



# A Glimpse into the Possibilities of Credit-Bearing Writing Support Courses: Students' Perspectives

Alana Kuhlman  
Amy Rushall  
Northern Arizona University

In our writing center, one of the most common complaints we hear from students and faculty alike is that they do not have time to address all issues in students' writing in a single appointment. One possible way to overcome this is by providing opportunities for students to make consistent writing center appointments throughout the semester. At the Lumberjack Writing Center (LWC) at Northern Arizona University (NAU), students can enroll in credit-bearing writing support courses in which they work with the same tutor throughout the semester on the same day and at the same time each week. Recurring and/or credit-bearing appointments allow tutors and students to develop sustained relationships. Through these ongoing relationships, the writing process can be scaffolded across appointments and skills can be refined; this sustained work can potentially lead to noticeable changes in students' perceptions of writing improvement and confidence.

Harry Denny et al. noted that “[s]tudents would be better served by a pedagogy that prioritizes multiple back-and-forth interactions with tutors throughout the drafting process” (87). Our writing center does this for students enrolled in credit-bearing writing support courses for multiple writing tasks throughout the semester, and we also offer optional workshops to target specific areas in students' writing. By offering writing support appointments attached to course credit, there is an added element of accountability, both in terms of students attending their appointments and for students consistently working on writing assignments.

Few studies exist that examine recurring writing center appointments, and to fill this gap, we conducted a small IRB-approved study in Spring 2023 to explore students' perceptions of how the writing support courses affected their confidence and writing performance, as well as their satisfaction with the courses and additional writing workshops.

## BACKGROUND

NAU is a four-year public Hispanic Serving Institution with a total enrollment of approximately 28,000 students, over 40% of which are first generation college students. The credit-bearing writing support courses offered at our institution have emerged over the years, beginning with a lower-division one-credit class that required students to attend 12 sessions and to bring in writing-related coursework or other tasks (resumes, cover letters, etc.) to pass the course. In 2019, we added an upper-division version of the course, also one credit, where tutors were trained to emphasize research-skill development while still providing all necessary writing support. Students enrolled in courses of any discipline who feel they could use additional support in their writing are encouraged to enroll in the credit-bearing writing support courses. Often, students in the lower-division writing support courses are concurrently enrolled in their first-year composition course, and students in the upper-division writing support courses are concurrently enrolled in their disciplinary junior-level writing intensive course. These writing support courses

may be required or strongly encouraged for international students depending on their degree program. Occasionally, graduate students enroll in the upper-division writing support course. At NAU, full time students do not pay additional tuition for credits beyond what is required for full time status, making these courses accessible to many full time students. Frequently students who are one credit short of being full time choose to enroll in the writing support courses to make up their additional credit and have full time status.

To increase accountability in these courses, to make these courses meaningful, and to encourage the transfer of what students learn in writing support appointments to future writing tasks, students complete weekly reflections where they consider their ongoing engagement in the writing process. Over the last two years, we added a goal-setting element to these reflections where students work with their tutors to develop, reflect upon, and revise goals as necessary throughout the semester. We anticipated that the added element of goal setting would help students feel more accomplished and more confident in their writing.

In addition to the required weekly meetings, in Spring 2023, we offered optional bi-monthly workshops that addressed various writing topics. These supplemental workshops targeted areas of concern in students' writing in peer-led, small, inviting, and interactive group settings. Students who felt they needed instruction and support with writing topics beyond those offered within their courses were encouraged to attend, and these workshops provided more in-depth and organized lessons than those offered within writing support appointments. Furthermore, one of these workshops focused on graduate school and job applications, which are often outside of the scope of students' academic coursework. We expected that students would choose to attend these workshops because they were interested in receiving additional instruction in writing that supplemented what they were learning in their courses and/or in one-to-one writing support sessions with their tutors.

Tutors who meet with students enrolled in the credit-bearing writing support courses receive additional training to work with these students. Our writing center employs approximately 40 tutors who are either Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) or hourly undergraduate or graduate student workers. All experienced tutors may be assigned to work with students in the lower-division writing support courses, while only graduate-level tutors are assigned to work with students in the upper-division writing support courses. Tutors will typically be assigned up to three students enrolled in writing support courses. GTAs work six hours per week in the writing center, while student workers may work up to 12 hours per week, so credit-bearing writing support appointments account for between a quarter and half of the students writing tutors generally see each week.

