

Evaluating the Complexities of Tutor Collaboration in Cross-Institutional Writing Center Research

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In the last few years, research by Brian Fallon, Lauren Fitzgerald, Melissa Ianetta, Katrin Girgensohn, and Christopher Ervin has explored how writing center professionals can support scholarship conducted by undergraduate and graduate peer tutors. Such research helps inform the work of the home writing center, incorporate the varied experiences of tutors in writing center scholarship, and encourage tutors as scholars

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in the field (Ervin; Fallon; Fitzgerald; Girgensohn). Calls for publication by undergraduate tutors have increased (see Kinkead), and in 2012, *The Writing Center Journal* published a special issue composed entirely by undergraduates (Fitzgerald and Ianetta, "Peer Tutors"; see also Fitzgerald and Ianetta, *Oxford Guide* 24-25).

While such scholarship encourages research with tutors, little published research investigates the complex nature of these collaborations, either at single or multiple institutions. Our ongoing multi-year study brought together tutors from three institutions, a large public university (LP), a medium private university (MP), and a small liberal arts college (SLAC). This ongoing project spurred a subsequent investigation probing a new area, which is the focus of this article: a study of the nature of such tutor-administrator research. Like previous scholars, we found that collaborative research was an important learning experience for our tutors. And naturally, there were also advantages to having tutors gather data. But we and our tutors faced unexpected challenges while collaborating across institutions, including tutors negotiating roles, navigating differing institutional cultures, and communicating over long distances. We therefore wanted to offer recommendations and share our experiences to acknowledge that, while rich in potential and often worth implementing, collaboration with tutors (in our case, with tutors across institutions) is not a seamless process. Yet this messiness can help writing center administrators see new sides of tutors as scholars in their own right—suggesting a richer mosaic of tutor potential and a need for administrators to be more attuned to tutors' varying research needs and desires.

Methodology: Studying Tutor Collaboration in a Large Research Project

This article, on the nature of research collaboration between tutors and principal investigators (PIs) – arose from our ongoing, IRB-approved, cross-institutional project examining student perceptions of writing center effectiveness. We were thus collecting data for these two studies simultaneously, as illustrated in Figure 1.

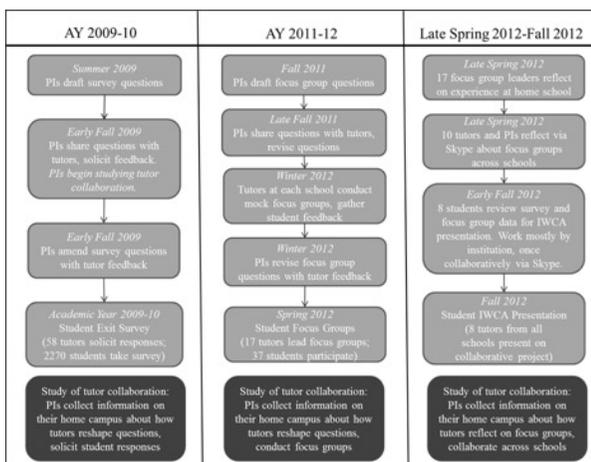


Figure 1: Timeline of Overall Cross-Institutional Research Project

As parts of the larger study were taking place, the PIs collected data about the complexities of tutor collaboration, focusing on the experience of the data-collectors, i.e., the tutors. In total, 58 tutors (the entire tutoring staffs, both undergraduate and graduate students, at our institutions) collected survey data, and 17 tutors led focus groups. Compared to recruiting a student to complete a survey, creating and administering focus group questions require tutors to take a more active role in the research process. In fact, we decided to use focus groups in the larger study not only because they would allow us to solicit more student experiences with less effort than conducting

individual student interviews. It was in this move that some of the benefits of working with tutor-researchers came out. As one of our focus group leaders explained in a multi-institution conference call, “if it was an interview, I think the people can feel like they are on the hot seat. But as a group we can gain the comfortability and get there, and I think people . . . warm up and share their ideas” (LP). In that same call, another focus group leader noted, “I like the focus group because you can hear interesting responses and immediately try to delve a little bit deeper” (MP). Such comments suggest that student-tutors can bring rich insights into selecting appropriate research methods.

