

Whose Voices Are Heard? A Demographic Comparison of Authors Published in *WLN* 2005-2017 and Writers Interested in Publishing

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The 2006 IWCA Diversity Initiative recognized that “Writing Centers are inherently multicultural and multilingual sites that welcome and accommodate diversity,” noting the “diverse population of tutors and administrators” working in our centers. The IWCA initiative also acknowledged that, despite valuing diversity in writing center practice, there remains a “homogenous composition of [our professional] membership,” calling for a plan to increase the participation of people from “historically excluded and marginalized communities” and for more scholarship addressing “diversity matters.”

Several studies focusing on the lack of diversity in our professional field emerged following the IWCA Diversity Initiative, including a survey of writing center directors and administrators conducted eleven years later in 2017 by Sarah Banschbach Valles, Rebecca Day Babcock, and Karen Keaton Jackson. Citing the “relative lack of demographic scholarship on writing center directors,” they surveyed writing center directors at over 1,458 U.S. writing centers. With data that challenges the claim in the IWCA Diversity Initiative about the diversity of writing center administrators, Valles et al. conclude that “writing center directors are not as diverse as we believed them to be” and call for changes to the infrastructure of writing center work to enhance heterogeneity in our field.



In this study, we build on the work of Valles et al. by examining the lack of diversity, in terms of ethnicity or racial identity and institution or position type, among authors in published writing center scholarship. This study arises out of the need to understand through research the nature of homogeneity in writing center scholarship. We focused specifically on authors of research articles published in *WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship* because *WLN* is the oldest peer-reviewed writing center journal and reflects broad interests in writing center practice and research. In focusing on *WLN* from 2005 to 2017, we believed we might get a clearer picture of those who publish in the writing center field. After identifying the *WLN* authors in this time period, we designed and administered a survey to gather demographic information about those authors. Our findings corroborate those of Valles et al., as we conclude that, like writing center administration, writing center scholarship is homogenous, dominated by white tenure-track or tenured faculty at four-year institutions.

We acknowledge, too, recent scholarship that points to concerns we highlight about the lack of diversity in publishing in writing center journals. For example, in his study of authorship and citation patterns in *The Writing Center Journal (WCJ)* from 1980-2009, which yielded a data set of 241 articles containing 4,095 citations, Neal Lerner concludes that there is a lack of diversity in the authorship represented in *WCJ*, despite enhanced work on diversifying writing centers (69-70). Citing the study of 14 writing center professionals conducted by Anne Ellen Geller and Harry Denny, Lerner notes a “reluctance” of writing center professionals to “pursue scholarship” (70), which he concludes may account for the homogeneous “inward gaze” of the field (67).

As Associate Editors of *WLN*, we found ourselves interested in exploring the connection, or disconnection as Lerner identified, between those who have published and those who might be interested in publishing. In addition, we wanted to gauge interest in topics for a webinar series we were creating to support those who want to be publishing in writing center studies. So, we conducted an interest survey—with similar demographic questions as our *WLN* published author survey—through the WCenter listerv in 2018. In conducting these two surveys, we aimed to look at whether there are demographic trends or patterns, such as faculty or staff status or disability status, ethnic, or racial background, in order to better understand the obstacles that might inhibit the publication of writing center scholarship.

METHODS

To gather information about the demographics of authors published

in *WLN*, we surveyed authors of *WLN* articles published during a twelve-year period from 2005-2017.¹ The survey asked respondents about institution type, their position, level of education, gender, age, race and ethnicity, disability status, and language. We omitted questions about sexual orientation and religion in order to keep the survey short and reduce undue burden on participants, particularly authors of multiple articles, whom we asked to complete the survey once for each article. This gave us a sense of who is publishing in *WLN*. We compared the results of our survey to the results of the survey of writing center directors done by Valles et al. to get a picture of the differences between writing center directors as a group and the subsection who are publishing in *WLN*. Finally, to get a sense of any significant gaps between who is publishing in *WLN* and who wants to be publishing in *WLN*, we compared the results of our survey of published authors to our survey of those interested in publishing. We discuss below the limitations of this comparison group.

