

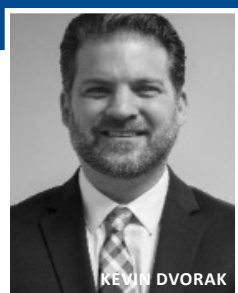
# How Course-Embedded Consultants and Faculty Perceive the Benefits of Course-Embedded Writing Consultant Programs



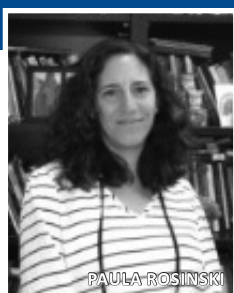
JULIA BLEAKNEY



RUSSELL CARPENTER



KEVIN DVORAK



PAULA ROSINSKI



SCOTT WHIDDON

Julia Bleakney  
Elon University

Russell Carpenter  
Eastern Kentucky University

Kevin Dvorak  
Nova Southeastern University

Paula Rosinski  
Elon University

Scott Whiddon  
Transylvania University

## INTRODUCTION

Course-embedded peer-to-peer writing support programs, also referred to as “writing fellows” programs, are often discussed in terms of student mentoring, writing growth, and advocacy. For example, Jim Henry et al. examine

course-embedded mentoring in first-year composition (FYC) courses; Kevin Dvorak et al. study ways embedded tutoring helps students achieve FYC course learning outcomes; and Dara Rossman Regaignon and Pam Bromley find that “working with the writing fellows multiple times over the course of the semester results in a positive and measurable difference in students’ writing” (48). Bradley Hughes and Emily Hall see course-embedded programs as a form of student advocacy, as well. Despite these and other studies, less attention has been paid to how course-embedded consultants (CECs) and faculty perceive the benefits of such programming to students and to themselves as major stakeholders. Furthermore, most studies of CEC work have been limited in terms of scope to individual classes, programs, or institutions.

Our multi-institutional, replicable, and survey-based study

emerged from a desire to get an in-depth understanding of faculty and consultant perspectives on the value of CECs and to highlight the value of cross-institutional research. In their responses to a survey administered across four institutions, CECs and faculty alike discussed how they thought students benefited from their programs. In addition, CECs shared how participating in their programs positively impacted their own learning and writing, and faculty offered their perspectives on programmatic aspects, such as arranging the logistics of student/CEC collaborations and funding struggles.

The programs involved in this study are located at diverse institutions with varying academic goals and different student and faculty populations; each program was designed with its own institution's student populations, goals, and histories in mind. Despite these differing contexts, study results show that these programs share three common features:

1. students are more engaged in the writing process and become more effective writers when they work with CECs;
2. CECs develop a greater self-awareness as writers based on their work with students; and
3. faculty better understand the importance of providing institutional and financial support to CEC programs so they can thrive.

Our study bolsters ongoing arguments about the importance of writing center work and connections to classroom pedagogies. What we found most interesting was how each of our institutions used CEC programming in light of localized concerns and student needs, suggesting that CEC programs are most effective when they are responsive to institutional contexts. Thus, we argue that recognizing localized institutional contexts and tailoring the program based on the departments that CEC faculty teach in, on their prior experience with writing pedagogy, on the majors that CECs are recruited from, and on whether the CEC program supports FYC or upper-level disciplinary writing, are crucial when generating best practices that apply across contexts.

## **METHODS**

The four participating writing centers are located at different types of universities in the southeastern United States; each has its own name for its CECs.

- Institution One is a mid-sized regional comprehensive university that had twenty-one peer undergraduate "Course-Embedded Consultants" connected to twenty-one FYC classes, all of which have a reading-heavy focus.

- Institution Two is a mid-sized liberal arts university that had six peer undergraduate “Disciplinary Writing Consultants” embedded in five undergraduate classes across the curriculum.
- Institution Three is a large private, research, doctoral granting university that had thirty-five peer graduate and undergraduate “Writing Fellows” embedded into sixty-eight FYC courses.
- Institution Four is a small, historic/traditional liberal arts university that had three peer undergraduate “Course-Embedded Consultants” in three first-year seminar courses.

The CECs at all four locations were a mix of novice and veteran writing tutors who were trained to meet the specific needs of the students in the courses to which they were connected. The authors administer the CEC programs at each of the four institutions.

We administered two short, open-ended surveys to faculty and CECs at each institution at the middle and end of the Fall 2017 semester. The mid-semester survey was intended to gauge general satisfaction with the level of interaction between the CECs and students; the end survey, which we focus on in this article, asked CECs and faculty for their perspectives on how the programs impacted their students’ learning about writing in general and writing processes in particular. Surveys were collected by Institution Two using Qualtrics after IRB approval was secured. With a total of ninety-seven courses involved in this program, the response rate to the end survey for faculty was  $n=22$  (23%) and for CECs was  $n=26$  (27%). The responses from each institution were as follows: Institution One: 4 faculty, 4 CECs; Institution Two: 5 faculty, 3 CECs; Institution Three: 9 faculty, 16 CECs; and Institution Four: 3 faculty, 3 CECs. Although the number of participants from each institution varies, we are most interested in patterns across the responses, given that all programs used CECs to support selected classes.

