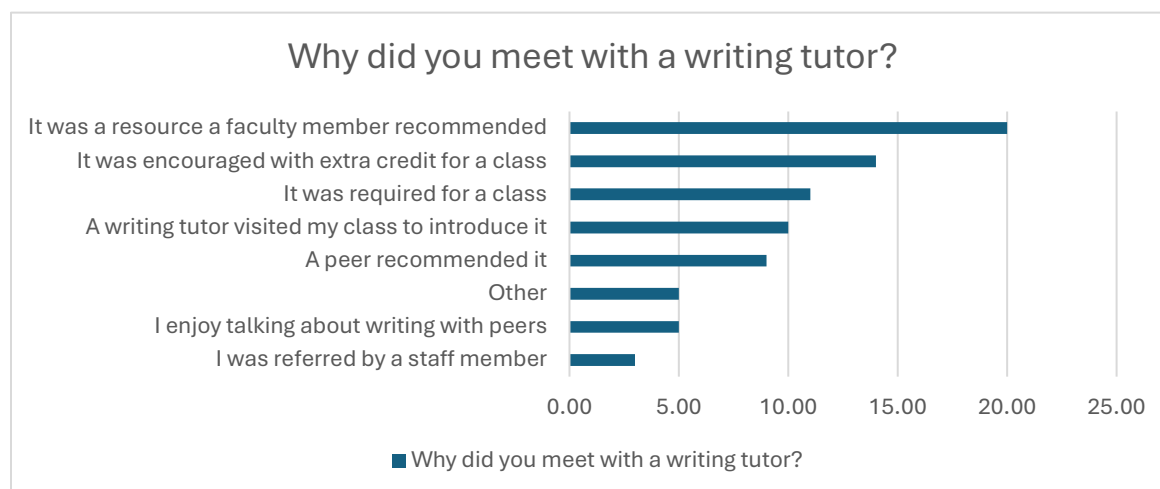


Figure 4. Usage Reasons

When respondents who reported not using the writing center were asked why (Figure 5), the most common response was they did not think they needed it (64%). Lack of time (36%) and not having any writing (29%) were also frequent. Some students reported not knowing about it (12%) and being skeptical about its usefulness (12%), both of which are of concern. Being uncomfortable (10%) was the least selected option, and the one student who chose “Other” specified, “I scheduled a meeting but forgot about it.”

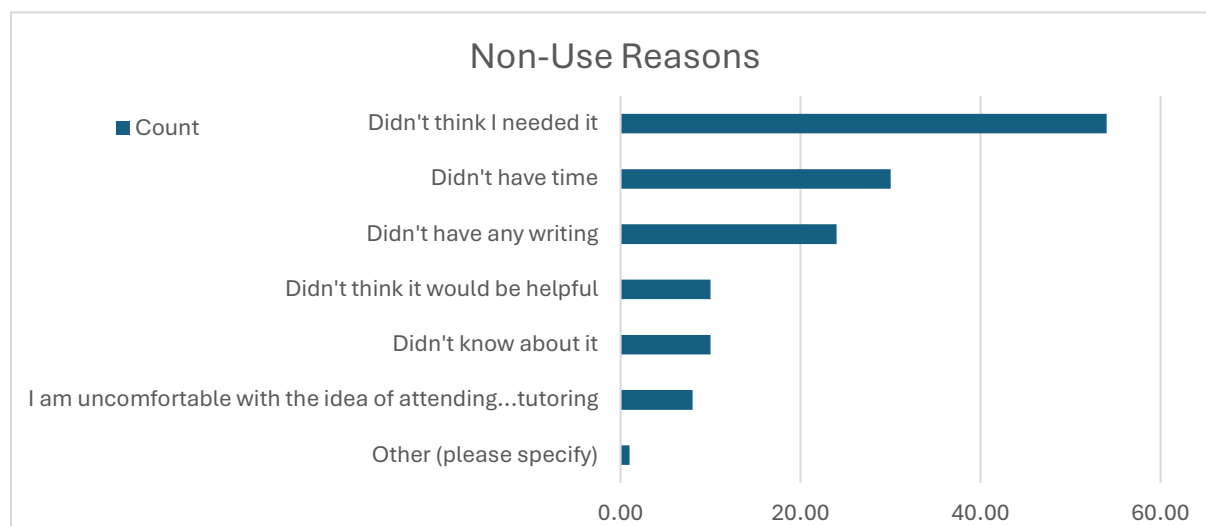


Figure 5. Non-Use Reasons

Even though most respondents reported not using the writing center, overall impressions of the writing center are overwhelmingly positive (Figure 6). Welcoming (71%) and helpful to all students (62%) were the most frequent responses, with very few respondents chose intimidating (7%) or not helpful (3%). This positive perception suggests that the choice not to use the writing center may not be about distrust of the writing center. However, we also found many students chose options that represent beliefs that we saw in the literature review and we work to counter in promotional materials and training for tutors

about approaching writing and writing support: that only struggling or novice writers benefit from support (24%) and that writing centers are only helpful for some types of writing (23%).

