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International Students at the University of California: The Impact on Writing Center Practice

The dramatically increasing number of international students at University of California (UC) campuses has had a marked effect on its campus writing centers, causing a reconsideration of personnel, pedagogy, training, services, and cross-campus partnerships. In this article, writing center administrators and staff at 3 UC campuses—UC Irvine, UCLA, and UC San Diego—discuss the challenges they are encountering and the possibilities that are emerging as they pursue their mission to serve all undergraduate student writers.

Like many other universities across the country, the University of California (UC) is encountering an influx of international students, which has led to rapidly changing demographics in the undergraduate student body, and academic support services have adapted to serve shifting student needs. Writing centers at UC campuses, in particular, have encountered a variety of challenges and opportunities as a result of the influx of international students. New pedagogical approaches, new tutor-training procedures, new personnel structures, new services, and new cross-campus collaborations have emerged as UC writing centers have begun to adjust to the changing student landscape.

Background

In 2007, UC Regents initiated a change in the policies governing admission of residents and nonresidents. This decision involved the following steps:

1. Separating enrollment targets for resident and nonresident undergraduates;
2. Setting a minimum per campus for tuition from nonresidents;
3. Dedicating state support to residents only.

Although an increase in enrollment of international students (who fulfilled a major share of nonresident tuition expectations) was expected, it did not occur immediately because of a variety of factors, including the need for increased outreach efforts and applicant TOEFL scores that were too low to satisfy UC admissions criteria. The surge finally hit several UC campuses in the fall of 2012, and the numbers continue to rise. Evidence of the rapid growth of international students throughout the system can be seen clearly through the example of UC Irvine (UCI), where the enrollment picture indicates an ongoing upsurge (see Table 1).

Table 1
Projected Enrollment Growth of International Students

New international students	***Fall 2012***	***Fall 2013***	***Fall 2014***
Freshmen	695	765	841
Transfers	166	175	190
All grad students	339	429	564
Total	1,200	1,369	1,595

Note. From Levin (2014).

According to UCI's executive vice chancellor (Clark, 2012),

> Going forward from next year … we anticipate continued growth in total enrollment of international students at an annual rate of approximately 6-10%. Average growth in new undergraduates is projected to be 6-8%, or about 80 students [per year], mostly at the freshman level.

Similar growth has occurred at other UC campuses. At UC San Diego (UCSD), for example, 2012 saw a 78% increase in international-student freshman admissions, with further increases of 17% in 2013 and 20% in 2014. In the fall of 2013, there were approximately 770 incoming international freshmen at UCSD, as compared to 160 in the fall of 2010—an almost fivefold increase in just three years.

The dramatic growth in the international student population has inevitably had a significant impact on classroom instruction and academic support services throughout the UC system. Data from the Academic English/ESL Program at UCI show how these numbers have been translating into increased enrollment in its classes. A 2013-2014 report to the University Committee on Preparatory Education notes that enrollment in Academic English (AE) classes quadrupled from 2011 to 2013 and has continued to rise: "undergraduate enrollment is expected to grow in [AY 2014/2015] by 541 students, or 30% over the past year" (Levin, 2014).

Challenges and Opportunities

Those of us who work in writing centers have encountered multiple challenges and opportunities resulting from this growth. The impact can be seen most readily in the numbers of students served at our centers. International students are often significantly overrepresented among writing center clientele. For instance, at UCSD, international students constituted 11.5% of the overall undergraduate enrollment in Fall 2013, but they constituted 24% of writing center clients; by Fall 2014, their percentage had grown to 33% of center clientele—and almost 60% of all writing center users listed a home language other than English. At UCLA, of the total appointments held in 2013-2014, 44% were with international students and 62% were with students who identified their first language as something other than English.

As the numbers grow, an aura of crisis—perceived or real—has led some university administrators and faculty to reconsider the available resources, approaches, and methods relating to writing and language support for international students. Some have expressed the concern in ethical terms: How can we legitimately recruit full-fee–paying international students who have little experience with American academic discourse and then simply allow them to flounder? This has sometimes spurred significant change: For example, at UCSD the relatively recent (2012) launching of a centralized writing center was in part prompted by administrative concern about the increasing demand for international student writing support. However, well-meaning statements of concern are not always translated into significant investment in or additions to instructional programs or support services that take into account the specific nature of the changing student body. Existing units are often expected to simply do more of what they have already been doing, in the same ways they had been doing it before the influx of international students occurred. As Nowacki (2012) notes in a recent article in *Praxis*, with no new investment in English-language programs, writing centers often become "default ESL writ-

ing labs in the absence of other language or writing support services" (para. 3), even when existing writing center staff may not have the specialized training necessary to optimally serve an international student clientele.

