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Decisions ... Decisions: Who Chooses to Use the Writing Center?

Abstract

Writing centers commonly say that they are “open to all students,” but not all students are equally likely to visit the writing center. This study offers a comparative analysis of users and non-users, and it reveals significant differences in the academic and demographic characteristics of the two groups. The author explores the reasons for those differences and proposes changes in writing center practices.

When I began high school in 1977, I was enrolled in advanced-track math classes, and I was proud to be recognized as “good at math.” But by the time I got to senior year, I had chosen to opt out of the advanced track. Why? If you had asked me at the time, I would have said that math was boring. I couldn’t imagine myself in a math-related career, so the whole exercise seemed pointless. Add to that the fact that the kids in the lower-level classes seemed much cooler than the math geeks in the advanced classes, and for me, the choice was clear. When I finally had an opportunity to select my own pathway, I signed up for the easiest, cheesiest math class I could find.

I start with this story because it brings the complicated and much-researched topic of “educational choice” down to the level of the everyday and personal. We all make choices about our educational pathways. If you’re reading this, you’ve already made many of them in your life. These decisions are significant because they have consequences for how education works, both for individuals and for society as a whole. Broadly speaking, the system of education in the US is designed to provide “opportunities” for people to achieve economic mobility and success; however, whether an individual makes good on these opportunities depends in part on the decisions he or she makes. Some educational decisions are obviously consequential. Should I go to college or not? Which college should I go to? What should I major in? These are all decisions that dramatically shape the outcomes of our educational pathways. However, we all also make a slew of smaller “micro” decisions, like whether to join a club, or take the easier math class, or to visit the writing center. These small choices can also shape our outcomes, albeit sometimes in less obvious ways.

Educational choices are tricky, and the way we make choices is influenced in a complicated way by the environments in which we live. For example, the decisions about whether to go to college and what to major in are often influenced by the information that students have access to. Students with professional, college-educated parents have access to a regular stream of rich information about life at college and life in professional careers. This information serves as a powerful resource for them when they make decisions of their own. Students whose parents did not go to college have much more limited access to that resource, and they must somehow make decisions without it. Moreover, educational decisions are also influenced by implicit social beliefs about what certain people—girls, boys, African-Americans, Asians—are supposed to want from education, and are supposed to be good at. Such beliefs are pervasive. We all contend with them, and they affect all of us, even, or perhaps especially, when we are unaware of them.

Here's the thing about educational decisions. When we make them, they feel purely personal. For example, when I made my decision to step away from advanced math classes, I had clear personal reasons for doing so. I preferred my arts/humanities courses to math class, and I preferred the company of the cool kids. Those preferences were absolutely real—I know this because they drove other decisions I made at that time, not just the math-track decision. And yet they can't be the whole story, because when I opted out of advanced math classes, I was just one of many girls across the country who were making the same choice. In fact, for my generation (and others), there was a veritable exodus of girls from STEM subjects in high school and college (Wilson and Boldizar; Randour et al.). So did it just so happen that all of those girls, myself included, preferred not to take advanced math? Or was something bigger going on that was encouraging us to adopt those preferences?

In the end, educational decisions are a “both-and” phenomenon. They are shaped both by our own personal preferences *and* by broader social factors, and it is important to hold both dimensions in mind. But doing that—holding both dimensions in mind—really requires that we work insistently to see the broader social dimensions of decision making. The personal dimensions of educational decisions are only too present in our minds, and only too easy to recognize. The social dimensions, by contrast, have to be excavated. They become visible only if we look for them. If an educational pathway is like a tree, then the social forces that shape the pathway are like roots. If you see a beautiful and flourishing tree—or a small and spindly one—you have to remind yourself that what is above the surface is just part of the picture.

There is a very substantial body of research in the sociology of higher education that is aimed at trying to see the “roots” of educational decisions. This research began with, and continues to rely on, large-scale quantitative analyses that look at how the educational decisions of students across the country are correlated with such variables as race, class, gender, ethnicity and age.¹ In addition to those analyses, there are also studies that investigate micro decisions, and studies that use qualitative methods to investigate the processes by which decisions are made: where do students get advice about college and what kind of

1 See McDonough (especially pp. 3-8) for a succinct introduction to this literature. See also DiMaggio (1982), Lee (1993), Davies & Guppy (1997), Hurtado, Inkelas, Briggs, & Rhee (1997), and Lucas (2001).

information do those people have access to, what kinds of advice are students given, and how do they make sense of it?²

Taken together, all of this research paints a grim picture of a system of education that is sharply stratified from pre-K through university. Although we may think of education as the “great equalizer” that drives social and economic mobility, the fact is that it often serves to reproduce social and economic hierarchies, and educational decisions are one of the points at which that reproduction takes place. 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. This is not because privileged students “want” success more than their peers, it is because their decisions are rooted in ample information, access to resources, and expansive views of what they can expect to achieve.