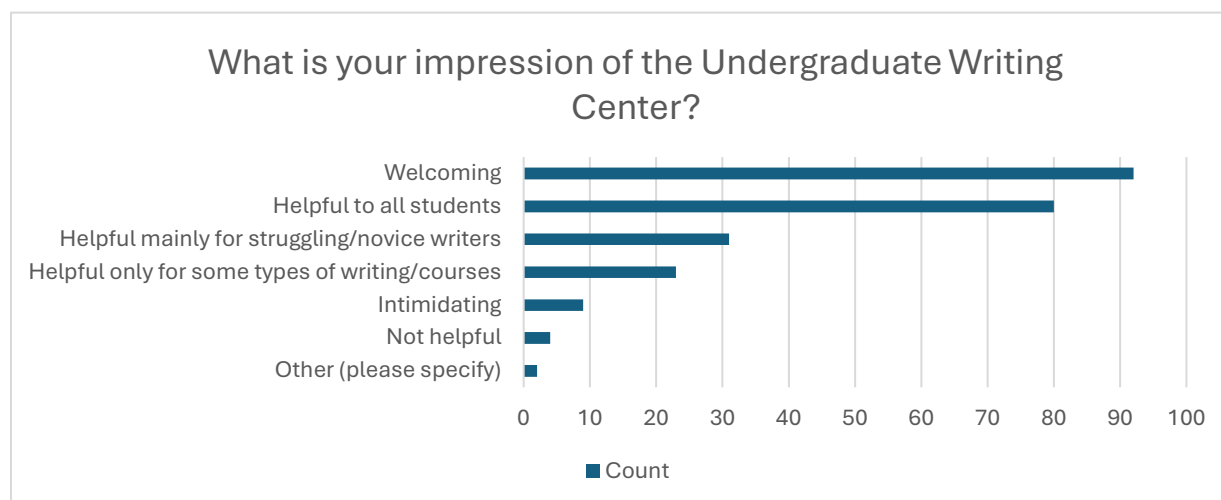


Figure 6: What is your impression of the Undergraduate Writing Center?

Attitudes toward Writing

The survey also asked about students' broader attitudes toward writing and feedback. Nearly all participants agreed that writing ability can improve with feedback and guidance (97%). A majority (68%) see asking for support as a sign of strength rather than weakness. Similarly, most respondents expressed at least moderate confidence in their writing skills, with 63% rating themselves four or five out of five, 32% selecting 3 out of 5 and only 5% choosing 1 or 2 out of 5 for their confidence level. (See Appendix B. Survey Data.) Taken together, these results suggest that students generally view writing with a growth mindset and feel confident in their abilities, which the writing center can capitalize on in outreach to and strategies with student writers.

When students encounter writing challenges (Figure 7), they most frequently report asking a friend, classmate, or peer (70%) or working through it alone (67%). Thirty-one percent would ask an instructor, and 26% would ask a parent or family member. Only 16% indicated that they would go to the writing center or other academic support program, but at least that was slightly more popular than using GenAI (12%).

This highlights a key outreach challenge for the writing center: although more students report asking for support than going it alone, they may be more likely to turn to informal, familiar, social networks rather than to the peer support provided in the writing center. While the number of students who indicated they would ask an instructor is a positive sign, and the relatively low position of GenAI is also encouraging, the