This can lead to significant challenges for writing centers, but center personnel also recognize that they can play a significant role in promoting the academic success of the changing student population. The words of Harris and Silva (1993), although written more than two decades ago, have taken on renewed relevance as we at UC writing centers work with more and more international students:

> For students whose first language is not English, the writing classroom cannot provide all the instructional assistance that is needed to become proficient writers. For a variety of reasons, these students need the kind of individualized attention that tutors offer, instruction that casts no aspersions on the adequacy of the classroom or the ability of the student. (p. 525)

Blau and Hall (2002), in their article "Guilt-Free Tutoring: Rethinking How We Tutor Non-Native English-Speaking Students," echo this point. They also note that writing centers—given the middle ground that they occupy between students and faculty—are especially well positioned for assisting multilingual students who may fear negative judgment by professors or teaching assistants (p. 32).

Promising as they may be as a resource for international students, writing centers face significant philosophical and pedagogical tensions in the context of an international clientele. The new demographic raises significant questions for writing centers that have long followed a nondirective, collaborative approach to writing support, and that have de-emphasized sentence-level matters in favor of focusing on global or "higher-order" concerns: formulating a thesis, structuring an argument, incorporating and explicating evidence, and other "big-picture" issues. Peer tutors, in particular, are often trained to view their sessions as egalitarian, informal conversations in which the tutor is not an authority figure but simply an interested reader providing feedback on the clarity, coherence, and credibility of a piece of writing. However, the needs and desires of the international students who come to our writing centers may prompt us to rethink our longstanding philosophies and practices.

Reconsideration of Pedagogical Approaches

Most writing centers, for example, have a "no proofreading" policy—we view grammar and mechanics as just one element of writ-

ing, and we think that students need to learn to become their own sentence-level editors rather than relying on others to "fix" their errors for them. We are, therefore, accustomed to helping students learn to identify and correct grammatical errors in their papers as one small part of a tutorial session. However, as our international student population has increased, we find ourselves doing more sessions focused solely on grammar. At UCSD, more than one-third of students seeking writing center assistance in Fall 2014 listed "grammar" as their primary concern. The number of international students seeking writing center services and the level of language support many international students need has put a strain on this "no proofreading" policy.

Although their writing may need attention in areas such as thesis, content development, and organization, often international students are most worried about the grammar and vocabulary in their texts, wanting their papers to appear as much as possible like they perceive the papers of native speakers to be. When they come to the writing center, they expect more than just general advice—many want the writing tutors to go over each and every sentence in their drafts. This is understandable, given their concern about language and the fact that the writing center is often the best or only place for international students to turn to on campus to receive not only detailed feedback on but also individualized help in revising and crafting their language. Some teaching assistants or professors may make detailed written comments on a student's language errors, but they are not available to go over each comment one by one. Most other faculty members simply do not have the time to provide such in-depth language comments and resort to inserting an end comment, suggesting that students with many language problems in their drafts visit the writing center. Students, therefore, may see the writing center primarily as a source of "grammar checking" services and may expect tutors to tell them explicitly how to correct each of their sentence-level problems.

Faculty expectations also challenge the writing center's nondirective pedagogy. Usually, professors are delighted that the writing center exists, but, as Adkins (2011) discovered when she gave her first presentation to the faculty as her university's new writing center director, often the "subtext" of their delight is: "'We are so happy that there is somewhere we can send students for grammar help'" (p. 3). At UCLA, colleagues have openly told the writing center director that they refer only ESL writers to the writing center, implying that the other students enrolled in their courses would not benefit from writing center services and that the center exists primarily to deal with English language-learning issues. Professors who are thus motivated to send students to the center are often disappointed with the results—their students

do not return from a writing center visit with flawless papers. The 30 or 50 minutes that writing center tutors have to work with students is usually not sufficient to correct every error in the student's paper, nor would good composition pedagogy and writing center practice condone this as a goal of our work with students. Nonetheless, professors are stakeholders in the writing center whose needs and opinions matter.

Because of the dual pressure coming from the expectations of international students and faculty members, writing centers may be forced to rethink a nondirective writing center pedagogy that prioritizes higher-order concerns, as many writing center scholars have begun to suggest. In a seminal article on writing center–conferencing strategies for English language learners, Powers (1993) problematizes the dominant approach to writing center tutorials, which views them as collaborative learning experiences. She urges writing center staff to accept their role as "cultural informants about American academic expectations" (p. 41) as an important aspect of their work, and to embrace a more authoritative and directive tutorial method when appropriate. Thonus (2004) has also argued that it may be necessary to "relinquish the orthodoxy of the collaborative frame" (p. 240) when working with writers whose language needs call for more direct instruction.