We used Google searches, queries on writing center listservs, and emails to writing center directors to find authors and then sent an email inviting them to take our survey. Of 259 authors of 313 *WLN* articles, we found email addresses for 197. Of those email addresses, 20 were invalid. We received 134 responses, representing 51.7% of all authors identified.

Our method for distributing the interest survey was a bit different because we did not have a predetermined pool of self-identified interested people. We simply distributed the survey link on the WCenter listserv and the listservs for writing centers in Europe and Asia to determine who might be the audience for our webinars.² The interest survey asked about obstacles to publishing and collected demographic information, such as race, gender, disability status, and educational level. We received 198 responses.

Before we discuss our findings, we want to acknowledge some limitations to our methods. First, we had problems finding email addresses for authors who were tutors when they published. Many of them were undergraduate or graduate students who left academia or changed their names after publishing in *WLN*. This means that authors who were students when they published may be under-represented in our data. Further complicating our results is that participants might have composed the article over a span of time during which their role, age, institutional affiliation, and other factors may have changed. Because of the often-idiosyncratic nature of writing center leadership positions, our survey answer options for the question about position did not fit 20.7% of respondents' positions, which led to a very large number of "other" responses.

In addition, the question about disability status did not offer a “no disability” option, so it is possible that people who wanted to choose that option went with “prefer not to answer” instead.

The most significant limitations have to do with our comparison of the survey of published authors to the survey of people interested in webinars on publishing. The author survey covers a twelve-year span, while the interest survey provides a snapshot of a moment in 2018. Because both surveys were anonymous, it is possible that there is overlap between who took the surveys, meaning some people may be counted twice. Finally, it is difficult to measure what it means to “want to be publishing.” In retrospect, it might have been helpful if we also asked if writing center administrators were rewarded or incentivized by their institution to publish, as this might help explain the distribution range in institutional representation. While we acknowledge these limitations, we also see compelling reasons to look at the differences between the results of the two surveys. Several clear, overwhelming patterns, which we discuss below, show up in the data and give us a preliminary sense, which will be researched further in a follow-up study, of trends in the gaps between who publishes and who wants to publish in a particular journal in writing center studies.

DATA FINDINGS

In the following discussions and tables, we focus on data by type of institution, position, and race and ethnicity. Because authors of multiple articles took the survey once for each article they wrote, some respondents’ answers are represented multiple times in the discussion of institution and position, but the number of authors of multiple articles is relatively low. In addition, respondents could choose all the options that applied to their situations, so some percentages add up to more than 100%.

1. TYPE OF INSTITUTION

Comprehensive institutions offering graduate programs are the most heavily represented among authors who published in *WLN* during the period we studied (see Table 1). Our interest survey also showed heavy representation from people affiliated with this type of institution. While almost 11% of respondents to our interest survey are affiliated with community colleges, there is only one community college author published. Tribal colleges are unrepresented in the data, with no *WLN* authors being affiliated with tribal colleges and no one affiliated with a tribal college responding to our interest survey. It is worth noting that many tribal colleges are two-year or community colleges, so the underrepresentation of community colleges and tribal colleges among *WLN* authors is a double whammy.³

Table 1. Types of Institutions Represented by Published Authors & Interested Writers

TYPE OF INSTITUTION	Published Author Survey (n=134)	Interest Survey (n=198)
Comprehensive Institution w/ Graduate Programs	66.4% (93)	56.1% (111)
Community Colleges	.7% (1)	10.6% (21)
Small Liberal Arts Colleges	20% (28)	16.7% (33)
Other	7.9% (11)	13.2% (26)
No Answer	5% (7)	0

2. INSTITUTIONAL POSITION

Along with data on the type of institution represented, we also examined the institutional position held by respondents (see Table 2). The interest survey did not include the categories of “independent scholar” or “tutor,” which were available in the published author survey. Respondents who checked “other” were then prompted to describe their position. Those who chose “other” in both surveys identified positions that were more nuanced than we initially anticipated such as retiree, intern, full-time writing center staff, dean, and volunteer.