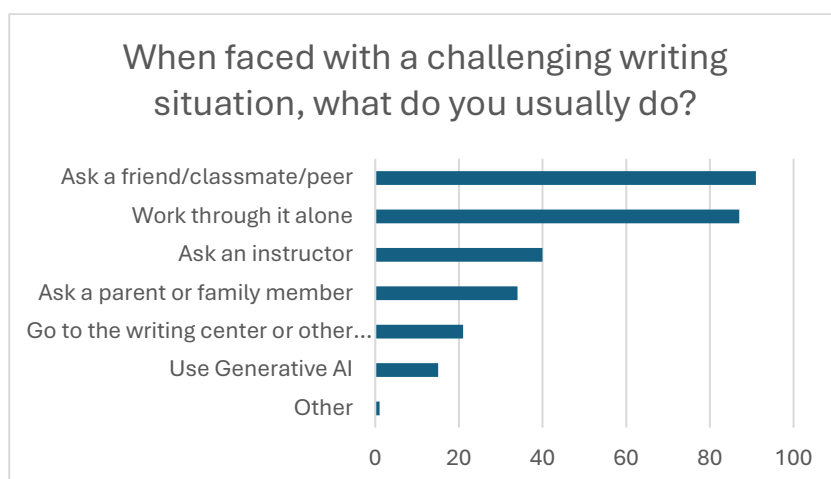


Figure 7: When faced with a writing challenge, what do you usually do?

slight difference between choosing the writing center over GenAI is of concern. These responses may reflect the importance of convenience, familiarity, and perceived authority in shaping support seeking behavior and show that students see the writing center as less useful for working through writing challenges than we would like, though we see it as valuable that writers report choosing human support more frequently than using artificial intelligence.

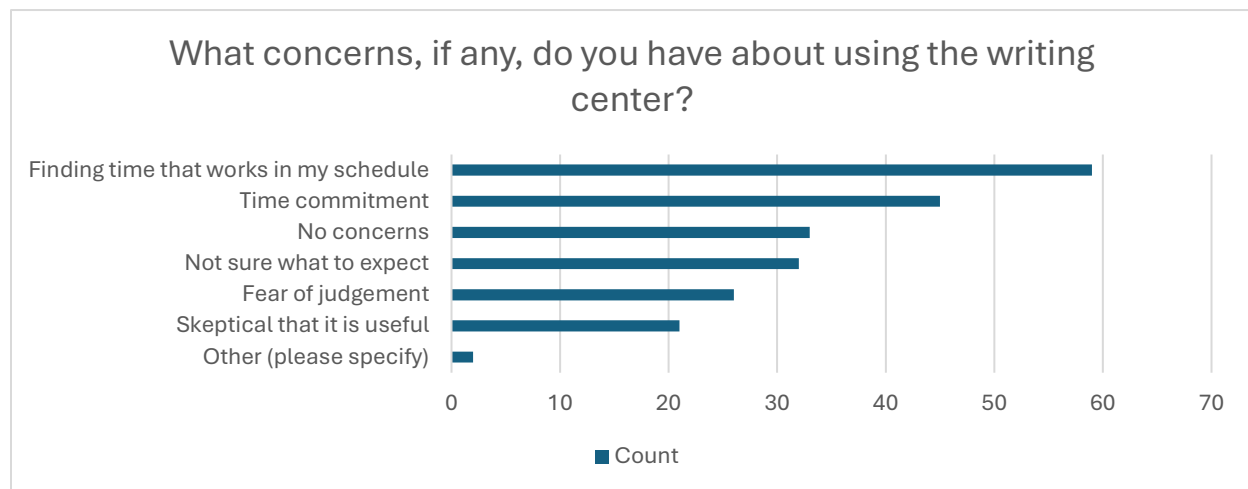


Figure 8: What concerns, if any, do you have about using the writing center?

The survey also asked about concerns that may discourage students from using the writing center (Figure 8). The most frequently chosen were time-related barriers including finding time (45%) and time commitment (35%), followed by uncertainty about what to expect (25%) and fear of judgement (20%). A quarter of respondents chose no concerns (25%), which is higher than the percentage who reported being skeptical that it is useful (16%). Clearer communication about what sessions involve, more emphasis on the collaborative and supportive nature of tutoring to allay fear of judgement, and some exposure to writing center pedagogy in writing courses could help address these concerns.

Demographics

To better understand whose perspectives were reflected in the survey responses, we asked about race and gender. Our participants identified as white (93%) more than what UVM's Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (OIRA) reports for the student body (80%). Our respondents also identified as Asian (7%), Hispanic (5%), Black/African American (2%), American Indian or Alaskan Native (1%), and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (1%), with 2% identifying with two or more races and another 2% choosing to self-specify.

