

REAL-TIME STUDENT ASSESSMENT

Meeting the Imperative for Improved Time to
Degree, Closing the Opportunity Gap, and
Assuring Student Competencies for
21st-Century Needs

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Foreword by George D. Kuh

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illustrated in Case 3.2. Organized to support students' writing needs across all departments, the MWC recognizes the importance of responding on time to students' needs. Along with keeping semester-by-semester records of student demand, the MWC provides reports based on student demographics. In addition, the MWC can provide more substantive data from the work they do with students, as illustrated in its reports to the university's libraries. These kinds of data deepen faculty and other professionals' understanding of the ongoing writing challenges students face.

CASE 3.2.

The Miller Writing Center at Auburn University: Semester Monitoring of Statistics to Respond On-Time

The Miller Writing Center (MWC) at Auburn University is a cross-disciplinary writing center that serves students from all departments. We hire undergraduate and graduate consultants from all disciplines, and we partner with different departments and units to maintain multiple locations across campus to be accessible to as many students as possible. To ensure that we are meeting student needs at these locations, we regularly calculate location-specific usages during the semester and adjust staffing as necessary.

Usage statistics are the lifeblood of a writing center. As Schendel and Macauley (2012) say succinctly, "In writing centers, we are used to counting things" (p. xvi). How many students come to the MWC, when and how often they come, and their demographic range all define how writing centers are serving student needs. This emphasis on usage data rightly troubles writing center directors (WCDs), and much work is being done to move beyond tallying users and appointments to asking richer and more substantive questions about the work of writing centers as part of institutional support for student learning. For example, the MWC is collaborating with the Auburn Libraries, using data from the MWC system about student perceptions of scholarly research to develop more effective support for student writers at both the library reference desk and the writing center. But numbers still matter, particularly when arguing for budgetary resources to maintain or increase staffing.

WOnline, a web-based scheduling system designed specifically for writing center use, reflects this emphasis on capturing usage data. The system allows the WCD to set up multiple schedules, customize enrollment questions about all users in the system, and run reports that break down statistics on both users and appointments across multiple schedules.

All user and appointment data can also be downloaded into Excel and be processed in more sophisticated ways. But the easiest and quickest data can be gathered from system utilization reports, which calculate the percentage of time used for appointments relative to the time offered on the schedule.

At the MWC we track this usage on a weekly basis to assess if locations are being overstressed. Writing center practice generally defines *maximum usage* as 80% across a semester. Student demand, however, varies depending on the timing of writing assignments; thus, usage will vary. If usage is consistently over 80%, students are likely turned away. Generally, usage assessment leads to changes made between semesters; in fall 2012, the usage at the main location in the Ralph B. Draughn (RBD) Library was over 80%, and other assessments showed that usage was peaking between 3:00 p.m. and 6:00 pm. As a result in spring 2013, an additional consultant was added to the schedule during those hours. This adjustment lowered usage at this location to 72%, taking pressure off the consultants and ensuring students were likely able to make appointments when they needed.

Early in fall 2014, we saw that the usage in RBD had moved back above 80%. We heard anecdotally from our front-desk staff at that location that students were attempting to make appointments, but when directed to other locations, they were not willing to cross campus. We made the decision to move some of the staff from other locations mid-semester to respond to student demand. In the following spring, we raised staffing for all hours at the RBD location to three consultants.

The ability to respond mid-semester has its limits; in the fall 2015 semester we once again faced usage over 80% at our RBD location, but our other locations were also showing increased usage, so reallocating resources was more difficult. We were able to justify a budget increase to add consultants to the schedule for the last two weeks of the semester, as well as increase staffing for spring 2016. As demonstrated by this example, monitoring usage data throughout the term allows us to make decisions that address both immediate and long-term student needs.

Note. Contributed by James C. W. Truman, assistant director, Office of University Writing, Auburn University. Used with permission.

Figure 3.1 represents the interdependency among core learner-centered commitments when an institution and its programs focus on students' equitable success. From left to right, the figure displays how the backward design of course or experience elements and assignments that assess students' learning are rooted in agreed-upon outcomes and scoring rubrics or other metrics that align with those outcomes.