Wilf Campus Writing Center

By Dr. Lauren Fitzgerald, Director

 Assessing writing center effectiveness is complicated because, unlike what happens in courses, the students we tutor almost never produce work for a curriculum we've designed and we seldom have access to the final versions of what we help them with. However, writing center administrators, student tutors, and student writers across the country are confident that the services we offer are effective, so other ways to assess student learning in these contexts have been developed.

 In fall 2013, an experienced tutor and I wrote up a set of goals and student learning outcomes (SLOs) that articulated much of the learning we believed that the 400 or so student writers and the 20 or so student tutors underwent as a result of their work in the Center each year. Then we mapped these SLOs onto a set of learning experiences typical in writing centers—not only individual tutoring sessions but also what writers do after their sessions as well as the tutor education program that all tutors engage in each semester they are employed.

Building on assessment programs at other writing centers, Rachel Ebner and I devised two questionnaires—one for tutors and one for students—that mirror each other and focus on tutors' and students' perceptions of what students learn during their tutoring sessions. Comparison of the results of these two questionnaires in spring 2014 suggested a shared belief among tutors and students that Writing Center sessions do indeed help improve students' writing.

To complete the feedback loop, early in the fall 2014, as part of the Wilf Writing Center's tutor education program, I shared this comparison of the results of the two questionnaires with tutors. Tutors in turn used these data to develop a specific tutoring strategy: setting aside time at the end of each session for writers and tutors to articulate what was accomplished and to develop plans for next steps. Results from our most recent (spring 2015) survey suggest that students were even more confident than they'd been the previous year that tutoring helped them form a specific plan for what to do next with their writing, provided them with useful strategies to improve their writing, and, overall, improved their writing projects.

Data collection has always been part and parcel of my job as Writing Center Director since, again, unlike courses, information about the numbers of students served and sessions held, for example, isn't automatically generated by the Registrar's Office. Now that we are operating within an assessment framework, however, tutors and I are asking much bigger questions and collecting different kinds of data to answer them. Next, we will consider whether we are meeting writers' expectations for sessions by comparing the kinds of help writers say they want to the kinds of help tutors say they provide and what tutors themselves learn through the tutor education program and tutoring itself.