UVM's OIRA reports enrollment by sex and limits the reported categories to the binary of female (62%) and male (38%). We chose to ask participants about gender identity beyond the binary, and survey participants chose their gender as women (62%), men (30%), non- binary (7%), genderqueer or gender non-conforming (3%), transgender (2%), and agender (1%). While the survey captured a broad range of gender identities, in comparison to what the institutional data suggests, the perspectives of men are still underrepresented.

We also asked "Have you used any other academic support services on campus? (for example, subject area tutoring, study skills tutoring, student accessibility services)." 53% of our participants selected "no"; 47% selected "yes." This shows that a higher percentage of respondents have accessed other academic

supports more than the writing center, but it also indicates that the majority are choosing not to use any academic supports.

Student Survey Conclusions

Overall, survey results suggest that the Undergraduate Writing Center is seen as a valuable academic resource even though it is underutilized. The data points to several factors that influence engagement, including faculty recommendations, perceptions about who the Writing Center is for, and students' existing habits for seeking help. By continuing to strengthen classroom outreach, clarifying the benefits of peer tutoring for all writers, and addressing common concerns, the writing center may be able to bridge some of the gap between positive perception and actual use.

Focus Group Analysis

By convening student focus groups, we aimed to explore more deeply the themes that emerged from the survey. However, we were not as successful at recruiting participants as we hoped to be. We conducted two focus groups with a total of five participants and asked them to discuss their reasons for writing center use or non-use. Participants who had used the writing center were asked how they found it and what their overall perceptions of it were. We recorded and transcribed the focus groups and identified the following themes.

Those who have used the writing center shared reasons that aligned with the survey results reflecting the influence of faculty. Students were encouraged by professors, sometimes with extra credit provided as an incentive, *"I've gone to the Writing Center for, I have certain classes where the professor will give you extra credit if you go."* They perceived it positively before going, reported hearing professors and peers describe it in positive terms, and had positive experiences of their own, which also played a role in students returning to the writing center: *"I came here and it worked so I'll come back."*

A theme that emerged was how a student's major and the frequency of writing assignments in that curriculum shapes their use of the writing center. Majors with heavier writing emphasis were more likely to use it: *"I have a major that is a lot of writing so like I personally come here"; "I haven't been yet because I haven't had any writing intensive stuff."*

Discussion of artificial intelligence (AI) as a reason why students don't use the writing center allowed students to expand on the possibility of AI replacing writing tutors. While participants did not report use of AI, they thought their peers were using it rather than coming to the writing center: *"I think it already is [in response to AI possibly replacing writing tutoring]."*

Focus Group Conclusions

Overall, the student focus groups were valuable, even though the number of participants was low. Focus groups affirmed that students view the writing center positively, seeing it as helpful and welcoming, and drew attention to the broader social forces that can affect usage, such as students feeling too busy or overwhelmed to visit for support despite their positive views of it. The writing center could consider offering and advertising more frequent "Write-In" events where students can come write on their own with the option to consult a writing tutor as needed. Another strategy could be to reach out to students who already use other academic supports to encourage them to test out the writing center.

UVM Faculty Perceptions & Communication

Introduction and Methods

Faculty communicate their attitudes to students explicitly and implicitly—sometimes through silence—which can encourage or hinder students’ use of academic support. Faculty can endorse the use of resources in syllabi, assignments, and in class, or they can remain silent or even discourage use. To investigate faculty perceptions of and communication about the writing center, we collected and analyzed 50 syllabi and conducted interviews with six faculty. The syllabi were supplied by the students in ENGL 2795, Exploring Writing Centers, and were from the other courses they were enrolled in during Spring 2026. They were from a range of majors, disciplines, and colleges. They were spread across course levels with 19 at the 1000-level, 17 at the 2000-level, 12 at the 3000-level, and 2 at the 5000-level.

Syllabi Review

College	Count of syllabi	Writing is assigned	Writing center mentioned	Other resources mentioned
CALS	4	2	1	2
CAS	24	15	2	9
CEMS	2			2
CESS	6	4	3	5
CNHS	3	2		1
GSB	5	2		1
HCOL	1	1		1
RSNER	4	4		3
LCOM	1	1		1
Total	50	31	6	25

Figure 9. Count of Syllabi by College and whether writing is assigned, the writing center is mentioned, and if other sources are mentioned.