Training sessions address topics such as establishing rapport, setting appropriate boundaries, goal setting, long-term skill development, supporting students' emotional needs/connecting students to resources, and working with students from diverse backgrounds. During the training, tutors spend time planning and developing activities for their sessions. Role playing, working through scenarios, and resource sharing are other important elements in preparing tutors to work with students enrolled in credit-bearing writing support courses. As previously noted, tutors emphasize research skill development in the upper-division writing support courses, which is addressed in training sessions. Finally, tutors learn about expectations related to engaging in regular communication with students; tracking students' progress and attendance; grading students' weekly reflections and providing feedback; and making midterm and final grade (P/F) recommendations.

In summary, both the upper- and lower-division credit-bearing writing support courses have a similar curriculum and requirements, with an added emphasis on research in the upper-division course. All students must attend a minimum of twelve 50-minute writing support sessions with their assigned tutor. Students are responsible for bringing in writing assignments, presentations, and/or projects from any of their courses to work on during their weekly sessions, thus largely driving the direction of the sessions. However, tutors may occasionally develop lessons and activities for sessions to address particular areas in students’ writing. In addition to attending weekly writing support sessions, all students must complete weekly reflections. These reflections encourage students to set goals, assess progress toward goals, and develop new goals when appropriate, as well as to reflect on their engagement in the writing process and application of what they work in in their writing support sessions and to ask questions and voice concerns and issues with their writing.

## METHODS

We approached this study to learn more about students’ experiences and perceptions of the course. More specifically, we were interested in how they perceived any changes in their own writing skills and confidence as a result of participating in the course. As such, this study had many limitations, including a small sample size/response rate, limited sources of data, and no control group. We collected data by administering a brief end-of-course survey to all students enrolled in the writing support courses each day during the last week of the Spring 2023 semester. The survey consisted of demographic questions, several questions related to students’ perceptions of the benefits of the course overall, and several questions that explored their experiences with the optional workshops. Finally, students were asked to describe their favorite part of the course and offer any suggestions for improvement. All questions were optional, meaning that, aside from a consent request, which required a “yes” answer to proceed, students were not required to answer any of the questions to move on to the next question.

To analyze the data, we used basic statistical analyses, and we coded the open-ended responses for emerging themes.

## RESULTS

Of the 89 students enrolled in the credit-bearing writing support courses in Spring 2023, 29 (31%) consented to participate in the study. Students who consented and who answered the respective demographic questions represented a wide range of academic levels, race/ethnicities, gender identities, and disciplines (see Table 1).

Table 1. Student Demographics

<b>Academic Level</b>	
First year	3
Second Year	9
Third Year	2
Fourth Year	5
Graduate	5
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	
Asian	12
Black/African American	2
White	5
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	6
Female	15
<b>Academic Major</b>	
Business	8
English	7
Elementary Education	2
Psychology	2
Undeclared	1

In addition to his demographic data (Table 1), seven students identified as first-generation college students. Because the demographic questions were optional, we were unable to gather data specific to other populations, such as Hispanic/Latine students and Native American students, who may have participated in the study but chose not to answer the demographic question(s).

The survey included several items related to students' experiences with the courses. The first two questions pertained to how useful students felt the course was in helping them to grow and refine their writing skills, as well as how useful the course was in helping them to be successful in their writing courses (see Table 2). The next two questions asked students about their preparedness for writing assignments in their future courses and workplace as a result of their writing support courses, as well as whether they felt they had higher grades on their writing assignments than they would have without taking the writing support course (see Table 3).

Table 2. Student Responses to Two Questions About Their Experiences with the Courses

Question	Extremely Useful	Very Useful	Moderately Useful	Slightly Useful	Not at All Useful
How useful was your ENG 100 or 405 class in helping you grow and refine your writing skills?	11	6	0	0	0
How useful was your ENG 100 or 405 class in helping you be successful in your writing assignments in your courses this semester?	10	6	1	0	0

Table 3. Student Responses to Two Assertions About Their Experiences with the Courses

Assertion	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Your ENG 100 or ENG 405 class made you feel better prepared for writing assignments you may have in future courses and/or the workplace.	11	5	0	0	0
Your ENG 100 or ENG 405 class helped you achieve higher grades on writing assignments than you would have received without your weekly writing support sessions.	11	4	2	0	0

The next several questions related to the supplemental workshops. When asked which workshop(s) they attended, three attended "Starting the Writing Process and Organizing Your Paper," four attended "Writing an Effective Thesis, Introduction, and Conclusion," two attended "Writing Succinctly," and two attended "Job and Graduate School Applications." All students indicated that the supplemental sessions they attended were either "extremely useful" or "very useful."