In this article, I draw on both the theories and methods of the sociological research in higher education to investigate students’ “choice” to use the writing center. To be sure, choosing to use the writing center is a “micro” decision. As choices go, it is not nearly as consequential as, for example, deciding whether to go to college or not. But even small decisions can have a cumulative effect on students’ pathways through college. Moreover, the decision to use or not use the writing center offers us a unique window into the writing center. Writing centers are one of the few places where college students have the opportunity to choose the type and amount of writing instruction they will receive. As such, their choices can reveal how society shapes understandings of implicit ideas about writers, writing, and writing instruction in higher education.

The Concept of “Choice” in Writing Center Professional Discourse

“Choice” is a vexed concept in writing center professional discourse.³ It usually isn’t a direct focus of our scholarship or research, and there is virtually no research about it, except in one case that I will discuss

2 McDonough (1997), Mullen (2011), and Stuber (2012), all present monograph-length studies of qualitative research related to educational decision-making.

3 In what follows, I use the term “writing center professional discourse” as an umbrella term that encompasses 1. published academic texts, like articles in *Writing Center Journal*; 2. unpublished conversations on WCenter and other informal settings; and 3. the often discontinuous relationships between the two.

below. Nevertheless, our work is powerfully shaped by our profession's implicit beliefs about what the choice to use the writing center "means." On the most basic level, writing center professionals view a student's choice to use the writing center in positive terms. Visiting the writing center is a good thing—something that we value and approve of. The choice is understood as a student's personal decision to invest time and energy in working on a piece of writing. We may recognize the fact that the visit is usually instigated by a required assignment, so in that sense, the decision is not entirely "free" or personal. We may also recognize that the student's goal for visiting the writing center is about grades, rather than about writing, *per se*. Nevertheless, writing center pedagogies are meant to uncover and encourage the personal writerly motivation that we presume to be in there somewhere, even if it is initially hidden. To that end, when students explain that they chose to visit because they want to get a good grade ("a better paper"), we counter by offering them an opportunity to invest in the longer term project of writerly development ("be a better writer").

Students' choice to visit the writing center is also understood as an endorsement of the writing center itself. This can be seen in the market-based logic of evaluating writing centers based on usage. If there is strong "consumer demand" for the writing center's "product," then it must mean that the center is doing something right. This means that we (and others in the university) implicitly equate students' choice to visit with an endorsement of some specific element of our centers, whether that is our pedagogies, our space, our location, or our tutors' friendly attitudes. For example, if the writing center's pedagogies are oriented toward long-term writerly development rather than short-term "fix-up" services, then we might interpret students' choice to use the center as their approval of our pedagogical approach.

It is a peculiar feature of writing center research that there has been no meaningful investigation of the decision *not* to come to the writing center.⁴ Nevertheless, our professional discourse reflects a lot of anxiety about non-visits. Specifically, we worry that non-visits happen when students have gotten the idea that the writing center is "remedial." If they think that going to the writing center is stigmatized, then they will choose not to visit, even if they genuinely want help with their writing. Therefore, most writing centers work hard to control how the writing center is represented to students. We assiduously avoid remedial

4 Non-visitors are mentioned in Bishop (1990) and Clark (1985), but they are not the focus of either article. Both articles report that students say they don't visit because they don't have enough time.

language in our own advertisements. Instead we say that our services are “open to all students,” and that we serve “students at all levels” and at “all stages of the writing process.” These are welcoming and inclusive messages, but the underlying purpose for saying them is not just to be friendly, but to signal that we are not remedial.⁵

And this brings us to the one way that “choice” is explicitly addressed in our professional discourse: namely, as part of a question related to voluntary vs. mandatory visits. Is it okay for students to be required to visit the writing center? Or should students always come to the writing center by choice? The standard response to this has been that students should come by choice, most, if not all, of the time. Many writing centers have policies that limit mandatory visits, and a few ban them entirely.⁶ The first rationale for this is that voluntary visits are better pedagogically; students who visit by choice are more motivated, and they get more out of the tutoring sessions. However, a second rationale—which is perhaps the more powerful one—is that student “choice” supports a non-remedial profile for the writing center, whereas mandatory visits are associated with remedial writing centers. Stephen North (1984) laid out the argument for this position in “The Idea of a Writing Center.” He argued that faculty who require students to visit the writing center are implicitly teaching them that writing centers are places where you go to get your writing deficiencies (i.e. grammar problems) fixed, a process that is so embarrassing and unpleasant that naturally students wouldn’t do it unless it was required. Such requirements, and the faculty who made them, were “out of line,” in North’s view, because they were trampling on the writing center director’s efforts to promote a more positive vision of the writing center.

In writing center discourse, then, the “choice” to visit the writing center is understood as a reflection of the students’ admirable commitment to themselves as writers, and as an endorsement of the writing center and its pedagogies, location, etc. Choice is also understood as something that separates writing centers from the stigma of remediation, and as such it is the preferred precondition for our tutoring pedagogy, and it is part of our professional self-definition. Implicitly, then, we see the decision to use the writing center as something that is rightfully “owned” by the student—ideally, they should always be free to decide

5 See Grutsch McKinney (2013), especially pp. 68–73, for a critical discussion of writing centers’ claim that they serve “all students,” which is, she says, “a lie.”