The PIs’ email conversations and the evolving focus group protocol on Google Drive demonstrate that tutors revised the focus group questions and clarified the wording to engage a broad student population more effectively. We shared feedback from tutors on the focus group questions before the focus groups began later that semester and then adapted the questions accordingly. For example, tutors at the Medium Private changed and added to the series of questions about breakthroughs. Our original beginning of that series of questions was “One of the questions we asked on the survey was about having a breakthrough in your writing”; tutors suggested alternative wording, incorporated into the final protocol: “Some people on the survey acknowledged having a breakthrough in their writing,” which directly addressed focus group participants and caught their attention at the start of this series of questions. Tutors also added new questions. For instance, in that same series of questions about breakthroughs, tutors from the Medium Private suggested a pointed concluding question, included in the final protocol: “Is a breakthrough important or not?”

Many of the tutors who helped revise the focus group questions led mock focus groups to confirm that the questions would actually address the issues we were aiming for. Tutors volunteered to lead substantive focus groups without directors present. Following the last focus group, ten out of the seventeen focus group leaders participated in a cross-institutional Skype call that asked them to reflect on their experiences participating in collaborative research. Once the data had been collected, eight tutors worked in groups by institution to analyze data related to particular interests. These tutors then collaborated using Skype calls and sharing information via Google Drive, as well as one face-to-face meeting, in order to present preliminary findings together at the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) Conference in October 2012.

Below, we use qualitative data gathered from our tutors in three different ways: from the three-institution transcribed Skype conversation (8 quotes), from the Medium Private and Large Public follow-up conversations and email exchanges after that Skype call (5 quotes), and from year-end reflections written at the Large Public and the SLAC (4 quotes). In each instance, we note the tutor's institution and the means of data collection. These seventeen quotes represent the views of twelve tutors, four from each school, almost all of whom were intensely involved in the project and representative of the seventeen focus group leaders. All of the empirical, qualitative data were collected using widely accepted means that recorded the information and are replicable and accessible to other researchers (Babcock and Thonus 32).

Background: The Larger Study

For context for the current study, we summarize some details of our larger research project here; for further information, please see Bromley, Northway, and Schonberg. Our ongoing project asks: What makes writing center sessions effective for students, and is this effectiveness connected to the transfer of knowledge or to the formation of a writer's identity? In order to match our research process to our writing center values, we needed—and wanted—to involve our tutors from the start (for an example of what made tutor involvement particularly appealing to us, see Wilson). We began our ongoing project with a post-session survey inviting student-writers to reflect on what they took away. We posted the same survey on computers in all three writing centers, and we asked tutors to request that every student-visitor complete it. Over the course of the 2009-10 academic year, we gathered 2,270 survey responses. Quantitative surveys are a useful methodology for getting at these kinds of what-questions, and surveys have the benefit of being easy to administer, a particular advantage when working with many data collectors; survey results can also be more easily generalizable than other types of research (Chambliss and Schutt 129; Driscoll and Perdue 28).

Information collected from the survey for the ongoing project demonstrated the following result: students found their sessions successful, for the same reasons, irrespective of demographic factors. However, the survey did not allow us to understand how students were learning and applying strategies or rethinking their identities as writers. To learn more, we needed to frame our questions differently. Complex how-questions about process necessitate qualitative methodologies, such as interviews or focus groups (Creswell 3-23). Our focus groups, which used the same protocol across campuses,

enabled us to pose these types of questions; we generally followed the guidelines of Tara Cushman, et al., for tutor-conducted focus groups in a university writing center setting. For example, Cushman, et al. suggest using two moderators per group and limiting the number of specific, goal-oriented questions, while providing refreshments. In the spring of 2012, we conducted focus groups at each school, soliciting participation from either a random sample of students who had already visited their campus writing center that academic year (MP) or all students who had visited that academic year (LP and SLAC). In total, we had 9 focus groups, with 2-4 groups per school and 1-8 participants per group, for a total of 37 participants, more or less equally distributed across our campuses. At all institutions, administrators trained focus group leaders on ethical practices for conducting focus groups, and at two institutions, focus group leaders were also required by IRB to pass online modules in ethical practices.

