



After the Writing Center Dissertation

Terese Thonus

University of Kansas | Lawrence, Kansas

Sheila Carter-Tod

Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State Univ. | Blacksburg, Virginia

Rebecca Babcock

University of Texas of the Permian Basin | Sterlin City, Texas

Often academic books begin with an article or conference presentation. This article, however, began while Rebecca Babcock was amassing qualitative dissertations on writing center tutoring for a book, *A Synthesis of Qualitative Studies of Writing Center Tutoring, 1983-2006*, she and others were writing.¹ Sifting through the dissertations and the dissertation writers' names, Babcock wondered what had happened to those colleagues who had invested so much time in writing center scholarship. That is, what happened to them *after writing their dissertations*? Were they still in the writing center field? If not, how did the writing of their dissertations prepare them for what they do now? And what happened to the dissertations? With those questions in mind, we focused this study on a sample of writing center dissertators and their career trajectories. We don't explore other interesting and valid career paths and preparations, nor do we argue that writing center dissertators *should* or *must* hold writing center positions. Instead, we offer our study, the results of which indicate that the benefits of writing a dissertation focused on writing center theory and practice are often subtle and far-reaching, serving as broad preparation for a range of academic jobs.

The match between writing center dissertation writers and those who become Writing Center Professionals (WCPs) is not so much a matter of supply and demand as an example of the complexity of the broader field of writing studies.² In a 1995 survey of writing center directors, Dave Healy reported only 10 percent of his participants were trained in composition and rhetoric, 20 percent had education degrees, and nearly 70 percent held English literature degrees. Stuart Brown, Theresa Enos, David Reamer, and Jason Thompson's 1999 survey of

rhetoric and composition doctoral programs showed that these programs produced more writing center dissertations than placed graduates in writing center positions. Their 2008 follow-up survey reported similar results. These studies suggest that a WCP job post-writing center dissertation is not a foregone conclusion.

What do these findings say about prospective and current WCPs in terms of identity, research, and the construction of the field? Lori Salem and Michelle Eodice surveyed 75 attendees of the 2009 and 2010 IWCA Summer Institutes and found the majority of them were “consumers” rather than “producers” of writing center research. Of the cohort, 50 percent reported viewing their writing center positions as “temporary service gigs.” Only 25 percent assumed “writing center director” as their primary professional identity, and only 25 percent professed a long-term commitment to writing center work and to research—though not necessarily writing center research. More recently, Anne Ellen Geller and Harry Denny reinforced the notion of an arbitrary connection between the writing center dissertation and WCP employment through a qualitative study of fourteen WCPs, six of whom had earned PhDs in composition and rhetoric, to determine their “route into the profession.” Only eight described their trajectory as “intentional,” while six labeled theirs “accidental” (126).

Our study complements the above scholarship—further developing the picture of writing center dissertation writers and their current jobs. We ask: What positions do these dissertation writers currently hold? How many identify as WCPs? What do they see as their “ideal position”? What impact has writing their dissertations had on their careers, as researchers, administrators, teachers, and mentors? In sum, what happens *after* the writing center dissertation?

We selected our sample of writing center-themed dissertations from *A Synthesis of Qualitative Studies of Writing Center Tutoring, 1983-2006*, the bibliography “Dissertations and Theses on Writing Centers,” and the *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses* database (up to 2014), employing the search term “writing center.” Because we each wrote a qualitative dissertation and because our research was extending a book project on such research, we focused exclusively on qualitative dissertations. We also excluded dissertations that listed “writing center” in titles but used the term differently from how it’s used in our field,

ignored Master's theses³ and elementary school writing centers dissertations, and encountered no secondary writing center dissertations. Of the 121 entries, we selected the 88 empirical dissertations in which writing centers were the *context* for data collection and results were discussed in terms of center work.

To create a rich data set, we found contact information for 80 of those authors, e-mailed each a questionnaire, and conducted follow-up telephone interviews. Forty (7 male, 33 female) of the 80 PhDs contacted responded to our survey. They had earned their doctorates between 1991-2014 with a median date of 2007, compared to a median of 2005 for the entire sample of 80. All but one respondent had directed a writing center or worked as a student tutor in the past, and the majority indicated they had selected writing center theory-practice dissertation topics based on mentor encouragement or because they had worked in writing centers as graduate students. At some level, all admitted the value of a writing center dissertation was *not* as a direct line to a WCP position but as a broader professionalization experience for teacher-researchers. Five work at the universities where they earned doctorates. Twenty-six are tenured or tenure-track professors (3 full, 18 associate, and 5 assistant) in English, education, writing and rhetoric, and communications; two work as instructors; one is a learning specialist; and one is a university assessment coordinator. Only twelve respondents described themselves as WCPs: ten writing center directors (WCDs) and two associate directors. Seven of the WCPs occupy staff positions; six occupy faculty positions, two of these being "hybrid" positions (to use Geller and Denny's term for non-tenure-able faculty with writing center administrative duties).