6 This may be changing. A recent *CompPile* bibliography demonstrating that required visits could be effective garnered a lot of positive attention. See Rendleman (2013).

whether to visit. Part of the writing center director's job is to ensure that those choices aren't usurped by any professors, administrators, or university policies.

This idea of choice posits the individual student as a free agent who lives in society, but thinks and acts independently from it. (Or at least, who *could* think and act independently, if only others would get out of the way.) It focuses narrowly on what individual students want and perceive in the moment, and on explicit communications in the immediate local context (i.e. what we say and what our colleagues say about the writing center). This view leads us to a fairly simple theory of action. If we want students to visit the writing center, we should flood our environments with "correct" non-remedial messages about the writing center. If we discover that faculty members are giving "incorrect" messages about our work, we should counter those messages by reiterating our policies and practices. If we do those things, students will visit by choice.

Yet all around us we can find hints that students' decisions about visiting the writing center are shaped by ideas that are neither local nor immediate. We have been enacting our vision of non-remedial writing centers for decades now, and flooding our campuses with "correct" messages about writing center work. At this point, there are very few writing centers left in the country that advertise their services in explicitly remedial terms. So, why do we still regularly encounter faculty, students, and administrators who have "incorrect" views about the writing center? Why hasn't the idea of a remedial writing center withered away already? The sociological research would argue that this is because we can shape what the writing center *does* much more easily than we can shape what visiting the writing center *means*. That meaning is not ours alone to define, and our ability to shape what other people believe is fundamentally limited. Trying to define the meaning of the writing center by flooding our environment with "correct" messages is like trying to change the roots of a tree by pruning the small branches.

Methods and Findings

To uncover the "roots" of students' decisions to use the writing center, this research offers a comparison of the academic, attitudinal, and demographic characteristics of students who use the writing center and those who don't. It is based on data about the 4204 students who formed the entering class of 2009 at Temple University, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Although the data come from only one institution, this particular institution offers a fitting site for research on this topic. Temple is

typical of the colleges that the majority of American students attend: It is a large, co-ed, publically-funded, mostly-residential university, with moderately selective admissions. Moreover, the university has a large, stable and well-funded writing center, with a central and visible campus location. This means that when we consider why some students choose to use the writing center while others don't, we can be fairly confident that accessibility is not a major confounding factor.

To begin the research, I collected a complete set of data from the university about all of the students in the incoming cohort. This included information about the students' prior academic performance, financial status, beliefs and preferences, and demographics. Then, over the next four years, I noted which of these students came to the writing center and which did not. In the end, 22% of these students visited the writing center at least once, while the remaining 78% did not visit.⁷

I used two analytical approaches to explore the differences between the users and the non-users, and each yielded significant findings. In what follows, I describe the analyses and the finding that each generated. To make this a smoother read, I moved much of the detailed commentary about the analytical methods to the footnotes.⁸

Part 1: Single Variables and the Decision to Use the Writing Center

I began by looking at the correlations between individual variables and writing center use, using cross-tabulations and t-tests. Many of the variables in the dataset were significantly correlated with writing center usage. For example, I ran a cross-tab between "gender" and "writing center use" and found that the two variables are significantly correlated: Women are more likely to use the writing center than men. Among the other variables that were significantly correlated were father's educational attainment (students whose fathers did not attend college are significantly more likely to use than students whose fathers' completed college); mother's level of educational attainment (same pattern); and SAT scores (students with lower SAT scores are significantly more likely to use than those with higher SAT scores).

7 Of the 22% who visited the writing center, 16% came for the first time in their first year at the university. In each of the next three years, an additional 1-3% of students came for the first time.

8 The discussion of quantitative methods begins in this note, and continues through the next five notes. You can read them by flipping back and forth as you encounter the numbers in the main text. But they are also written so that you can read the notes straight through, as a text in themselves.

But here's the interesting part. One of the variables in my dataset was a question about tutoring that was included on Temple's "New Student Questionnaire," a survey that is given to all incoming students at orientation. The question asked students to indicate whether there was a good chance that they would use a tutoring service while they were enrolled in the university. Students' answers to that question turned out to be highly significantly correlated with actual writing center usage.

At first glance, this may not seem like a big deal; it's just logical for there to be a positive relationship between planning to use tutoring and actually using tutoring. But the timing of the survey makes this an important finding. It shows that students' decisions about seeking tutoring were in place *before* they come to the university. This means that their decisions cannot simply have been the result of what we say to them about the writing center. All of those "correct" messages that we give, and all of the "incorrect" messages that we worry about, do not determine students' choices about the writing center. This is not to say that we have no influence at all on the decision. But the roots of this decision were already in place, and they were based on students' lives and experiences before college.