Finally, the survey ended with two open-ended questions. The first asked: “What was your favorite thing about your ENG 100 or ENG 405 class?” Responses were coded for emerging themes, which included satisfaction with their tutor, satisfaction with the types of support offered, and satisfaction with the course materials and resources. The majority of comments offered praise for the tutor in particular, while multiple comments mentioned “everything” or the “course overall.” Other comments talked about the type of support offered, and several comments discussed course materials/resources. When asked: “What suggestions do you have to improve your ENG 100 or 405 experience?”, seven students wrote “none” and two others wrote “increase appointment time.” It is important to note that several students misinterpreted these questions to refer to the courses from which they were bringing writing assignments, so those responses were not included in the analysis.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are promising in considering the possible benefits of credit-bearing writing support courses. Of particular importance were students’ perceptions about how the course helped them to improve their writing skills, to be successful in their writing assignments, to be better prepared for future writing tasks, and to achieve higher grades on writing assignments than they would have without having taken the writing support course. We also found that students’ comments about their tutor being their favorite part of the course helped affirm the value of the credit-bearing courses, in which we hope that tutors and students develop trusting relationships. Though attendance at the optional workshops was not as high as we had hoped, we were pleased to see that all students who did attend the workshops found them to be beneficial.

While this study did offer meaningful data, it was not without its limitations, in particular, the survey response rate. This study offered insight into the experiences of the 31% of students who chose to participate in the study, which leaves the experiences of the other 69% of students unknown. Because the demographic questions were optional for students, we were unable to fully explore how different groups were affected. Additionally, this study explored only students’ perceptions of their experiences and the benefits of the courses without additional data, such as rubrics/grades to support any reported changes. As a survey with primarily multiple-choice questions and few opportunities for students to explain their answers, this study was also limited in that it did not necessarily offer information about why students selected particular choices. Furthermore, there was no control group to help determine whether students who attended single drop-in or multiple drop-in appointments throughout the semester experienced similar results.

There are a few implications of this study for future practice. Firstly, the purpose of credit-bearing writing support courses should be clarified so students understand how the writing-support course is different from their disciplinary course(s). Additionally, in the case that the workshop topics were not relevant to individual student’s needs or that workshops were not offered at times students were available, the workshop offerings could be expanded. Workshops could also be integrated into the curriculum of the writing support courses and incentivized within the writing support courses as extra credit opportunities.

There are several avenues for additional research we might pursue based on our findings. Students’ perceived improvements and increased confidence justifies the need for future studies that specifically explore the potential for credit-bearing writing support courses to help increase retention, particularly for students who come from diverse backgrounds, which is an important

concern at many higher education institutions. Examining why students chose to enroll in the course could not only help with future recruitment efforts, but also provide further insight on adjustments that can help the course and optional workshops to even better meet the needs of students. It would also be useful to include a demographic question asking if students are international or domestic to understand the unique experiences and needs of international students that could help shape the courses and optional workshops. Also related to the survey, administering a pre- and a mid-semester survey, as well as sending the end of semester survey to students several weeks before the semester ends could yield additional responses and data that could be useful. Including a control group could be useful in determining differences in experiences and perceived changes amongst students enrolled in credit-bearing writing support courses versus those who attend multiple or single drop-in appointments. Exploring tutors' experiences working with students in credit-bearing writing support courses could yield interesting insights, especially considering their experiences in writing support courses versus drop-in appointments. Finally, administering a similar but modified survey to students who use the writing center on a drop-in basis would allow a better understanding of differences in perceived growth/improvement for those who enrolled in the writing support courses versus those who used the writing center for drop-in appointments one or more times in a semester.

### **Work Cited**

Denny, Harry, et al. "‘Tell Me Exactly What It Was That I Was Doing That Was So Bad’: Understanding the Needs and Expectations of Working-Class Students in Writing Centers." *Writing Center Journal*, vol. 37, no. 1, 1 Jan. 2018, pp 67-99. <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1866>. Accessed 20 Sept. 2024.