

CARLI COUNTS

COHORT 4

**EVALUATING STUDENT WRITING FROM AN INFORMATION LITERACY
PERSPECTIVE AT A SMALL THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL**

JOHN DECHANT

DIRECTOR OF LIBRARY & ARCHIVES

MEADVILLE LOMBARD THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL

FEBRUARY 1, 2024

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Single Sentence Abstract.....	1
Motivations for the Project.....	1
Partners and Stakeholders.....	4
Inquiry Questions.....	5
Study Participants.....	5
Methods of Data Collection and Analysis.....	5
Findings, Use of Findings, and Next Steps.....	7
Timeline.....	9
Bibliography.....	10
Appendix A: Calendly Pre-Session Patron Survey.....	11
Appendix B: The Relationship between ACRL Information Literacy Frames and the Options in Pre-Session Survey Question #5.....	12
Appendix C: Responses for Pre-Session Survey Questions #1-4.....	13
Appendix D: Pre-Session Survey Question #5: Tutee Answers vs. Tutor Observations.....	14
Appendix E: End of School Year Satisfaction Survey.....	15

SINGLE SENTENCE ABSTRACT

Working under the hypothesis that writing tutoring work is in large part information literacy education, this evaluation project collects data from patron surveys and writing tutor observations to: 1) diagnose the issues with which writing tutees most struggle and 2) ascertain the effect of information literacy-based writing tutoring on student success.

MOTIVATIONS FOR THE PROJECT

I originally began this project as the Language & Writing Center Coordinator at the Chicago Theological Seminary (CTS). CTS had previously employed full-time students to work as part-time peer writing tutors. Given their limited availability, the fact that demand for tutoring was highest in the lead up to finals when the peer tutors were themselves busiest with their own studies, and calls for a non-peer tutor, CTS decided to hire a professional—if still part-time—Language & Writing Center Coordinator. My supervisor explained to me that the faculty and administration had been concerned with the quality of many of the students' academic writing and hoped that I in my position could help struggling students. These students included students who had attended under-funded secondary schools, English as a second language students, students with little to no experience in higher education, and relatively older students who had been out of school for many years and therefore out of practice with academic and computer-based writing. Working within CTS's library, the Lapp Learning Commons, combined with my MLIS degree and my previous experience working as a writing tutor and academic editorial assistant, my work led me to hypothesize that the writing issues facing the students I worked with revolved in large part around issues of information literacy. On the recommendation of the Director of the Lapp Learning Commons Yasmine Abou-El-Kheir—a CARLI Counts alumnus—

I enrolled in Cohort 4. I sought to develop an assessment plan I might use to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of my services as a writing tutor and identify areas in need of improvement.

While I enjoyed my work at CTS, I continued to look for a better-paying full-time academic library position. At the beginning of June 2023, before I had a chance to implement my CARLI Counts evaluation project at CTS, I was offered the position of Director of Library & Archives at Meadville Lombard Theological School (MLTS), another small, progressive theological graduate school located in Chicago. The faculty and administration interviewers liked that I had work experience as both a writing tutor and an academic librarian. I explained my observation that students who struggle with academic writing are in fact struggling with information literacy, and my interviewers responded by noting that some of their students have difficulty in writing for reasons similar to those at CTS. Beginning my new job in July, my new supervisor and the faculty tasked me with developing academic writing resources and offering one-on-one writing tutoring services for students at MLTS. My supervisor also voiced concern about the potential for students to plagiarize, especially with the emergence and availability of AI text generators like ChatGPT. After a few weeks of settling in and after my one-on-one meeting with CARLI Counts' Lisa Hinchliffe, I decided that I could implement an assessment project that was both scaled back from what I originally envisioned conducting at CTS but also more focused on information literacy in writing.

In reading the literature on writing tutoring assessment, I learned that I of course was not the first librarian to come to the conclusion that there is significant overlap between the work of a writing tutor and the work of an information literacy-instructing librarian, and that CTS &

MLTS were not the first education institutions to root their writing centers in their libraries.¹ As Stephen M. North has argued, writing centers suffer under misconception that they are “fix-it shop[s]” that mainly exist to *correct* grammar and style. North explains that the writing tutor instead follows—or should follow—the philosophy of *give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach him how to fish you feed him for a lifetime*: “Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing.”² Personal experience and the literature have taught me that one aspect of producing better writers is improving their confidence,³ making the writing tutor a sort of therapist or “confessant.”⁴ Anecdotally, I have found that this lack of confidence can stem from the all-too-common student fear of making mistakes or earning a bad grade, as well as a feeling of impostor syndrome.