Part 2: Multiple Variables and the Decision to Use the Writing Center

As noted above, there were many variables that were individually correlated with writing center use. However, many of these variables are also correlated with each other. For example, SAT scores are significantly related to parents' educational attainment: Students whose parents completed college degrees have higher SAT scores overall than students whose parents have only high school diplomas. These cross-correlations raise tricky questions. How do we know if the variables that are correlated with writing center use are actually meaningfully related to the writing center, or if they only correlate because they are related to something else?

For example, we know that parents' educational attainment, SAT scores, and gender are all significantly related to writing center use. And we know that all of these variables are also significantly related to each other. So what are the real relationships here? Maybe writing center use is really driven by parents' educational attainment: Students can't ask their family members for help with their essays, so they come to the writing center instead. Or maybe it's really driven by SAT scores: Students have weaker academic preparation, so they come to the writing center for extra help. Or maybe it's really about gender: Women are

less inhibited about asking for help than men are. If we only investigate correlations one at a time, there's no way to sort this out.

What we need, then, is a way of seeing the hierarchies and relationships among the variables, so we can figure out which matter most. To address this problem, I created an analysis using CHAID,⁹ a data-mining technique.¹⁰ CHAID is an effective method for sorting out which variables have the strongest overall relationship to an “outcome,” which in this case is use of the writing center. Moreover, through the branching design of the analysis, CHAID helps to identify variables that are important only in certain contexts or combinations.

The results of the CHAID analysis are presented in Figure 1. To read the analysis, start at the top with Node 0, which represents the full cohort of 4204 students. As Node 0 indicates, of this overall group, 22% visited the writing center—this is the baseline rate of use. The analysis proceeds downward from there; at each “branch” of the tree, the CHAID algorithm selects the variable that is most effective in dividing the group into sub-groups that separate users from non-users.¹¹

9 CHAID stands for “Chi-Squared Automatic Interaction Detection.” As the name suggests it uses a chi-squared analysis to find interactions among variables. CHAID analyses can be performed using most of the major statistical software packages—I used it with SPSS—but in most cases, it has to be purchased as a separate “add on” module to the software. And unfortunately, it's not cheap. In SPSS, the CHAID analysis “add-on” module is called “Decision Trees.”

10 “Data-mining” is different from traditional statistical analysis. Data-mining techniques are generally newer practices that have been enabled by the speed and power of computers; most traditional statistics—regressions, for example—were originally created when researchers relied on pencils, paper, and slide rules. Traditional statistical techniques rely heavily on prior research and on control. You can't have too many variables (or variables with unknown interactions) in a traditional regression analysis. By contrast, data-mining techniques work well with “unknowns;” in fact, the whole point of them is to sort through large complex datasets, and find meaningful relationships among variables.

11 Here's a simple way to visualize how CHAID works. Imagine that you're a contestant in a game called “Find the Writing Center Users.” To play the game, you go into a huge room, where 4000 students are gathered. Some of these students have used the writing center and some haven't, but you don't know which ones are which. As a contestant in this game, your goal is keep the writing center users in the room, and get everyone else out. To do this, you must call out an instruction that sounds like this: “Everyone who is [X], please leave the room; everyone who is [not-X], please stay.” You get exactly one chance to call out an instruction, and your instruction cannot directly refer to the writing center. The winner is the contestant whose instruction gets the greatest number of students into the right place.

So, what will your instruction be? You could say, “Everyone who is wearing a blue shirt, please leave the room, and everyone who isn't, please stay.” But then,

At the end of the analysis, which is found in the “terminal nodes” at the end of the branches, the overall cohort has been split into 11 subgroups that have levels of writing center usage ranging from 10% to 60%.

Note the variables that the CHAID algorithm selected at each stage of the analysis.¹² The first variable selected was students’ SAT verbal (SAT-V) score, and it was used to divide the overall cohort into four unequally-sized subgroups. Students with the lowest SAT-V scores are most likely to come to the writing center, while those with the highest SAT-V scores are least likely. Immediately below the SAT-V branch, we find that the groups further sub-divide according to three identity variables¹³:

you would lose the game. Wearing a blue shirt has nothing to do with the writing center, so you would end up with a lot of people in the wrong places. But what if you said, “Men please leave the room, women please stay”? That *might* be a winner, because women are much more likely to visit the writing center than men. But you might still lose, if another contestant thinks of an instruction that works even better than yours. If CHAID were a contestant in the game, you would *always* lose and CHAID would *always* win. Why? Because CHAID doesn’t have to guess what instruction to give. Instead, it tests every single possibility, so it always knows which one will work the best.

- 12 To start a CHAID analysis, the researcher loads the program with a library of variables. You can picture this as a big excel spreadsheet, where the student’s name is in column A, and the library of variables (basically, various bits of information about the students, like their scores, demographics, answers to survey questions, etc.) appears in Column B, Column C, and so on, to infinity. The ideal scenario for a CHAID analysis is to have *many* variables – the more the better. Because this is data-mining, where unknowns are welcome, the key is *not* to be selective when building the library, and not to assume that you already know which variables are relevant and which aren’t.