Reconsideration of Tutor-Training Procedures

Despite its benefits, this shift to a more directive writing center pedagogy poses especially difficult challenges for writing centers, such as those at UCLA and UCSD, that are staffed almost entirely by peer tutors. At UCLA, for instance, the writing center's peer learning facilitators are chosen because of their excellent writing and interpersonal skills, but they are not likely to have a background in language learning, linguistics, or applied linguistics. Nonetheless, they are asked to regularly deal with grammatical errors that may be unfamiliar to them. Undergraduate tutors may themselves be strong writers, but they often lack declarative knowledge of English grammar or even awareness of some English structures that second language writers find difficult (e.g., articles and noun form, relative pronouns). This can make it difficult for them to facilitate language-focused sessions effectively in multiple ways:

1. They may not be able to identify language infelicities that they see or to discern patterns of error;
2. Even if they can identify an error, they may not be able to explain what the problem is so that the student can edit the text or learn to avoid this error the next time.

In the face of these difficulties, tutors may just ignore a language error or simply tell the students the correct form without further explanation. As demonstrated in a study by Schendel (2012), tutors' confidence in their knowledge of English grammar can affect how they deal with students' grammar issues or even whether they address them at all. The peer tutors' lack of formal knowledge of English grammar, coupled with the tutors' strong desire to help, may mean that such consultations devolve into proofreading sessions, with the tutor simply correcting the problems. When this happens, peer tutors may find themselves in a difficult spot. They want to be helpful, so they supply the correct forms, but at the same time, they are left feeling like bad tutors because not-proofreading has been emphasized so much in their training.

At UCLA, to equip the peer tutors to better handle these language-focused sessions, a dual-pronged training program has been introduced, helping tutors master declarative knowledge of the grammar of English and, at the same time, teaching them strategies to help the students they work with to learn to edit their own writing more effectively. To help the composition tutors familiarize themselves with grammatical structures and rules that second language writers have difficulty producing and editing in their writing, a training website now includes grammar and language reference materials that cover sentence structure, noun reference and articles, conditional sentences, verb tense and form, subject-verb agreement, relative pronouns and clauses, passive versus active voice, modal auxiliaries, as well as an overview of grammar terminology. Before orientation, the tutors are asked to read through these materials. During orientation and meetings during the quarter, they use the information they have learned to practice identifying, correcting, and providing pedagogical explanations of the errors in L2 writers' texts.

At the same time, the tutors are introduced to student-centered, nondirective strategies for helping L2 writers identify and edit their own language errors. These are divided roughly into two categories. The first category focuses on ways of working with rule-based elements of the language such as grammar and sentence structure: specifically, teaching students text-marking and focusing strategies that will allow them to go beyond content and meaning to view their texts as language. Some of the marking approaches include underlining or highlighting verbs or nouns and then applying rules related to verb-tense shift or articles. Using another method, the tutor underlines or circles language problems in one or two paragraphs of the student writer's text and asks the student to correctly edit any of the marked sections that she or he can. This helps the tutor do two things:

1. Identify patterns of error; and
2. Ascertain which errors in a student text are proofreading errors and which errors derive from the student's lack of grammar knowledge.

The second category of strategies involves helping students with vocabulary and diction. The tutor's work with students on vocabulary problems in their texts is usually more directive—if the students knew the correct words, they would usually have used them in the first place. Often, tutors just have to quiz the student writers about what they were trying to say and then provide alternative word choices or phrasing. But tutors are also introduced to language resources such as learner dictionaries, corpora such as the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (Davies, 2014), and resources such as "Word Neighbors" (Milton, Wong, Ho, & Cheng, 2010) and the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000).

Some writing centers have the luxury of requiring prospective tutors to take a preservice course during which this information is covered, but that is not possible at UCLA, UCSD, or UCI. In addition, our writing center budgets are limited. Thus, whatever information and concepts peer tutors should master must be covered during orientation and training meetings, which usually comprise approximately 10-16 hours. Needless to say, the peer tutors in our writing centers learn a great deal on the job and through trial and error.

What we are asking of our undergraduate peer tutors is no small feat: They must learn and master grammar and syntax concepts and rules that they may be unfamiliar with and then turn around and use them productively both to identify errors in the texts of second language writers and to explain to students why their linguistic choices are incorrect and what is correct. They must do all this in a way that is sensitive to the student writer's language acquisition and learning process. This requires that the tutors make decisions about what errors to address, and about how to address them clearly, yet sensitively, and that they come to some understanding about how the student best learns and retains information and about the student's writing process to determine which editing strategies the writer will find most helpful.