Harry Denny and Zandra L. Jordan go even further in rejecting the focus on grammar in writing tutoring while advocating the need to affirm students’ writing through a recognition of their context and background. They argue that formal written English, the language of the academy that is coded as “normal” and “standard,” is largely the product of the dialect of white, heterosexual, well-educated, upper- and middle-class men. People from historically marginalized communities—people of color, queer, working class, women, those who attended under-funded primary and secondary schools, etc.—are at a disadvantage, as their ways of communicating English are coded as “abnormal,” forcing them to learn to code switch to the prestige dialect in order to succeed in higher education. Denny and Jordan therefore encourage writing tutors to be more open to other ways of writing essays, focus on teaching critical thinking

¹ Kelly Cannon and Jennifer Jarson, “Information Literacy and Writing Tutor Training at a Liberal Arts College,” *Communications in Information Literacy* 3, no. 1 (2009): 45-46.

² Stephan M. North, “The Idea of a Writing Center,” *College English* 46, no. 5 (Sept. 1984): 433, 435, 438.

³ Jane McAvooy and Deborah Core, “Writing Discernment in Theological Education,” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 3, no. 1 (2000): 49.

⁴ Harry Denny, “Queering the Writing Center,” *The Writing Center Journal* 25, no. 2 (2005): 57.

skills, and, when students must by social necessity codeswitch, help them “nurture awareness of their own identities and experiences.”⁵

North, Denny, Jordan, and others therefore argue that writing tutoring should be less about teaching grammar and style and more about teaching critical thinking skills about writing. I was already developing a similar hypothesis even before reading the literature. I have observed that the major issues my students—albeit graduate students—have struggled with can almost all be tied to the Association of College & Research Libraries’ (ACRL) Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education.⁶ Many of the students I have worked with have had trouble making strong arguments, finding and utilizing appropriate sources, and handling sources critically. Many have been especially worried about making a citation error; some have struggled to understand when, how, and why they should cite a resource.

PARTNERS AND STAKEHOLDERS

- Student patrons of the Writing Center (the tutees): the *raison d'être* of writing tutoring and therefore the primary stakeholders
- The administration: the stakeholders who hired me to engage in writing tutoring and who have an interest in seeing the students improve academically
- The faculty: they are stakeholders in that they assign and grade the assignments that are the impetus behind the majority of tutoring sessions, but also partners in that they refer students for tutoring and ask me to give lessons on writing and information literacy issues

⁵ Denny, “Queering the Writing Center,” *The Writing Center Journal* 25, no. 2 (2005): 61; for general arguments paraphrased in the paragraph, see Denny, “Queering the Writing Center,” 39-62; Zandra L. Jordan, “Clarity and creativity as womanist ethics for teaching and evaluating theological writing,” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 22, no. 4 (Oct. 2019): 253-268.

⁶ Association of College & Research Libraries, “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education,” January 11, 2016, <https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>.

- The writing tutor (myself)

INQUIRY QUESTIONS

In my CARLI Counts application back in December 2022, I wrote that I was interested in determining “how the Language & Writing Center can be more effective in assessing the needs of and improving the academic and research skills of CTS’s students.” Early on in the CARLI Counts program, that translated to *What is the impact of the writing tutoring service on student learning and success?* In order to measure the impact of my writing tutoring service on student learning and success, I also determined that I need to identify: *What areas of academic writing do patrons need help with?*

STUDY PARTICIPANTS

While I started developing the project at CTS, I only implemented it at MLTS. Therefore, the study participants have been and will continue to be MLTS students who have made an appointment for writing tutoring.

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

When I was still the Language & Writing Center Coordinator at CTS, writing tutoring was my primary responsibility. I therefore planned on developing a relatively time-intensive pre- and post-session test or writing comparison as detailed in other studies.⁷ In my new job at MLTS, I have a variety of responsibilities beyond just information literacy or writing instruction,

⁷ See: Isabelle Thompson, “Writing Center Assessment: Why and a Little How,” *The Writing Center Journal* 26, no. 1 (2006): 47-52; and Neal Lerner, “Writing Center Assessment: Searching for the ‘Proof’ of Our Effectiveness,” in *The Center Will Hold: Critical Perspectives on Writing Center Scholarship*, ed. Michael A. Pemberton and Joyce Kinkead (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2003), 70-71.

meaning that I no longer have the time to request post-session papers and review them against the pre-session drafts. I therefore decided to follow the advice of Ellen Schendel: “the best assessments are those that fit so seamlessly into the center that they are not noticeable, or they even enhance the work of the center.”⁸ Following the terminology and examples of Ellen Schendel, James H. Bell, and Isabelle Thompson,⁹ my project gathers data through:

1. A five-question pre-session survey (Appendix A) completed by the student patron at the time of scheduling their appointment via Calendly.¹⁰ I designed the first four questions to gather counts on student writing habits and curricular data on the types of courses and assignments that drive students to seek help. I based the options for the fifth question on the ACRL Framework for Inquiry.¹¹ Given that these frames can be relatively jargony and overlap with each other, I boiled the frames down using more digestible language into what I determined to be the most salient issues for academic writing (for a breakdown of how I argue each option fits into the Framework, see Appendix B). After the student makes their appointment, I enter the data, including the date the appointment was made and the date of the appointment itself, into a spreadsheet (Appendices C and D). For Question #5 (Appendix D), if a student checks a box, I enter it in as a 1 so I can utilize Excel’s addition function. I keep the data completely de-identified from the tutee,

⁸ Ellen Schendel, “Integrating Assessment Into Your Center’s Other Work,” in *Building Writing Center Assessments that Matter*, ed. Ellen Schendel and William J. Macauley, Jr. (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2012), 122.

⁹ Schendel, “Integrating Assessment,” 127-131; James H. Bell, “When Hard Questions are Asked: Evaluating Writing Centers,” *The Writing Center Journal* 21, no. 1 (2000): 9; Thompson, “Writing Center Assessment,” 43-45.

¹⁰ “Writing Help,” *Calendly*, accessed January 30, 2024, <https://calendly.com/jdechant-meadville/writing-help>.

¹¹ Association of College & Research Libraries, “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education,” January 11, 2016, <https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>.

but I keep a list of students who have been tutees and their emails on a separate document which I keep not on our shared cloud server but my password-protected hard drive.

2. A post-session survey, completed by myself as the writing tutor as an analysis of my session notes. Utilizing my session notes, I go through and note what areas in question #5 I thought that the student needed help with (see again Appendix D). I can therefore compare what issues a student believes she may be facing with what issues I as the writing and information literacy professional see in their writing.
3. A Likert-scale satisfaction survey (Appendix E) completed by the student patron at the end of the academic year in May. I considered having the patrons fill out a more immediate post-session survey, but previous researchers have already found that such surveys are unfairly skewed positive.¹² Following the advice of Ellen Schendel, I therefore decided on an end of the academic year survey so that I could “gauge what lasting effects writers might have gained from their writing center experiences.”¹³

FINDINGS, USE OF FINDINGS, AND NEXT STEPS

Running this project at MLTS, I always knew that it would take a while before I might accumulate a large enough pool of data to make any substantive conclusions. MLTS only has a full-time equivalent student population of 48. Moreover, MLTS, unlike CTS, has never had a dedicated writing tutor, or at least not one in recent memory, meaning that I have had to advertise my services instead of benefiting from the momentum of previous writing tutors. These factors mean that I have only thus far had four one-on-one appointments (see Appendices C and D). I

¹² Thompson, “Writing Center Assessment,” 44-45.

¹³ Schendel, “Integrating Assessment,” 127.

have also yet to distribute the end of the academic year survey (Appendix E). I therefore need to continue collecting data.

As I collect data, I will share pertinent findings with the administration and faculty with the goal of identifying areas of need and improving information literacy and academic writing amongst MLTS students. While the data in Appendices C and D are thus far too limited for any conclusive results, the limited data I have collected thus far shows that there is a mismatch between what the tutee thinks she needs help with and what I the tutor thinks the student actually needs to improve. There is also the beginnings of a trend in that most of the tutees have come seeking help from one particular class, although I know that that professor has taken an interest in my work and has been encouraging her students to seek me out for help. It will likely be some years before I could amass a fruitful enough pool of data for which I could publish a peer-reviewed paper.

My start at MLTS coincided with a revamping of our academic misconduct standards, including as related to generative AI technology. Some in our administration have wanted us purchase a subscription to Turnitin. The committee chosen to investigate a subscription—which includes myself—have so far resisted, not because Turnitin is not a good tool, but because it would be relatively expensive for a small school like ours and we found it to be rather punitive. That is, we do not simply want to catch offenders for punishment; we want to address the issues of when and why students plagiarize. My assessment project can help contribute quantitative data and qualitative anecdotes to improve our understanding of what leads a student to plagiarize.