Once the “library” is created, the CHAID algorithm plays “Find the Writing Center Users,” as described above. It churns through all of the variables methodically—that’s where the need for computing power comes in—and selects the ones that are the most effective at sorting the users from the non-users. Whereas a human researcher would intuitively consider some variables more important than others, CHAID makes no such judgement. If SAT scores turned out to be the most powerful variable, then that’s what it will choose. But if students’ scores on Candy Crush were stronger, then Candy Crush it would be. So if a variable is selected in a CHAID analysis, that tells us that variable was *stronger than any of the other available variables* in separating users from non-users. Sometimes the meaning of a CHAID analysis emerges when we ask why one particular variable was stronger than another.

- 13 The gender and linguistic background variables are based on self-reported data. Students were asked whether English was their native language, and the answer choices were “yes” or “no.” A very small number of students did not answer the question, and those responses are coded as “missing.” In terms of gender, students could select “male” or “female;” and again, there were a small number of “missing”

- linguistic background (native vs non-native speakers of English)
- race (whites vs. non-whites)
- gender (men vs. women)

Note, also, that in each of these divisions, the identity that is *less* socially privileged is associated with *higher* rates of writing center use. Thus, non-native speakers of English, women, and non-white students are all more likely to use the writing center than native-speakers of English, men, and white students.

If we dig a little bit deeper into the CHAID analysis, what emerges is an interaction—a push and pull—among the variables. The “pull” of SAT scores is either intensified or lessened by the “push” of the identity variables. To get a sense of this, it is helpful to compare two pairs of nodes:

Node 6 vs. Node 12: Where SAT scores and identity “pull” in the same direction

(These nodes are outlined in blue in the figure.)

Students who have low SAT-V scores are more likely to use the writing center, and when low SAT scores are combined with less privileged identities, that effect is intensified. In Node 6, we see that among students who have low SAT-V scores and who are non-native speakers of English, 60% came to the writing center. This is the group with the highest rate of writing center usage, and it is the only subgroup where a majority of students visited the center. Meanwhile, students who have high SAT scores are less likely to use the writing center, and when high SAT scores are combined with more privileged identities, that effect is even stronger. In Node 12, we can see that among students who have the highest SAT-V scores and who are male, only 10% visited the writing center. This is the lowest percentage of users of any subgroup.

Node 18 vs Node 13: Where SAT scores push and identity pulls in the opposite direction

(These nodes are outlined in yellow in the figure.)

responses. The race variable that was selected by the algorithm is one that was coded by the university for a reporting purpose. It was one of three race-related variables in the library, and it is the only one that was dichotomous. (Why was the dichotomous race variable stronger than the non-dichotomous ones?)

In general, students who have the highest SAT scores are the least likely to use the writing center; but when those students have less-privileged identities, the effect of their high SAT scores is eliminated. For example, in Node 18, we see students who have the highest SAT-V scores, but who are female and non-white. Their rate of use is 26%, which is *above* the baseline for the whole cohort, and more than 2.5 times the rate of white men with the same SAT-V scores. Similarly, students with low SAT-V scores generally use the writing center more frequently, but this effect is eliminated when students have more privileged identities. For example, the students in Node 13 have the *lowest* SAT-V scores overall, but they are white and native-speakers of English. Their rate of use is 23%, which is only barely above the baseline, and which is lower than that of the students in Node 23 (even though those women had higher SAT-V scores).

Since SAT scores are so important in this analysis, I want to pause here to explain how I am interpreting them. SAT scores are popularly understood as measures of students' academic abilities—of how “smart” or well-prepared they are for college. But in academic circles, they are often interpreted more critically, typically as a reflection of students' socioeconomic status.¹⁴ Neither of these views is entirely supported by the CHAID analysis. The dataset included several direct measures of students' academic preparation and socioeconomic status; if SATs were *really* a measure of just one or the other, then those direct measures would probably have been stronger variables. Instead, what makes SAT scores so powerful is precisely that they capture both academic preparation *and* the socioeconomic factors that conspire to enable some students to be so well-prepared. Some researchers have used the term “inherited merit” to name this kind of hybrid variable (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007).

But there is another aspect of SAT scores that is important in the context of this research: namely, SAT scores don't just *reflect* things about students, they also shape how students see themselves, and therefore the choices they make. College students know what their own SAT scores are, and they know how their scores stack up against those of other students, and against university admissions policies. In the college admissions process, students with the highest scores get the A-list treatment; they may be courted by the university, and offered scholarships and other perks for enrolling. They enter college with the confidence boost that comes with knowing that they are just exactly the kind of candidates that the university was hoping to attract. Students with low

14 See Guinier (2015) for a summative argument against the use of standardized tests to assess achievement or preparedness. See also Crouse & Trusheim (1988).