### **CODING**

We divided into two coding teams, with two researchers in each team; we used an iterative emergent thematic coding process, which allowed us to review open-ended survey responses to identify themes and develop initial codes. After each team member reviewed the data independently, teams discussed their codes and made decisions to merge some for synthesis and clarification. Each reviewer then read and coded their data a second time. This process allowed us to develop consistency across the reviews. Merging codes after the first review led to a high level of agreement on the second review of our individual coding. We identified patterns and categories in the responses, as well as in individual comments

from faculty and CECs, to better understand the value of CEC programming across institutions from faculty and CEC perspectives.

## **RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS**

### **CEC PERSPECTIVES — BENEFITS TO SELVES**

In response to the question “In what ways, if any, do you think this program helped you become a more effective writer?”, CECs affirmed benefits documented in previous research. For instance, Bradley Hughes et al. suggest that “every writing center director has seen that student tutors learn as much about writing as do the students they tutor, if not more” (13). Like the alumni tutors who participated in Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project (PWTARP), the CECs in our study described becoming more self-aware of their writing style, improving communication skills, learning new writing or research techniques, and improving their critical thinking. The most common benefit, described by fourteen respondents across institutions (54%), is how collaborating and talking with other writers led to improvement in their own writing.

For example, some CECs highlighted how conversation was at the heart of a consultation: “I feel that I have become a more effective writer because of the conversations that happen during a session. During those conversations [...], I’m able to also come up with ideas for my writing as well.” Other CECs focused directly on how working with other writers helped them evaluate and improve their own writing: “In working with the students, I was constantly reevaluating my own writing and knowledge of the writing process.”; “Looking at other students’ styles of writing helps to diversify my understanding of the different ways in which students write.” One CEC highlighted how consultations offer the opportunity for reflection: “it was a reflective process to think back on how my own voice has developed, even during this semester, by working with other writers so consistently.” A final example speaks directly to the idea of collaborative learning: “As the student learns and asks questions that I have to research answers for, we’re both learning about or how to do that one thing.” While the benefits CECs described may also be gained from regular consulting work, what makes them distinct to the CEC experience is the opportunity to work consistently with the same writers and to self-monitor their own development as they repeat advice and review papers with similar content throughout the semester.

The CECs’ responses show that collaborative learning benefits both CECs and student writers because both participate in the development of valuable skills. One of PWTARP’s goals was to “propos[e] a more comprehensive view of the value and influence of collaborative learning in writing centers, one that includes the

impressive development of peer tutors themselves” (16-17). Thus, this study supports PWTARP’s findings through CEC programs. This type of learning is especially powerful and distinct from standard writing center sessions because the CECs are closely mentored by professors concerning assignment needs. These strong working relationships between teachers and students are an excellent selling point for the value of CEC initiatives, promoting students as partners (Cook-Sather, et al.).

### **CEC PERSPECTIVES — BENEFITS TO STUDENTS**

To understand how CECs perceived the benefits to students, we asked, “In what ways, if any, do you think this program helped students become more effective writers?” Twenty-six CECs provided responses to this question, which we coded into categories such as “encourage help-seeking,” “build confidence,” and “encourage collaboration with peers.” The most common response was coded as “help students engage more deeply in the writing process,” which 20 CECs (77%) mentioned. For example, one CEC thought her experiences working with basic writers helped them learn a writing process: “Through this program, I’ve been able to teach them the writing process and show that by learning the steps and tools writers use, they too can become writers.” A second CEC reinforces this idea:

[T]his program has helped students learn how to revise their paper aside from making the small corrections someone could make within the margins of a draft. [It] teaches students that writing is a recursive process, and that it is okay for everyone to have their own process that works best for them.

These findings suggest the CECs believe the work they are doing with students reinforces a long-standing goal for writing centers: providing students with interactions and experiences that help them identify, develop, and hone their own writing processes.

### **FACULTY PERSPECTIVES — CECS ADD VALUE AND HELP STUDENTS BECOME MORE EFFECTIVE WRITERS**

The twenty-three faculty who responded to the question, “In what ways, if any, do you think this program helped your students become more effective writers?,” made clear they value CECs for the same research-backed reasons we value writing center consultants (Henry et al.; Dvorak et al.; Regaignon and Bromley). Faculty explained that CECs provide individualized feedback and guidance as dialogic partners to their students. One faculty member wrote, “[Students] have support and direction in our class—and I think they feel like the embedded consultant and their instructor really care about their progress.” A second faculty member noted, “Students are engaged in a dialogue about their writing that they wouldn’t

necessarily get if writing alone.” Faculty also said students received writing support on organizational issues such as planning and coherence. We see from these responses that faculty are interested in integrating collaborative learning that is characteristic of writing center pedagogy. We also note that building and implementing CEC programs can enhance the culture of writing on our campuses. Faculty recognize that CECs provide students with individualized, dialogic feedback from a more experienced peer who is concerned with their writing development.