TIMELINE

March-April 2023

- Beginning of CARLI Counts Cohort 4
- Began identifying and articulating my project

April-June 2023

- Researched and read studies on writing center assessment
- Began formulating how I would collect data
- Received IRB approval from my then-employer, CTS

July 2023

- Started my new job at MLTS
- Began evaluating how I might be able to implement my CTS project at MLTS
- Had my one-on-one meeting with Lisa Hinchliffe

August 2023

- Set up a writing and citation guide for MLTS from scratch
- Settled on a plan for collecting data that worked in my new institutional context
- Beginning of the fall 2023 semester

September 2023

- Began advertising my services as a writing tutor
- Received IRB approval at MLTS
- Began collecting data

September 2023-February 2024

- Continued to collect data
- CARLI Counts Cohort 4 ends in February

February 2024- and onwards

- Continue to collect data

May 2024

- Satisfaction survey to be circulated amongst student patrons

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Association of College & Research Libraries. "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education." January 11, 2016. <https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>.
- Bell, James H. "When Hard Questions are Asked: Evaluating Writing Centers." *The Writing Center Journal* 21, no. 1 (2000): 7-28.
- Cannon, Kelly, and Jennifer Jarson. "Information Literacy and Writing Tutor Training at a Liberal Arts College." *Communications in Information Literacy* 3, no. 1 (2009): 45-57.
- Denny, Harry. "Queering the Writing Center." *The Writing Center Journal* 25, no. 2 (2005): 39-62.
- Epstein, Maglen, and Bridget Draxler. "Collaborative Assessment of an Academic Library and Writing Center Partnership: Embedded Writing and Research Tutors for First-Year Students." *College & Research Libraries* 81, no. 3 (2020): 509-537.
- Gofine, Miriam. "How Are We Doing? A Review of Assessments within Writing Centers." *The Writing Center Journal* 32, no. 1 (2012): 39-49.
- Jordan, Zandra L. "Clarity and creativity as womanist ethics for teaching and evaluating theological writing." *Teaching Theology and Religion* 22, no. 4 (Oct. 2019): 253-268.
- Lerner, Neal. "Writing Center Assessment: Searching for the 'Proof' of Our Effectiveness." In *The Center Will Hold: Critical Perspectives on Writing Center Scholarship*, edited by Michael A. Pemberton and Joyce Kinkead, 58-73. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2003.
- Macauley, William J., Jr. "The Development of Scholarship about Writing Center Assessment." In *Building Writing Center Assessments that Matter*, edited by Ellen Schendel and William J. Macauley, Jr., 1-24. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2012.
- McAvoy, Jane, and Deborah Core. "Writing Discernment in Theological Education." *Teaching Theology and Religion* 3, no. 1 (2000): 47-53.
- North, Stephan M. "The Idea of a Writing Center." *College English* 46, no. 5 (Sept. 1984): 433-446.
- Schendel, Ellen. "Integrating Assessment into Your Center's Other Work." In *Building Writing Center Assessments that Matter*, edited by Ellen Schendel and William J. Macauley, Jr., 115-136. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2012.
- Thompson, Isabelle. "Writing Center Assessment: Why and a Little How." *The Writing Center Journal* 26, no. 1 (2006): 33-61.
- "Writing Help." *Calendly*. Accessed January 30, 2024. <https://calendly.com/jdechantedmeadville/writing-help>.

APPENDIX A

CALENDLY PRE-SESSION PATRON SURVEY¹⁴

1. If you are seeking help with a course assignment, what is the course name and number? If you are not seeking help for a course assignment, type N/A.
2. Please briefly describe the assignment/issue for which you are seeking help.
3. What is the length requirement for the assignment? If this question is not applicable to your appointment needs, please enter N/A.
4. When is your assignment due? (select one)
 - More than one month from today
 - More than a week but less than a month from today
 - Between 3-7 days from today
 - 2 days from today
 - Today or tomorrow
 - Past due
 - Not applicable/no due date
5. For the assignment/task for which you are making this appointment, select any and all areas in which you think you need help. If you don't know or are unsure, or if an area is not applicable for your appointment, then do not select it.
 - Writing with an appropriate tone or voice
 - Grammar
 - Formatting
 - Making an outline
 - Writing the introduction
 - Writing the thesis statement
 - Writing the body of the work
 - Writing the conclusion
 - Composing sentences of the appropriate length
 - Composing paragraphs of the appropriate length
 - Making good vocabulary and word choices
 - Being precise/not being too general
 - Starting with appropriate research questions
 - Finding sources suitable for your assignment/research question(s)
 - Weighing the strengths/weaknesses of your sources and using them appropriately
 - Keeping an open mind towards your sources
 - Organizing your writing/moving from one idea to another
 - Making good arguments
 - When to cite something
 - How to format your citations and/or bibliography
 - Other (please specify)

¹⁴ "Writing Help," *Calendly*, accessed January 30, 2024, <https://calendly.com/jdechant-meadville/writing-help>.