SAT scores have to worry about whether they will be accepted to college at all, and when they are accepted—sometimes after being wait-listed or conditionally admitted—they have to wonder whether they really “belong” at the university at all.¹⁵

In this study, then, I interpret SAT scores as a measure of students “academic standing.” By this I mean that they measure where students are positioned in the competitive field of university admissions, which is itself a reflection of both the work they did to prepare themselves academically, and their families’ ability to marshal the social and economic resources to ensure that they could be well-prepared.

With this interpretation of SAT scores in mind, re-read the description of the CHAID analysis, especially the part where the pairs of nodes are compared. What do you see? What stands out to me is that the students who are mostly likely to “choose” to come to the writing center now are the students who were historically excluded from full access to higher education: women, students of color, English language learners, and students with less “inherited merit.” They are the students who began pursuing higher education in much greater numbers beginning in the 1970s, an expansion that spawned the current wave of writing centers. They are, in other words, precisely the students who would, at one time, would have been considered “remedial” and required to come.¹⁶

Rethinking the Choice to Visit the Writing Center

Choosing to visit the writing center, then, is in part a personal decision that reflects the wishes and preferences of individual students; students come because they “want” to. But like all educational choices, the choice to visit the writing center is also much more than that. It is rooted in deeper social factors such that not everyone is equally likely to “want”

15 Some readers may wonder how this discussion of the SAT relates to the ACT, the other standardized test commonly used in US college admissions. My research includes SAT scores simply because those are the scores submitted by the vast majority of Temple students. (The SAT test is used by more high school students overall, and it is particularly common among students in the east coast, where Temple is located.) Although the SAT and the ACT are somewhat different in their structure, their role in college admissions process is identical. Both are used by universities as a measure of students’ academic merit, and as cut-off scores for admissions and placement, among other things. Moreover, the concerns about the bias of the SAT test apply equally to the ACT test. Both reflect “inherited merit.”

16 See Soliday (2002) (especially pp. 65-145) for an extended discussion of how remediation has been defined and used by institutions.

to visit the writing center. In fact, the data show that some students arrive at the university primed by a complicated interaction between academic standing and identity to seek tutoring help. The choice to use the writing center is raced, classed, gendered and shaped by linguistic hierarchies.

What should we make of these findings? Are these data cause for pride or concern? What, if anything, do these data suggest that we should do differently in our centers? In the writing of this article, I paused at this point for the better part of a year.

The answers are not obvious, in large part because the issues that are revealed here are much bigger than writing centers, and perhaps bigger than higher education. Ultimately, this research raises, but doesn't answer, challenging questions about equality. The data show us that the inequality that stubbornly pervades the rest of the American education system also shapes writing center work. But the outcomes and implications of this are not entirely clear. If students with less privilege are more likely to come to the writing center, is this a good thing or a bad thing for the students? Does the writing center serve them well? Would something else serve them better? And is this a good thing or a bad thing for the writing center?

But even as it raises some larger questions that can't yet be answered, the research still has clear implications for everyday writing center practice and for the development of the writing center profession. In what follows, I offer two practical proposals for changes in writing center practice that emerge from this analysis.

First, we should expand the writing center research and assessment agenda to investigate “non-visits” and “non-visitors.” Up to this point, most writing center research and assessment has focused on activities that happen inside the writing center proper—that is, it investigates what students do and experience when they come to the writing center. This is logical, of course; we need to know that we are serving the students who come. But if that is *all* we do, then we have a major blind spot in our understanding of writing center work. What is missing is any accounting of the needs and experiences of students who do not come to the writing center, who are, after all, the majority of students at most colleges and universities.¹⁷

It may be that non-visits don't seem relevant to the writing center—that they aren't “about” us so we don't need to know about

17 Other research has also found that writing center users comprise only a minority of students at the university. See Grutsch McKinney (2013), pp. 72–73, for an overview.

them. But in fact, understanding why students don't visit, and what, if anything, they do instead, would give us critical information about the writing center's position in the university, and students' perceptions of our work. If someone doesn't visit the writing center, does that mean that they don't have any questions about their writing? Or does it mean that they have questions, but they are choosing to ask someone else? Or does it mean that they have questions, but they are choosing not to ask them at all? And if they are choosing not to ask them, is that because they simply don't care enough about their assignments? Or is it because they are embarrassed to seek help? Each of these choices is possible, and each suggests quite different dynamics at play.

At the very least, investigating non-visits would give us new, and perhaps better, ways of talking with students about our services. It might also help us shape our services to make them appealing to students who don't currently visit. But this research suggests another reason—a more troubling one—for investigating non-visits. Earlier I noted that the research literature on educational choice has repeatedly shown that students who have greater privilege typically make educational choices that increase their privilege, while students with less privilege do the opposite. And here in this research, we have just seen that students with less privilege are more likely to choose to visit the writing center. So, could it be that visiting the writing center is somehow a downwardly mobile choice? Does it harm students in some way, as Nancy Grimm (2011) has suggested? Or is it more that whatever students do instead of visiting the writing center somehow increases privilege? These are speculative questions, admittedly, but the terms of the speculation are powerfully suggested by the data. It seems at least worth asking ourselves whether there is something to them.

