

# Tutors' Column: "Image is Everything: The Data Behind Impressions and Perceptions"

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On campus, a student's image is everything. For example, most of us define ourselves, in part, by the fact that we are writing center tutors, which means certain things to us and different things to those around us. These defining images, and the perceptions that go with them, also reach beyond individuals. They touch things like on-campus resources, such as the Writing Center. Our Writing Center has spent the last several years working toward creating an ideal "brand" for what we do. The University of Connecticut Writing Center now has a well-developed webpage, a clearly defined logo (displayed on various signs, takeaways, and staff apparel) and a campus-wide web of in-class tutor talks—short summaries of what the Writing Center is all about—delivered by request each year. With all this branding, a fellow undergraduate tutor and I began to ask ourselves: Were our efforts impacting the undergraduate population at UConn? The number of appointments has steadily risen each year, but does that mean we're "liked" or otherwise valued the way we want to be? How does the general undergraduate population really view us?

## WHAT DOES OUR BRAND SAY?

To answer these questions, we first analyzed how our writing center is portrayed through images, writing, physical spaces, the internet, and marketing materials. Because of our interdisciplinary backgrounds as tutors, we knew that all these artifacts could influence brand transmission, including the built environment and how individuals interact in a given place (Tuan 1977). Similarly, Tim Cresswell, a spatial theorist, notes that "places are created by people doing things" and that the people in a space can influence how places are perceived in terms of who we are, what our work is, and how we tailor our spaces to convey a certain "brand" for the writing center. To convey our brand and professionalism, we have a distinct, unifying yellow and blue color scheme, marking everything from our furniture and t-shirts to bookmarks and

workshop materials. Although UConn is known for its navy blue color, ours is a lighter, brighter blue, tying us to the community while simultaneously allowing us to stand out. Our space consists of round tables and comfortable seating, highlighting collaboration and warmth. Similarly, our directors work to include as many majors on staff as possible—ranging from biochemistry to music—to help mirror the campus population we serve. Our digital presence embodies what we do in our space via the “about us” section of our webpage, using words such as “dynamic” and “convenient” to align with how our tutors might communicate our values in sessions and tutor talks.

### **DATA COLLECTION**

Ultimately, we knew how we described ourselves: collaborative, welcoming, and academically driven. What we wanted to know, then, was how the undergraduate population described us, and whether or not it was similar. Over the course of several weeks, we administered a digital survey to students across campus. Of our 96 participants, 60 were writers who took the survey upon appointment intake at the center itself. We also posted the survey on a campus-wide listserv, from which we received 36 responses. The survey was meant to capture a quick, gut perception of the writing center. The most significant data came from one question, which asked participants to “list three words you associate with the UConn Writing Center.” Additional demographic information allowed us to differentiate between the opinions of key groups, defined by attributes such as year in school, gender, and English language learner status. We analyzed our data using Excel and word clouds.

### **CONTENT ANALYSIS**

We were pleased when the data from undergraduates echoed how we, as tutors, view the writing center. Both the word “helpful” and “help” dominated the word cloud analysis, occurring a collective 59 times. Other positive words such as “useful,” “productive,” and “friendly” also stood out. Our results showed that writers generally know not only what we do—and to some extent how we do it—but also where our space was. Among these glowing responses were words whose connotations were a little trickier. For example, the words “essay” and “English” appeared widely, both of which potentially clash with our intended brand. While it is a fact that we work on a large portion of English essays, these words potentially pigeon-hole us in ways we have diligently fought. Just as our staff is diverse, we want students to see and use the writing center as a place for a variety of subject areas

and types of writing. In fact, a majority of our yearly professional development activities do not focus on topics for English and often include multidisciplinary topics such as personal statements and scientific lab reports, neither of which appeared in our survey results.

Other words that don't traditionally align with our brand included "grammar" and "editing," both appearing more frequently than we liked. These words can have negative connotations in the field of writing centers. While we do work on grammar and editing—especially with English language learners, who made up 16% of our respondents—we were disheartened to see these words appear as one of the first three things people think about when they consider our resource.









### **ANALYSIS BY DEMOGRAPHIC**

We sliced our data into different demographic subgroups and found word trends arise regardless of demographics. Each group had a similar distribution of positive ("helpful," "friendly"), neutral (words such as "read," "tutors," or "writing" that are simply facts), and disconcerting ("inconvenient," "terrible") words suggesting that while our branding is consistent across all areas, the perception of us doesn't necessarily change—improve or otherwise—as students move through their time at UConn. There was no single group of students, based on gender, year, or language fluency, that held a unique view of us. These consistent perceptions suggest that we are promoting our center to all students, but our results did not provide any specific group to target with future branding efforts.

While the branding our directors spent the last decade creating is ultimately similar to how students actually perceive us, the survey results demonstrated that only two of the words we found from our branding efforts appeared in student responses—"busy" and "academic." So where were they getting their message? In a separate survey section, participants were asked to check the box of all the sources from which they have heard about the writing center, with nine categories available, including "other" (see table). Surprisingly, none of the elements the tutoring staff has control over even reached a 20% response rate, including the website and staff-run social media like Facebook and Twitter. It turns out that, at this point, those of us who work at the writing center have very little direct influence in the branding process. Instead, students acknowledge that they remember hearing about us from course instructors (including the required visits

tied to our First Year Experience course). While it means that we have strong support from the faculty at the university, more interestingly almost half (46.88%) of the respondents reported hearing about the center from friends or peers.

**TABLE 1: Where have you heard about the Writing Center**

	Percent of Student Responses	
Instructors	81%	
Friends	47%	
WC Staff	20%	
Facebook	4%	
Twitter	0%	
WC Website	19%	
Orientation/Campus Tours	45%	
FYE Class	55%	
Other	6%	

We concluded that the discussion of our center has moved outside of the classroom and is more strongly grounded in the overall culture of the university than we may have first anticipated. Word of mouth, it appears, is the strongest asset we have in defining our brand at this point, and it is self-sustaining, largely without staff input. In addition, 44.79% of respondents noted receiving information about our center from orientation leaders and campus tour guides, further supporting our finding that word of mouth within the undergraduate population is a strong contributor to our overall image.

### CONCLUSION

Ultimately, we were excited to see that our center’s self-image is, by and large, held by the overall university community. While our rate of participation is small and our participant pool represents a small segment of the total undergraduate population on our large campus, we were able to gather enough data to draw interesting conclusions. Branding will forever be a part of our job as tutors, especially because the student population is constantly changing and evolving, and—currently at least—writing centers are something most students encounter for the first time in college. That being said, this study gave us the confidence to put intentional branding on the back burner, especially in formal and informal discussions of our practice, in favor of our most important duty—working with students.



## WORKS CITED

Cresswell, Tim. *Place: A Short Introduction*. Blackwell, 2004.

Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. U of Minnesota P, 1977.

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