### **FACULTY PERSPECTIVES — MAKE THE VALUE OF CECS EXPLICIT**

Faculty also wrote comments on the need to integrate the CEC into the class in more meaningful ways and to make the program’s value more obvious to students. Eight faculty (35%), responding to a question about elements of the program that might be unhelpful, noted logistical limitations or hurdles to making the CECS helpful; four offered comments related to resistance from students, such as “[s]ome students didn’t see need” or “should have made writing worth more than 5%” and “saw it as a hassle” or a “hurdle”; two commented on the need for funding. Two faculty members suggested the CEC “Gave wrong or bad advice,” which can also be a logistical hurdle as it highlights the need for close communication and mentoring between the faculty member and their CEC. The two comments about students undervaluing the program and lack of funds, however, point to larger administrative issues: the need for faculty development on integrating CECS effectively so fewer students view the interaction as “busy work,” and the need to adequately fund the program both as a fair labor practice and as a way to encourage active student participation.

Importantly, faculty development varies among institutions in this study; although it is required across our institutions, the structures differ. For example, three programs provide participating faculty with stipends to support their advanced preparation and participation in workshops, while the fourth provides faculty development during their annual, required pre-fall semester meeting.

### **FACULTY PERSPECTIVES — ATTEND TO CONTEXT AND MAINTAIN FLEXIBILITY**

Our data show that faculty needs and attitudes toward CEC programs are context-specific, and logistics must be clearly defined for constituents, or frustrations may emerge. When asked, “Do you have any other suggestions for improvement to this program?” seventeen faculty gave responses we coded into fourteen different categories, indicating that faculty experiences with CECS are highly context-specific (four faculty said “no changes” and thirteen

faculty each gave a distinct response). The range of different responses highlights how CEC programs are embedded in particular institutional, social, and cultural contexts, and therefore the need for flexibility in design and implementation is crucial.

However, despite these differing contexts, faculty responses indicate that across institutions there is a very real (although unique) need to be specific with logistics, as the following comments highlight: “Make meetings b/w students and fellow/CEC required,” “More examples of how to include CECs,” “Same time requirements for all consultants,” and “Better pay for CE[C].” We hear in these responses faculty frustration over struggles to integrate the CECs and program requirements. Practical implications for designing and implementing successful CEC programs therefore include offering logistical guidelines to participants; defining time or frequency requirements for consultant/student and consultant/faculty interaction; providing institutional- and course-appropriate examples for integrating CECs into the course; and financially supporting these programs, faculty, and CECs.

### **FACULTY PERSPECTIVE — BELIEF IN THE CEC MISSION**

Faculty overwhelmingly believe in the mission of the CEC programs and would like to participate again, although they’d like more time to dedicate to participation as well as to receive more student feedback. Of twenty-two faculty who responded to the question, “Would you like to participate in this program again?” seventeen responded “Yes,” two responded “No,” and three responded “Maybe.” Open-ended responses were clustered around three issues: investment of time committed to students and their CEC; their students’ feedback on the program; and interest in participating again because they believed in the CEC mission. These issues reflect the complex nature—in terms of both impact and labor—of course-embedded, writing center-based programming.

### **CONCLUSION**

Our multi-institutional research highlights several benefits of CEC programs that apply across differing institutional types. These benefits suggest CEC programs are worth pursuing and cultivating, although it’s also important to note that CEC work is challenging and time-intensive. We hope such labor can be supported institutionally, via stipends or professional development resources, as a way to incentivize participation and involve more faculty with CEC programming. As a whole, our study suggests CEC programs are most effective when they are in tune with and responsive to institutional contexts; flexible in response to student, CEC, and faculty needs; and careful to minimize confusion that can occur when building any new program by providing all participants

with explicit guidelines and logistical frameworks. To ensure the program is effective, we recommend sharing with faculty and CECs, in writing and before the class starts, the following:

- a description of the program, to be included in syllabi;
- a list of FAQs unique to the institutional context (e.g., how will the CECs be compensated/at what rate?);
- a list of program protocols (e.g., introduce students to their CEC early in the term, don't ask your CECs to grade writing, etc.);
- examples of how to integrate CECs into classrooms;
- logistical information such as how to arrange appointments with CECs and how CECs should record their work hours;
- a timeline of relevant dates, such as meetings between the directors, faculty, and CECs.

We found that these recommendations contributed to strengthening all of our CEC programs, even though each of them emerged out of distinct institutional and cultural contexts. Similarly, we found that each of our CEC programs, with their attention to building supportive, collaborative environments for the teaching and learning of writing, contributed to enhanced cultures conducive to improved student learning.



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