Only six out of the 50 syllabi (12%) mention writing center support (Figure 9). Of those, one is from CALS at the 1000-level; two are from CAS, with one at the 1000 and one at the 3000-level; and three are from CESS, with one at the 2000-level and two at the 5000-level (which mention the Graduate Writing Center). However, 31 of the 50 syllabi (62%) indicate that the courses include writing assignments. Half (25) of all syllabi mention other student support services such as the UVM Libraries, Student Accessibility Services (SAS), and Counseling & Psychiatry Services (CAPS).

Faculty Interviews

Syllabi are not the only way faculty endorse use of academic support. Academic resources, including the writing center, may be mentioned in class or during office hours, and may be included in writing assignments. To gather more information about faculty perspectives and habits, researchers created a semi-structured set of questions to address topics such as writing pedagogy and teaching methods, attitudes toward the writing center, and faculty perspectives on AI. We contacted seventeen faculty members across colleges and disciplines and asked them to participate in an anonymous interview. Eleven never responded; six agreed to participate—one from the College of Education and Social Services (CESS), one from Grossman School of Business (GSB), and four from the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS), with one of those four in a STEM field, one in a Social Science and two in Humanities fields. Interviews lasted between 15-30 minutes and were recorded and transcribed for accuracy.

Writing in the Disciplines

Faculty participants all described writing as a valuable skill. There were disciplinary differences in the role of writing in courses and the expectations and conventions for writing in different fields. Humanities faculty described writing as a central skill oriented towards analysis, argumentation, and research, with a focus on writing as a means for critical thinking, interpreting, and communicating. Humanities faculty emphasized scaffolding writing projects at all levels of course work to help students develop effective and iterative processes that incorporate peer review and revision. The Social Science faculty member described the role of writing played in the curriculum shifting by course level. In introductory and large lecture classes, they tended to use multiple choice or fill in the blank assessments for demonstration of command of material. At the intermediate level, they were more likely to have students demonstrate their understanding of course material through writing assignments that start asking students to develop original arguments. Finally, upper-level writing emphasized research and involved the creation of new knowledge in the field, such as in a senior thesis or research projects. The CAS STEM faculty member viewed writing as crucial for the ability to process information and convey it to others. This faculty member noted that even though many STEM classes do not involve writing intensive assignments, scientific writing skills are necessary, and as STEM students advance, writing becomes an important part of communicating scientific research.

Because business writing prioritizes conciseness and directness, the GSB faculty member noted that some faculty have been hesitant to endorse the writing center out of concern that writing tutors might not understand how to coach students to use the conventions valued in business writing that differ from other academic fields. GSB had hired a writing coach and referred students there, but recently, this position was cut. This GSB faculty member thought their colleagues were becoming aware that writing tutors are trained to understand disciplinary differences and were developing a more positive perception of the writing center as a source of student support.

Overall, these faculty participants saw the writing center as a useful and positive resource that helps students improve their writing. They valued the generalist approach and believed that generalist writing tutors could help writers in different disciplines understand the purpose of writing assignments and provide valuable feedback.

Faculty Concerns about Student Writing

A theme among the Humanities faculty was a perception that over the past decade, students lack strong mechanics and the ability to create depth in their writing. Some blamed inadequate preparation at the secondary school level. They felt that students struggle to get started and don't have effective writing

processes or the habit of using resources like support for research and writing. Many believe that good readers make good writers; however, they see students struggle to identify peer-reviewed, academic sources and to read them critically. One reported encouraging use of the writing center but found students did not make appointments and still procrastinated starting and completing assignments.

The impact of generative AI was also a theme, about which beliefs varied. While one faculty member in English described students as often firmly against use of AI and committed to traditional writing methods, others thought that AI has made some students think developing writing skill as optional. Even if students still value developing writing skills, faculty are concerned that the tools are hard to resist and worry that students may be more inclined to use AI instead of the writing center.

A shared concern amongst the Humanities, Social Sciences, and STEM faculty was whether stigma is a barrier to use if students believe that the writing center is only for weak writers in need of remediation. To counter misconceptions, faculty participants described urging students to view the writing center as useful for all writers. They felt writing center class presentations were beneficial in communicating the value of peer tutoring for writers at any skill level, for any kind of assignment. They were also concerned that students might see writing tutors as copy editors, focused solely on mechanics, and may be less likely to visit while in their planning or drafting phases. The STEM faculty member described the writing center as giving students another pair of eyes and engaging them in productive activities such as “iteration”—the activity of reviewing writing as part of an ongoing process that produces better writing. Other humanities faculty agreed with this sentiment, arguing that the writing process is never “finished,” and drafts can always be further polished or re-examined in new contexts.