Benefits for Both Administrators and Tutors as Researchers

While this article focuses on the benefits and challenges of cross-institutional collaboration for student-tutors, we found advantages for us as professionals as well. We discovered that this research solidified tutors' learning, helping them to invest further in their tutorials and developing their professionalism. For instance, watching our tutors at IWCA, we were impressed at their investment in preparing their collaborative presentation. This presentation in a public forum demonstrated the tutors' development as professionals, allowed us to assess our pedagogical work in the center, and showcased the education provided by our centers and schools. Tutors can also access student perceptions that administrators and teachers, perhaps due

to their positions of power, cannot (Cushman et al. 4-5; see also Vyvial). Such multi-site, multi-method, replicable and aggregable data (RAD) collected with tutors provide us with higher quality evidence on which to base our research claims (see Driscoll and Perdue 21-23; Rowan 18; Chambliss and Schutt 188; Creswell 3-23).

Tutors also became confident conducting research. Across our institutions, a major change was that tutors gained awareness of both the broader writing center field and the value of research. One focus group leader emailed after the Skype call that the IRB process “helped [him] understand the procedures for obtaining permission for university research” (LP). In the same email conversation, another focus group leader recognized the potential of RAD research methodologies to which she had never been exposed: “For me, I gained insight into a new method of research from the focus group process” (LP). Furthermore, one focus group leader was delighted to realize that the focus group research method actually works; in the multi-institution conference call, she explained,

“it seemed like it [the questions] would be difficult to answer, yet when we were in the focus group, people seemed very willing to talk. They didn’t pause or question the questions in a way that we would. So I would say that the most surprising was actually the ease with which those focus groups went, and maybe perhaps I was over-thinking how they might be difficult” (MP).

During that same call, a tutor from another institution remarked on the surprising benefits for participants as well: “I was afraid it . . . might be an ordeal for people to come in and answer all

of these questions about their identities and their writing. But it seemed to be a positive experience, for them as well as us” (SLAC). One tutor commented in his year-end reflection, “I had never even been part of a focus group before I led this session, so I learned a lot about research procedure” (LP). More significantly, the cross-institutional design forced tutors to cultivate trust both in their colleagues at other institutions and in the research process. During the conference call, a leader commented on her concerns about focus group questions drafted by colleagues at another institution: “I think a lot of us [tutors] were confused and/or made uncomfortable by some of the questions, . . . but I think that it actually went better than I anticipated. Most [participants], after we had discussed it a little bit, said some really interesting things” (MP). This increasing trust produced fruitful results for this research project and, we hope, for later collaborations.

Growth for Tutors as Practitioners

Our research, drawing from student-writers and tutors, shows, like Ervin’s findings from writing center practitioners, that tutors benefit from working with project data through reflecting on their practice and gaining confidence (A10-12). At all three centers, anonymous survey results informed administrators’ staff meeting conversations about tutors’ growth and best practices. Across all three campuses, tutors felt that the surveys and focus groups helped them recognize the effects of their tutoring practices and therefore gain confidence. As one tutor noted in a debriefing conversation with her administrator after the multi-institution Skype call, this information gave insight into “the black hole” of tutoring (MP), meaning that tutors are often not sure what writers take away from

their sessions. Another tutor, in her year-end reflection, discovered that, while she was worried about whether students were learning, “they found me useful. . . . The students were getting what I was trying to pass on” (SLAC). These statements demonstrate that tutors realized the positive impact of their work. One leader noted during the conference call that the research experience justified her habitual consulting strategies; she preferred specific feedback to general praise, paraphrasing a student’s response, “not just saying, ‘Oh, this helps me,’ but saying, ‘This helps me because . . . [I find that] helpful” (MP). Furthermore, leaders came to understand and appreciate how students used their writing center sessions. One tutor noted in the multi-institution Skype call, “hearing [from focus group participants] that it [the session] is not just come in, fix the paper, and leave, it’s gathering tools to use in the future. I thought [that] was really valuable” (MP). Seeing that students were growing as writers, transferring knowledge acquired in their sessions, allowed tutors to reflect on how they could increase this type of learning.