We should rethink writing center pedagogy to ensure that it meets the needs of students who visit. Or, to put this another way, we should stop allowing the fear of being perceived as remedial to drive our pedagogical practices. Since the 1980s, writing center pedagogy has been dominated by a certain constellation of practices, which, according to some writers, amount to writing center “orthodoxies”: We don't proofread; we address “higher order” concerns before “lower order” concerns; we work with students on assignments they bring to us; we use non-directive questioning preferentially or exclusively; tutors do not hold the pencil; tutors give non-expert (peer) feedback; and so on. In many writing centers, some or all of these practices are treated as “policy.” They are meant to apply to every tutoring session, regardless of the student, the assignment, or the circumstances.

However, these pedagogical practices are not supported by RAD research. In fact, research in education, TESOL, and cognitive science has repeatedly shown that these practices have only limited value as pedagogies.¹⁸ They might be effective in some situations for some students; however, as “policies” that are applied to all students, they are poor choices. Indeed, almost any pedagogy that is treated as an across-the-board policy would be a poor choice. Educational research generally supports the idea that instruction should be “differentiated” (Tomlinson). But the problem with writing center pedagogy goes beyond just the fact that our practices are not differentiated. It’s also the *particular* pedagogies that we have embraced. For example, non-directive tutoring is not a “neutral” pedagogy that works equally well for everyone. Rather, it is a pedagogy that is most appropriate for students who have solid academic preparation—who already have a pretty good idea of what kind of text they are expected to produce—and who already feel a sense of self-efficacy and ownership over their texts. In other words, it is best suited to students with privilege and high academic standing. When students do not understand the expectations—when they “don’t know what they don’t know” about writing—then non-directive tutoring doesn’t transform them into privileged students, it simply frustrates them.

Orthodox writing center pedagogies for working with grammar and correctness are similarly slanted toward privileged students. Treating grammar/correctness as a “lower order” or “later order” concern, means that frequently we do not address grammar much (or at all) in our tutoring sessions. For privileged students who grew up in homes where a white, middle-class version of English was spoken, this approach *might* be okay. But affecting a genteel disregard for grammar concerns makes no sense if we are working with English language learners, with students who spoke a less-privileged version of English at home, or with any student who feels anxious about grammar. If we regularly dismiss or defer (“later”) students’ questions about grammar, this doesn’t make those questions go away, nor does it fundamentally alter the terms on which grammar is understood in the university or in society. It simply leaves students up to their own devices to deal with those questions.

18 For concise, reader-friendly summaries of the existing research on the science of learning, see Deans for Impact (2015). For a critique of non-directiveness, see Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark (2006). See Darling-Hammond (1998) for the importance of teacher expertise. See also Nordlof (2014) for a cogent argument about the theoretical bases of writing center pedagogical practices.

I am not the first writing center researcher to observe problems with orthodox writing center pedagogies, nor the first to call for changes (Clark, 1990; Thompson, 2009; Grimm (2011). My goal here is to add my voice to that growing chorus, as well as to provide some empirical backing for the argument. In particular, this research supports the case for change because it demonstrates that...

- users of the writing center are diverse, and therefore unlikely to be served by policy-pedagogies that are meant to be applied to all students. And,
- the very students who are most likely to visit the writing center are the ones who are least likely to be served by our traditional pedagogical practices. And,
- our efforts to protect writing centers from being seen as remedial, efforts that largely involve clinging to certain prestigious-seeming pedagogies, have not worked. The idea of a “remedial” writing center serving “underprivileged” students is alive and well. Moreover, this approach probably cannot work, since beliefs about writing centers (what they are for, who they are meant to serve) are deeply rooted, and go well beyond our immediate sphere of influence.

Given all of this, I would argue that we have nothing to lose and everything to gain from reinventing writing center pedagogy. To be clear, I am not saying that we should look for ways to tinker with or expand our traditional practices. Rather, I am arguing for completely rethinking what we do and why we do it. We can begin by challenging ourselves and each other to abandon policy-as-pedagogy—to reject the idea that the writing center director’s role is to define a set of practices that are to be used in all tutoring sessions. And indeed, as Grutsch McKinney argues, we should also challenge the idea that all (or the primary) pedagogical interactions in the writing center should take the form of tutoring sessions. Learners need instruction that is fully differentiated, and we should seek to embody that in the writing center.

After that, we can challenge ourselves to seek out pedagogies that are backed by the most powerful, most up-to-date, and most rigorous research. If this leads us to some practices that we previously rejected because they seemed too “remedial,” so be it. If we use pedagogies that work, I believe that fact alone will protect our collegial status and reputation. But ultimately, I believe that we should set aside concerns about writing center status and focus instead on ensuring that the students who visit the writing center get the best support we can provide

them. We owe them nothing less than that. I envision the writing center as a kind of pedagogical workshop—a place where writers encounter writing tutors who know their stuff—and a space where pedagogical practices are constantly being developed, explored, and tested.