Interestingly, one faculty member who described often referring first and second year students to the writing center, does not recommend the resource to Juniors and Seniors because they should already be aware of it and the faculty member is providing feedback on student writing. This faculty member seemed to take an either/or rather than both/and approach. This attitude may shape student belief that if a professor, who is an authority figure, is supportive, students couldn’t also seek peer support. Or it may reinforce the belief that the writing center is only for weak or novice writers working on basic skills and is not suitable for more advanced assignments. Students may believe that upperclassmen “outgrow” the writing center as a result. Ironically, this same faculty member gave an example of an already strong writer who improved the quality of an Honors Thesis project by working with a writing tutor weekly as a writing partner.

Recommendations from Faculty

While participant faculty generally viewed the writing center as a valuable support, they questioned whether they had any influence on students’ use of resources. They noted students’ general lack of use of academic supports, specifically their own office hours. Some found it challenging to set aside precious class time to endorse use of resources—even the ten minutes that a visit from a writing tutor takes to introduce the writing center. One faculty member noted that if the writing center offered a five-minute presentation that does not require slides or a projector, they would be more willing to allocate class time to increase student awareness of the service. Another request was for the writing center to provide a copy-paste summary of the writing center and its resources for syllabi. Faculty also suggested stronger outreach through short, concise, and bold emails, that emphasize the brevity of the class time needed to present and provide multimodal announcements periodically during the semester about accessing writing center support that they can share with students.

These faculty also emphasized that faculty have an important role to play in destigmatizing use of academic support among students by making time in class and during office hours to encourage

students to utilize the resources at their disposal. Faculty also believe in the importance of educating students about the limitations of AI and including critical AI literacy in the curriculum.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Writing Center Outreach to Faculty

Across disciplines, our faculty participants support the mission of the writing center and value peer-to-peer writing support as an academic resource, even when they suspect that student may misperceive the writing center as intended for remediation, serving weak or underprepared writers. There was a shared anxiety among our participants that students in the age of GenAI may not see the importance of developing writing skills as central to critical thinking, argumentation, and expression.

However, our interviews also revealed a consistent pattern that faculty are not fully aware that writing tutors can visit their classes by request and that they can find [cut and paste language for syllabi](#) on our website. Even these writing center-friendly faculty were not aware of the diverse and flexible skills of writing tutors that extend across disciplines. Though the Undergraduate Writing Center sends a reminder of the different ways faculty can connect students to writing support at the start of every semester, clearly, we need to promote our services and strategies for faculty to share information more effectively and frequently. One strategy for bridging this attention gap could be to send regular reminders of the Writing Center services that faculty can forward to their classes with multimodal texts they can share in Brightspace or elsewhere.

Appendices

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Appendix 2. Student Survey

Student Perspectives Survey Responses: Perspectives Questions

Total Responses: 167 [35 non-responses; 132 responses]

For each question, the most commonly selected answer is highlighted in blue with italicized text. The least commonly selected answer is highlighted in yellow with underlined text.

Q1: I am at least 18yo and chose to participate in this survey

- *Yes: 100%*
- No: 0%

Q2: Have you met with a UWC writing tutor?

- Yes: 36%
- *No: 64%*

Q2 Follow-up: If yes, why?

- Required for a class: 23%
- Encouraged w/ extra credit for a class: 29%
- *Resource a faculty member recommended: 42%*
- A writing tutor visited my class to introduce it: 21%
- Referred by a staff member: 6%
- Peer recommended it: 19%
- I enjoy talking about writing w/ my peers: 10%
- Other: 10%

Q2 Follow-up: If not, why?

- Didn't have any writing: 29%
- Didn't know about it: 12%
- *Didn't think I needed it: 64%*
- Didn't think it would be helpful: 12%
- Didn't have time: 36%
- I am uncomfortable with the idea of writing tutoring: 10%
- Other (please specify): 1%
 - 1 Response: "I scheduled a meeting but forgot about it."

Q3: What is your impression of the UWC? *Check all that apply.*

- *Welcoming: 71%*
 - Helpful to all students: 62%
 - Helpful mainly for struggling/novice writers: 24%

- Helpful only for some types of writing/courses: 18%
 - Intimidating: 7%
- **Not helpful: 3%**
 - Other (please specify): 2%
 - 2 Responses: “I’ve never been” and “None.”

Q4: Do you think of asking for support as a sign of strength or weakness?