There were three positions that appeared most in the “other” category worth mentioning because of the percentage of respondents who identified them. In the interest survey, the largest group who selected “other” also identified themselves as “graduate tutors” (6.6%), and that percentage is close to the 7.4% of respondents in the published author survey who selected “tutors.” It was also striking to see that 4.5% of respondents who selected “other” in the interest survey also identified themselves as professional tutors or coaches. We had no respondents in the published author survey who identified themselves in this category. By contrast, the biggest “other” position category in the published author survey is tenured or tenure-track faculty (4.4%) who are not directors or administrators of writing centers. In the interest survey, only 1% of responses were from this group of faculty.

Overall, our findings show a wider range of positions among the respondents to our interest survey versus the published author survey. For example, the published author survey shows that more than double the percentage of respondents were in full-time tenured or tenure-track positions than were respondents for the interest survey. Also, the interest survey indicates a wider distribution of writers who occupy part- and full-time non-tenure track positions, whereas non-tenure track faculty comprise a much lower percentage of published authors. Overall, this data suggests a higher rate of publication for respondents in more secure positions

or positions with publication expectations at their institution.

Table 2. Institutional Role Represented by Published Authors & Interested Writers

ROLE	Published Author Survey (n=135)	Interest Survey (n=198)
Full-time writing center director (w/o required teaching)	8.1% (11)	23.7% (47)
Full-time non-tenure writing center director (w/ required teaching)	14.1% (19)	15.2% (30)
Full-time tenure-track writing center director (w/ required teaching)	43.7% (59)	14.6% (29)
Part-time, non-tenure track writing center director	2.2% (3)	9.6% (19)
Independent Scholar	2.2% (3)	0% (0)
Tutor	7.4% (10)	0% (0)
Other	20.7% (28)	31.3% (62)

3. RACE AND ETHNICITY

Finally, we compared our published author survey and our interest survey through the lens of race and ethnic identity. Of the 134 authors who responded to our published author survey, 111 responded to the specific question of race and ethnic identity (see Table 3). Of 198 respondents to the interest survey, 187 responded to this particular question. Of those who answered this question in the published author survey, an overwhelming majority self-identified as white. In addition, 100% of authors who published multiple articles in *WLN* self-identified as white. By comparison, our interest survey suggests that there is a higher percentage of people of color who want to be published than the percentage who have been published.

Table 3. Response to Race and Ethnic Identity Question

ROLE	Published Author Survey (n=111)	Interest Survey (n=187)
American Indian or Alaskan Native	.9% (1)	1% (2)
Asian	2.7% (3)	5% (10)
Black or African-American	.9% (1)	3% (6)
Hispanic or Latinx	0% (0)	5% (9)
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0% (0)	0% (0)
White	90.1% (100)	77% (144)
Other	0% (0)	4% (8)
Prefer not to answer	5.4% (6)	7% (13)

CONCLUSION

Our findings point to homogeneity of *WLN* authors in terms of

institution type, position, and race. Because of this homogeneity, we conclude that the lack of diversity in our field is affecting both professional membership and writing center scholarship. While it is beyond the scope of this article to solve the diversity problem in writing center studies, we advocate moving beyond individual actions to broader structural change that is needed for institutionalized diversity to become reality.

Our surveys are merely a starting point for more research on diversity in writing center publications. We intend, for example, to extend the research presented here as we develop a comprehensive survey that considers more closely the specific obstacles prospective *WLN* authors face in developing work for publication. If scholarly conversations about writing centers are to authentically represent the concerns and perspectives of the diverse players in the writing center community, we will need to find ways to surmount the recurring barriers to publication as well as to actively create opportunities for underrepresented practitioners and scholars at each step of the publication pipeline.

NOTES

1. We focused only on authors of research-based articles. Because research-based articles are more likely to be cited than Tutors' Columns or book reviews, we felt they were more significant in terms of shaping scholarly conversations.

2. *WLN* Webinars can be found at: <https://wlnjournal.org/resources.php>. In addition, the two surveys we conducted can be found at bit.ly/2N7uEH9.

3. The lack of representation in community colleges or in tribal colleges may be complicated and due to a variety of issues: some institutions or positions do not incentivize writing center administrators to publish; some may lack funds to have writing centers. Nonetheless, the near-total absence of representation of indigenous voices in both surveys is troubling and suggests more research is needed to explore their absence in writing center studies.



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