Ten of the twelve current WCPs earned doctorates after 2007, suggesting a trend for those who author writing center dissertations to be employed as WCPs. The majority of recent PhDs (our study focused specifically on 2007-2013) fully wanted—and expected—to become WCPs immediately or in the future, although whether they expected "WCP" to be their primary academic identity was unclear. One respondent wrote:

My current position provides me the opportunity to teach, and in the future, I will . . . coordinate the Writing Center [and] still be responsible for classroom teaching while in an administrative role.

One was glad she had recently switched from a faculty position into a non-faculty WCD position:

While the full-time faculty position was initially a nice opportunity to focus on my teaching and develop new materials, courses, etc., I missed administration . . . particularly . . . writing center work. [T]he writing center is the only institutional space where I am able to work with multilingual students, my preferred student population.

Another commented wistfully:

I want to involve myself in [a] writing center job although the university that I am working at now has no writing center. I look forward . . . to do[ing] some administrative job for the writing center when the university will establish [one].

When asked about their “ideal situation,” 23 respondents indicated contentment with their current positions, including 11 of the 12 WCPs. Five assistant or associate professors wanted to be WCDs. Four respondents desired more research time (including one faculty WCD), one wanted better pay, and another wanted a Research I university position mentoring graduate students. Six former WCDs noted they were “making the rounds” of departmental and university administrative responsibilities, including WPA, WAC coordinator, and first-year-experience learning community director.

When asked, “What aspects of your job did the dissertation prepare you for?” participants’ top answers were (1) research, (2) administration, (3) teaching or pedagogy, and (4) mentoring researchers. Several noted their dissertation had been preparation, as one respondent wrote, for “academia in general.” In terms of research, 28 respondents had submitted or were working on dissertation-based conference presentations and articles, with a mean of 2.6 per person. Twelve respondents, however, had not published or presented on their dissertation research; the majority of these held faculty, not WCP, positions. One tenure-track respondent explained the dissertation had prepared her in a general way for research:

The dissertation prepared me to tackle long-term projects with lots of data to manage and analyze . . . to set a research agenda and follow through—very necessary in terms of later tenure and promotion decisions.

Another respondent had discontinued writing center work and related research post-dissertation fearing it would be “the death” of her career. Several faculty respondents changed their research focus after the dissertation because they had moved away from writing center work and became directly involved

with writing program administration, ESL, or professional/technical writing. Some now held higher administrative positions with less time (and sometimes fewer expectations) for research. Community college faculty expressed difficulties finding time to continue research beyond the dissertation because of heavy teaching obligations. One such individual engaged in some self-recrimination:

I suppose I should do more writing. I haven't because teaching at the community college is notoriously demanding. Time seems a good excuse. But no one has time, and others seem to get it done.

Writing center dissertation writers who currently serve as WCPs often echoed this response. Three staff WCPs noted research is not in their job descriptions. One, however, indicated she had far more time to engage in research than she had ever had as a tenured faculty member.

Seventeen respondents explained how their writing center dissertations had contributed to their understanding of their administrator roles, although not all were WCPs. One writing center director wrote:

My dissertation not only prepared me for thinking about writing centers as a place for teaching, learning and research, but it also shaped my understanding of what a writing center is. It has helped me develop my vision for the potential of writing center work, which I am applying to my directorship. That vision, of course, will shift and change, but the dissertation gave me time and space to reflect deeply on how I envision my work.

Twelve respondents claimed their writing center dissertations had prepared them for teaching. One reported:

Preparing for and writing my dissertation was absolutely instrumental in preparing me to teach at the community college. My research on writing centers and the dialogue between consultant and writer inform the way I talk to students in my conferences, . . . to students in the writing center, and even how I write comments on my students' work.

Another explained how her preparation as a tutor and writing center researcher continued to inform her teaching:

Learning about the inner workings of the writing centers within my university system was eye-opening, and helped me to prepare my ELL students better on those occasions when they seek help from tutors. It also made me more

aware of how faculty involvement (not lip service about being involved) can create a partnership that better enables the writing center [to] fulfill its mission and purpose.

Five respondents attributed their mentoring skill to their dissertation experience. One faculty writing center director viewed her role as a *sponsor* of research:

Research for me nowadays is *undergraduate* research, initiating students into the process of asking good questions and then designing projects that will help them answer those questions.