- **Strength: 68%**
- Weakness: 5%
- Neither: 14%
- Depends: 11%
- **Not sure: 2%**

Q5: How confident are you in your writing skills?

- **1 star: 1%**
- 2 stars: 4%
- 3 stars: 32%
- **4 stars: 42%**
- 5 stars: 21%

Q6: Are you comfortable sharing your writing with others for feedback?

- Always: 35%
- **Sometimes: 41%**
- Neutral/It Depends: 14%
- Rarely: 9%
- **Never: 1%**

Q7: When you are in a challenging writing situation, what do you do? *Check all that apply.*

- Work through it alone: 67%
- Ask an instructor: 31%
- **Ask a friend/classmate/peer: 70%**
- Ask a parent or family member: 26%
- Go to the writing center or other academic support programs: 16%
- **Use Generative AI: 12%**
 - Other (please specify): 1% (1 Response)

Q8: Do you believe writing ability can improve with feedback and guidance?

- **Yes: 97%**
- **No: 2%**
- Not sure: 2%

Q9: What concerns, if any, do you have about using the Writing Center? *Check all that apply.*

- Time commitment: 20%
- Finding time that works in my schedule: 16%
- Fear of judgement: 25%
- Skeptical that it is useful: 16%
- Not sure what to expect: 25%
- No concerns: 25%
- Other (please specify): 2% (2 Responses)

Q10: Beliefs about the Writing Center

Q10A: Do you think that the Writing Center can help writers develop their skills?

- Yes: 96%
- No: 0%
- Unsure: 4%

Q10B: Do you believe visiting the Writing Center can improve the confidence of writers?

- Yes: 92%
- No: 2%
- Unsure: 6%

Q10C: Do you believe using the Writing Center can contribute to good grades?

- Yes: 96%
- No: 0%
- Unsure: 4%

Demographic Questions (optional)

Demo1/Q11: With what race do you identify? *Select all that apply.* If you do not wish to answer this question, skip it.

- American Indian or Alaskan Native: 1%
- Asian: 7%
- Black/African American: 2%
- Hispanic: 5%
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander: 1%
- White: 93%
- Two or more: 2%
- Prefer to self-specify (please specify): 2% (2 Responses)

Demo2/Q12: What best describes your gender identity? *Select all that apply.* If you do not wish to answer this question, skip it.

- Man: 30%
- **Woman: 62%**
- Transgender: 2%
- Non-binary: 7%
- Genderqueer/Gender non-conforming: 3%
- Agender: 1%
- **Two-spirit: 0%**
- Prefer to self-specify (please specify): 0% (No Responses)

Demo3/Q12: Have you used any other academic support services on campus? (for example: Subject Area Tutoring, Study Skills Tutoring, Student Accessibility Services, etc.) If you do not wish to answer this question, skip it.

- **Yes: 47%**
- **No: 53%**

Appendix 3. AI Disclosure Statement

Writing Centers recognize the challenge posed by generative artificial intelligence (genAI) in higher education broadly and how it has impacted students' writing and thinking processes and their choices about seeking writing support. Collectively, we are concerned about reliance on genAI atrophying thinking and writing skills or hindering the process of skill building. GenAI also has environmental impacts, ethical problems, and the potential to amplify bias and inequality. We also recognize there may be benefits to becoming AI literate and using AI tools appropriately, though we are skeptical at present that benefits will outweigh the drawbacks, especially when corporations who have invested the most and have the most to gain drive the pressure to adopt AI without regulating or limiting use.

In this research project, the Principal Investigator, Undergraduate Writing Center Director Sheila Boland Chira, used genAI in two ways.

1. Early in January 2026, she prompted Copilot to generate a draft student survey which was used by student perspective researchers to jump start their design of our student survey. This choice was influenced by time constraints from needing IRB review, launching and promoting the survey, and collecting and analyzing data in one semester. The group modified the draft significantly to reflect what they wanted to know about student perspectives, beliefs, habits, and identities.
2. Toward the end of the semester, after each research group had submitted a summary report and a synthesis group had drafted an executive summary, we also faced time constraints to finalize the report. Sheila uploaded the findings and recommendations from each group and tasked Copilot with identifying themes and suggesting an organizational structure. The Copilot generated version was long, repetitive, and vague, but it did inform what we included in the Executive Summary in Key Findings and Recommendations. Because of the agreement between UVM and Microsoft, what was provided to Copilot will not be used to train the LLM.