WC Usage in Four Academic Years (Yes or No)

Node 0			
Category	%	n	
Did not use Writing Center	78%	3288	←
Did use Writing Center	22%	916	
Total	100%	4204	

SAT Verbal Score
 Adj. P-value=0.000, Chi-square=197.649, df=3

<= 430.0

Node 1	
%	n
55%	208
45%	169
9	377

(430.0, 470.0]

Node 2	
%	n
68%	312
32%	145
11	457

Is English your native language?
 Adj. P-value=0.000, Chi-square=22.344, df=1 Gender
 value=0.016, Chi-square=8.302, df=1

Yes

Node 5	
%	n
65%	146
35%	78
5%	224

No

Node 6	
%	n
40%	62
60%	91
4%	153

Female

Node 7	
%	n
63%	164
37%	97
6	261

Male

Node 8	
%	n
76%	148
24%	48
5%	196

Race

Adj. P-value=0.029, Chi-square=7.181, df=1

White

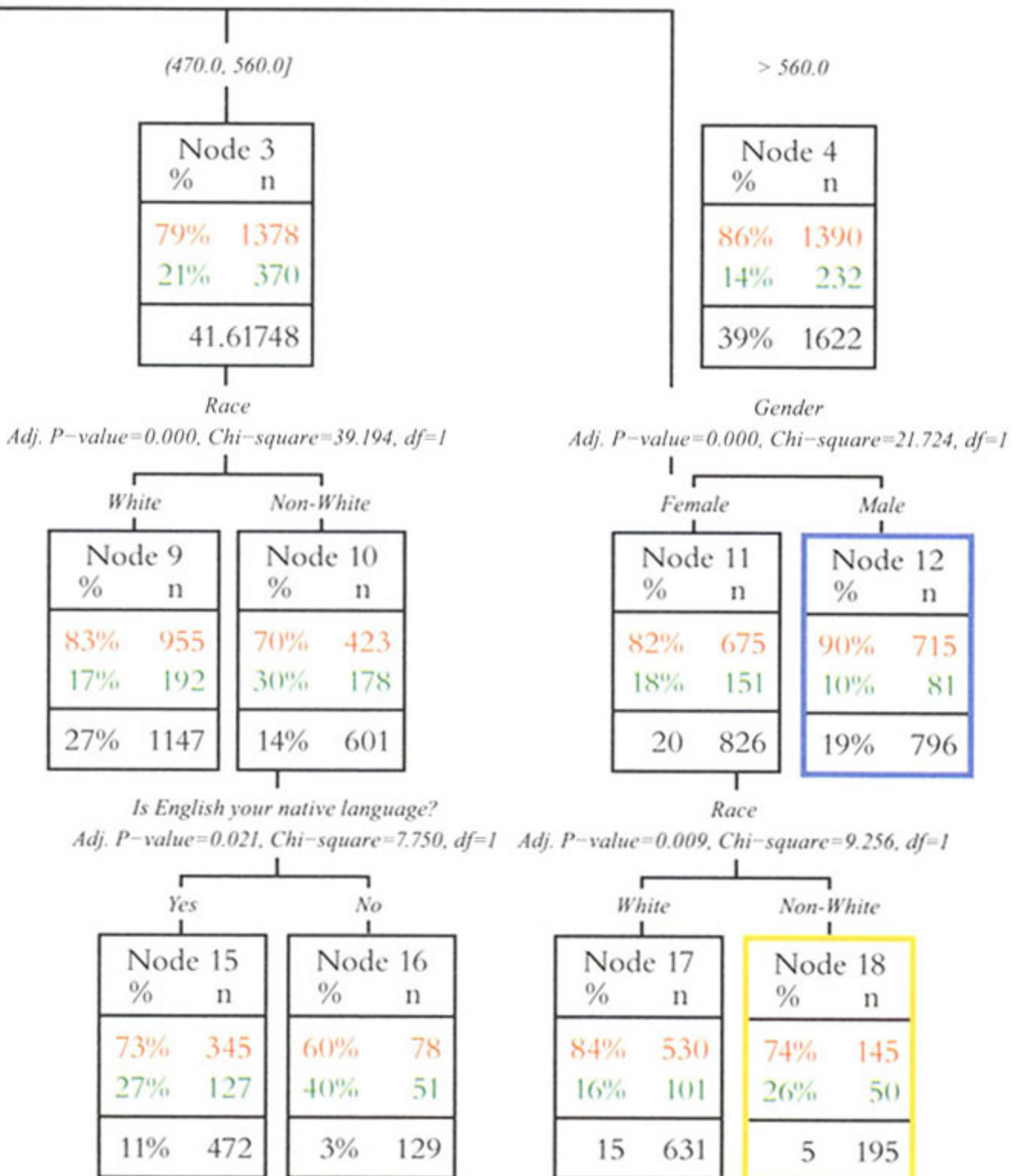
Node 13	
%	n
76%	64
24%	20
2%	84

Non-White

Node 14	
%	n
59%	82
41%	58
3	140

The analysis starts here.

This tells which variable was used to split the group.



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