Another respondent explained her dissertation has been crucial to mentoring graduate students:

. . . doing a qualitative study familiarized me with the challenges of that work (getting cooperation, transcription, field notes, etc.), and I have used that experience many times when advising students about research projects.

Interestingly, two respondents argued that their jobs prepared them for their dissertations. One wrote her dissertation over five years as she designed, implemented, and directed a community college writing center, which she still leads:

Three and a half years into my doctoral program, our local community college advertised for a Writing Center Coordinator . . . responsible for designing, implementing, and directing writing centers for their multi-campus institution. My friends and colleagues encouraged me to apply, while my graduate school professors, most of them with furrowed brow, all but discouraged me from applying. "You'll never finish the degree," they chanted. One even commented: "You could work anywhere. Why a community college? And why [pause] in the writing center? You could do so much more!"

Fortunately, my committee chair supported my decision and eventually helped the others to see that the community college writing center was . . . as valid a research site as any others they favored in the profession. . . . According to my chair, I was one of the few students in her experience privileged enough to write within the conversation rather than beneath it. Very few charged with creating writing centers are fortunate enough to be simultaneously steeped in the research and surrounded by a willing team of academic advisors.

What can we make of our survey results? From one vantage point, our study may reveal a waste of academic and research talent because so few writing center dissertation writers go on to WCP

positions, and even fewer continue to engage in writing center research. The lack of a coherent career path for writing center dissertation writers likely contributes to the present reality of administrators with little grounded research experience. Other contributing factors may be the consolidation of writing centers into learning commons and institutions determining director jobs as masters-level positions. Publication of dissertation findings, replication of studies in new writing center contexts, continuity between dissertation and post-dissertation inquiry and between research topic and academic context—all are lost in the motivated or incidental abandonment of WCP career options. And we wonder, like Geller and Denny's WCPs, whether PhDs responding to our survey were "accidental" writing center directors? That is, was their dissertation research context unrelated to their professional aspirations? From another vantage point, however, our findings suggest the changing range and role of writing centers, and the work and research done there prepares scholars for a range of post-dissertation research. In addition, the process of writing a writing center dissertation prepares scholars for a range of higher education positions, both academic and administrative. Our participants found their writing center dissertations good preparation for research and teaching in the classroom, writing center, and community. That some may not direct writing centers or do writing center research disturbed very few.

Geller and Denny focused on WCPs' institutional status, a secondary issue in our study, finding that "everyday realities of WCPs' positions can perpetuate WCPs' exclusion from conventional academic culture" (113). We concur with their plea for writing center-based research by WCPs:

[I]f advancing a field and oneself within it involves the consumption, production, and dissemination of knowledge, whether through conference proposals and presentations, or, more importantly, vetted publication, what might it mean to exempt oneself or for significant parts of a community of professionals not to participate in its own collective social construction of knowledge? . . . [W]hen WCPs don't publish, they perpetuate their own marginalization and invisibility by withdrawing, by intent or de facto, from any of the "larger" disciplinary domains to which they might align. (118)

Our study also corroborates Salem and Eodice's findings: Despite our participants' hopes to be involved in writing center

administration in their careers, the majority expect (and some are resigned to the fact) that their career trajectories and scholarly endeavors may lead them away from writing center work.

What is the solution to the possible mismatch between academic preparation, which often includes writing center tutoring and administrative experience, and PhDs' eventual job choices? We strongly second a challenge Geller and Denny pose:

We suggest that as institutions and departments consider future writing center positions, they think simultaneously about what position configuration will best support the growth and development of the institution's writing center and what position configuration will best support the growth of an individual writing center director's career trajectory, including the director's scholarly, teaching, and personal life. (112-113)

We believe that writing center scholars must shape this research agenda by encouraging and guiding writing center dissertation writers and by developing a coherent disciplinary identity for them from graduate school to profession by promoting and supporting their transition into WCP positions or other positions they choose. Whether writing center dissertation writers occupy faculty or staff positions, it is important that throughout their professional lives they continue to grow the field and themselves as participants in it. As one reviewer of this article noted, "Perhaps the point is that writing center directors, no matter what their status, should be able to continue to grow the field and themselves through conducting, and hopefully sharing, their research with colleagues."⁴

1. See Neal Lerner's review of this book in this issue.

2. Over the past twenty years, studies indicate 40% (Healy), 53% (Diamond), or 44% (Valles, Babcock and Jackson) of WCPs hold doctorate degrees.

3. An interesting follow-up study could examine career paths of those who write Master's theses about writing centers.

4. This article grew from a 2008 IWCA conference presentation with Katie Levin and Katie (Stahlnecker) Hupp. Thanks to Karen Rowan, Michael Pemberton, Cinthia Gannett, Carol Zeuses, anonymous reviewers, and all study participants.



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