APPENDIX B

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACRL INFORMATION LITERACY FRAMES AND THE OPTIONS IN PRE-SESSION SURVEY QUESTION #5

Pre-Session Survey Question #5 Option	Related ACRL Information Literacy Frames¹⁵
Writing with an appropriate tone or voice	4. Scholarship as Conversation
Grammar	2. Information Creation as Process
Formatting	1. Authority is Constructed and Contextual
Making an outline	4. Research as Inquiry
Writing the introduction	5. Scholarship as Conversation
Writing the thesis statement	3. Information Has Value 5. Scholarship as Conversation
Writing the body of the work	5. Scholarship as Conversation
Writing the conclusion	5. Scholarship as Conversation
Composing sentences of appropriate length	4. Research as Inquiry
Composing paragraphs of appropriate length	4. Research as Inquiry
Making good vocabulary and word choices	4. Research as Inquiry 5. Scholarship as Conversation
Being precise/not being too general	4. Research as Inquiry 5. Scholarship as Conversation
Starting with appropriate research questions	4. Research as Inquiry 6. Searching as Strategic Exploration
Finding sources suitable for your assignment/research question(s)	6. Searching as Strategic Exploration
Weighing the strengths/weaknesses of your sources and using them appropriately	2. Information Creation as a Process
Keeping an open mind towards your sources	1. Authority is Constructed and Contextual 4. Research as Inquiry
Organizing your writing/moving from one idea to another	4. Research as Inquiry
Making good arguments	5. Scholarship as Conversation
When to cite something	3. Information Has Value 5. Scholarship as Conversation
How to format your citations and/or your bibliography	3. Information Has Value 5. Scholarship as Conversation
Other	N/A

¹⁵ Association of College & Research Libraries, "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education," January 11, 2016, <https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>.

APPENDIX C

RESPONSES FOR PRE-SESSION SURVEY QUESTIONS #1-4

Key	Appointment Made	Appointment Date	Course Name & Number	Please briefly describe the assignment/issue for which you are seeking help.	What is the length requirement for the assignment?	When is your assignment due date?
110323	11/1/2023	11/3/2023	M411INT Healthy Boundaries for Leaders	Healthy Boundaries for Leaders: Case Study	1000 words	Between 3-7 days from today
112123	11/8/2023	11/21/2023	M411INT Healthy Boundaries for Leaders	Outline for final paper in healthy boundaries	10-12 pages	More than a week but less than a month from today
112823	11/8/2023	11/28/2023	M411INT Healthy Boundaries for Leaders	Final for healthy boundaries	10-12 pages	More than a week but less than a month from today
12624	1/22/2024	1/26/2024	N/A	Working on CPE essays	N/A	N/A

APPENDIX D

PRE-SESSION SURVEY QUESTION #5:

TUTEE ANSWERS VS TUTOR OBSERVATIONS

Question #5 Options	Appointment							
	110323	110323review	112123	112123review	112823	112823review	12624	12624review
Writing with an appropriate tone or voice								1
Grammar								1
Formatting								
Making an outline	1							
Writing the introduction	1		1					
Writing the thesis statement	1		1					
Writing the body of the work								
Writing the conclusion								
Composing sentences of appropriate length							1	1
Composing paragraphs of appropriate length							1	
Making good vocabulary and word choices								
Being precise/not being too general								1
Starting with appropriate research questions		1		1				
Finding sources suitable for your assignment/research question(s)		1		1				
Weighing the strengths/weaknesses of your sources and using them appropriately								
Keeping an open mind towards your sources								
Organizing your writing/moving from one idea to another		1						1
Making good arguments								1
When to cite something								
How to format your citations and/or your bibliography						1		
Other					1		1	

Other 112823: In theory, this will be a final going over my draft

Other 12624: By this appointment, I expect my essays to be largely done and proofed

APPENDIX E

END OF SCHOOL YEAR SATISFACTION SURVEY

This past semester you made at least one appointment with Dr. John Dechant to seek help in academic writing. Please rate the following questions on a scale of 1-5, with 1 = not at all, 3 = average, and 5 = very much so; you may also answer N/A for not applicable.

1. You learned something(s) about academic writing in your appointment, and/or you found the time useful.
2. You remember the lessons, guidance, and advice you obtained in your appointment.
3. You have found the lessons you learned and/or the guidance/advice you received in your appointment to be helpful to you as a student.
4. The help you received helped you earn a better grade.
5. You would recommend writing tutoring services to your classmates.
6. Do you have any other comments?