Such reflection, in which we often encountered concepts or terminology from the survey or focus group questions, helped tutors grow as consultants and writers. A tutor who administered the survey but had not led focus groups used the vocabulary from the survey in her year-end reflection: “When reading over [student] responses on the survey, the areas that I realize I don’t focus on as much are the ‘changing the way they view themselves/writing’ fields. . . . I’d like to try to remember this aspect a little more consistently” (SLAC). Another tutor, who administered the survey and led focus groups, explained in her annual reflection, “Through our focus groups, I started thinking about how my identity comes

through as a writer. . . . This manifests itself in my consultation reports . . . perhaps because in a small, only-readable-by-four-people way, I'm putting myself out there. That, in an exhilarating way, is frightening" (SLAC). These two comments directly refer to specific survey and focus group questions about identity. While we do not have empirical evidence that tutors indeed applied these concepts in actual sessions, using the terminology from both instruments helped tutors internalize desired outcomes for tutorials and develop a vocabulary for talking with students about these features, even for tutors not explicitly involved in focus groups. Reflection on tutoring sessions and experiences is an important way for tutors to develop and progress (Fitzgerald and Ianetta, Oxford 78). Furthermore, as tutors at all institutions wrangled over the focus group questions, tutors demonstrated that they were beginning to think about how researchers create effective questions. This is an important step for tutors in generating their own research agendas or projects.

Following this project, some of the tutors who led focus groups and/or presented at IWCA , and designed their own research projects or changed the focus of their job searches to include writing center positions. Many tutors found that leading focus groups and/or presenting at IWCA helped them expand their skill sets, giving them experience in their field of study. In essence, they, like the writers in the centers, were "gathering tools to use in the future." One of the undergraduate focus group leaders from the Large Public designed his own IRB-approved, multi-site, qualitative research project, conducting interviews with tutors, students, and administrators to assess benefits of literacy centers, which he presented at the 2012 National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing. In addition, an undergraduate tutor and marketing major at the Medium Private wanted the experience of leading focus

groups on her resume. She had only conducted focus groups in her major once, so the writing center focus groups provided valuable job preparation. A SLAC student foregrounded her focus group experience and IWCA presentation to secure her post-graduation goal teaching English in Japan. Finally, a graduate tutor from the Medium Private, just beginning to explore job possibilities in her field of study and in writing centers, accepted a faculty position teaching and establishing a new writing center.

Unexpected Complexities of Collaboration

Much of the current scholarship focused on involving tutors in research only addresses these types of benefits (Ervin; Fallon; Fitzgerald; Girgensohn). And indeed most of our tutors were delighted with the experience of working together on the focus groups. As one leader noted in the conference call, "I thought that the collaboration across the institutions was great because I think everyone had enough input into the questions. . . . I think that we had a lot of input into the process" (LP). However, not everyone involved in our project was equally enthusiastic, and we want to draw attention to the challenges of involving tutors in research. Some of our tutors were more circumspect. As one leader noted in an email debriefing the Skype call, "I came to appreciate the complexities of collaborating across institutions" (LP, our emphasis). Therefore, while we saw real benefits for tutors and administrators from this collaborative research project, it is important to acknowledge that we also faced obstacles--some insurmountable and some that could be productively overcome.

Given the barriers of institutional culture and distance, it was difficult for tutors and administrators to negotiate roles, particularly

cross-institutionally. For example, on our multi-institution online conference call, tutors from the SLAC and the Medium Private found it easy to jump into a large, virtual conversation; the Large Public tutors found it difficult to speak up. After that call, tutors from the Large Public continued their conversation about the format and offered some possible reasoning for their reticence. As one tutor explained, as recording continued after the other schools hung up, “My non-participation is not an indicator of my non-interest—the format wasn’t working for me” (LP). Another commented, “I can’t think on my feet” (LP). There is more than just a predictable complaint about technology here—the technological challenges highlighted preexisting concerns. Tutors wanted to feel heard, and a lack of previous ties and early face-to-face meetings made the virtual format seem particularly frustrating for some.

Collaborating across institutions was a logistical challenge for our tutors. We discovered that institutional structure affected tutors’ ability to engage with each other. For example, at the time of this research, the M.A. tutors at the Large Public often only worked for one semester at a time, limiting involvement in a long-term project. Distance was another impediment. Synchronous communication was difficult to arrange across three time zones. As a result, we only managed to connect our tutors in this way twice: once to debrief about focus groups and once to plan and divide roles for the IWCA presentation. Because of the coordination problem, in general, all changes suggested by one set of tutors were relayed by their administrator to the other administrators, who discussed with their tutors, proposed next steps, then came back to the other administrators, and so on, delaying the feedback loop and further distancing tutors from each other.

A final major hurdle was negotiating commitment and roles. Tutors were committed to their home institutions and writing centers but not necessarily to the field. In addition, for tutors, analyzing the data for a research presentation was new and demanding, in part because tutors did not understand how the information gathered and analyzed fit into the larger research project or into existing scholarship. We also discovered that some tutors wanted to be more or less involved than administrators initially envisioned. We had tutors who only wanted to participate in one portion of the project, such as leading focus groups, due to other commitments. Conversely, two graduate tutors wanted to be more involved in the writing and data analysis than we, as administrators, could manage. Because the three administrators had together created this research agenda, focus groups were only a portion of the ongoing research project, and given that three of us were already collaborating across institutions, we felt that introducing an even larger writing collaboration at such a late stage would become unwieldy. However, this put the director of these interested tutors in an awkward position in which she had to discourage her tutors from additional participation and hence from research.

Ramifications for Future Studies

Not all writing center practitioners will want such a large-scale approach for every project: tutors working across institutions with each other and tutors working on research projects with their own director will only be suited to certain types of research questions. But we learned a great deal from collaborating on research with our tutors, and we strongly encourage others to engage their tutors in cross-institutional projects. Nevertheless, there are important things that we wish we had known that may prove beneficial for others collaborating with tutors.

We, as PIs, could have done a much better job creating a sense of disciplinary community for the tutors in our project, perhaps by creating more real-time or asynchronous team-building activities. Tutors were engaged and excited to be involved in research, but their involvement simultaneously enriched and complicated the project in terms of design and implementation. We also discovered that timing was important. We could have been more intentional in articulating to tutors the long-term commitments and, for tutors coming in midway, the history and future of the project. While some mobility is unavoidable, administrators should anticipate graduation dates of tutors and prepare accordingly.

Supervisors have to recognize our influence and be cautious about tutors who get involved in a project out of a sense of obligation or good citizenship. We should have been more flexible and sensitive in matching specific roles to tutor interests. It is important for administrators planning research with tutors to think about what experienced and inexperienced tutors can gain or lose. Tutors who have been to a conference before or conducted individual research may have preconceived ideas about what they want to study. It may be harder for them to make a commitment to a collaborative research project when they have their own evolving research agenda.

In addition, we needed to think more deeply about differences between data-gathering and initial analysis with tutors versus fully co-authoring. As we reflect several years later on the missed opportunity to incorporate our two eager graduate students, we wonder, what does it really mean to collaborate, in all senses, with our tutors on a long-term research project? Given the complications of long-distance, cross-institutional mentoring, trying to manage it successfully with multiple administrators and tutors seemed, for

us at the time, to be too challenging. While one of the PIs was already co-authoring with a tutor, bringing in new co-authors to this project in the midst of data analysis was just too late in the game. However, we should have expected that collecting data would cause some tutors to want to analyze and write about that material. Therefore, in addition to including tutors in instrument design and data collection, we needed to anticipate tutors' deeper engagement and leave space in the project for tutor-administrator analysis, perhaps at single institutions to make the collaboration more workable. The challenges we, as PIs, faced in setting up and structuring a three-institution, three-time zone collaboration prevented us from thinking as optimistically and expansively about our tutors as we normally might have, and as others should as they embark on future research. Considering the push for more student research as well as emerging conversations about the complexity of junior professional roles, which all of the PIs occupied at the time, and their effect on different institutional relationships (Geller and Denny; Ervin), this issue is ripe for writing center studies to address.

Collaborating with our tutors on a multi-year/method/institution study was challenging. However, the substantial benefits for tutors and for administrators may well be worth the effort, not only because such collaborations lead to stronger research, but also because the collaborations themselves should merit investigation. Rather than championing student research for its own sake, it is time for the field to confront the real and significant complexities involved in tutor-administrator collaborations and to theorize new best practices for such valuable research.

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