It is not only in dealing with grammar, vocabulary, and other sentence-level concerns that peer tutors require additional training as they work with growing numbers of international students. The writing support needs of international students arriving directly from abroad are varied, and they are very different from the needs of native-speaking writers, or even from the needs of multilingual students who have attended American high schools or community colleges before

entering the university. At UCSD, for example, many of the international students who seek assistance from the writing center's undergraduate peer writing mentors begin their conversations by expressing anxiety about their command of English grammar. But after a few minutes of discussion, it often becomes clear that what they initially express as grammar anxiety encompasses broader concerns about the expectations for paper writing. The experiences of these students echo those discussed by Nan (2012) in her essay "Bridging the Gap." Nan describes the daunting situation faced by many Chinese students, in particular, who may enter American universities with an essay-writing background that is limited to timed writing exercises for the TOEFL or SAT exam. International students who come to our writing centers sometimes remark that they have never before written an academic paper in *any* language, not just English, aside from timed essay exams. They note that their anxiety is in part engendered by fear of the unknown. What, they wonder, could possibly be expected of them in this unfamiliar genre? There are often specific gaps in information or vocabulary resulting from a lack of experience with American education: simply not knowing what the conventions and expectations of American university discourse might be, or what particular terms that are often central to American writing assignments might mean. What constitutes legitimate use of evidence in a first-year composition essay? What is a professor asking for when she invites her students to "analyze" a passage?

Writing center tutors must therefore be trained to explain these matters clearly and supportively, recognizing that what they take for granted (e.g., the thesis-support structure of an argumentative essay) may be uncharted territory for the students they are assisting. At UCSD, new materials have been developed specifically for the changing writing center demographic, including a "How to Read an Assignment" handout, a set of templates for constructing thesis statements, and a minipresentation on composing an email to a professor. Staff training meetings have focused on using these materials effectively and have often included discussions about the ways in which writing center tutors may serve as "translators" of the university, interpreting general academic expectations for the international students we work with and providing direct instruction in the associated discourse conventions.

Reconsideration of Personnel Structures

As well trained, hardworking, and dedicated as they may be, however, undergraduate tutors simply do not have the specialized expertise of trained professionals. Therefore, some writing centers have

done more to incorporate professional TESOL staff to serve the needs of international students and other multilingual writers. At UCI, the newly established Center for Excellence in Writing and Communication (writing center) includes professional writing specialists in addition to undergraduate peer tutors; the writing specialists work with students on a by-appointment basis, and the peer tutors provide more informal drop-in assistance. The center's director decided to initiate some exchanges between center staff and the Academic English Program (AE) faculty, who deliver ESL instruction, to appropriately chart a course for supporting the growing numbers of international students. Initially, the AE instructors wanted to mandate that every international student visit the writing center for an hour-long appointment with a writing specialist at least once for every essay. However, the center's data coordinator conducted a statistical analysis and discovered that even if the center helped no other students on campus (an unthinkable proposition), there would not be enough personnel hours to accommodate the international students under those circumstances. The AE faculty then decided to mandate that students visit either a writing specialist or a peer tutor at least once per quarter. While this arrangement was more workable, the peer tutors did become, to varying degrees, overwhelmed, saying (like many of the peer tutors at UCLA and UCSD) that they felt like "human grammar checkers." Two of the tutors made the unusual decision not to return to the position the following year. However, this problem self-corrected through time, as newly hired tutors were told what to expect and the ESL part of tutor training was enhanced.

Another decision the UCI writing center director made was to add a writing specialist position with an emphasis in ESL/ELL expertise. Ironically, almost as soon as the writing specialist was hired, AE coordinators asked if they could use part of her time to teach a course in their program. This agreement was a double-edged sword: The writing center lost some of the specialist's time to counsel international students, but the partnership between the center and AE was solidified. In addition to this agreement, the writing center and AE piloted an intensive tutoring program for AE students who were having difficulty passing out of the program and needed extra support. Tutoring sessions were tailored to individual students' needs but often had a heavy focus on grammar and language errors. Along with two AE staff members, the writing specialists worked closely with AE faculty to communicate about the needs and the progress of the tutees.

In terms of working directly with students, the professional writing specialists on the writing center staff at UCI have been tasked with providing international students, not only in AE but across all

writing classes, with the resources they need. In response, the writing specialists have been engaged in an ongoing discussion about how to provide appropriate feedback to English language learners versus native speakers. Much like the case at UCLA and UCSD, the changing student population at UCI has spurred a rethinking of long-standing writing center practices. Some of the ways in which the professional writing specialists have adjusted their practices to accommodate the needs of international students include providing more direct linguistic input, identifying patterns of grammatical errors, and encouraging repeated visits with the specialists and/or peer tutors for extra writing and grammatical support.

First, writing specialists have adjusted the input they give international and other multilingual students. For example, following a method suggested by Sharon A. Myers (2011), instead of leaving them to find correct word choices on their own, the writing specialists have started facilitating the language acquisition process by "giving the students more … language from which to make choices, establishing more … links for them from the language they have to new language they need" while providing "correct language input rather than [solely] focusing on incorrect language" (p. 296). Supporting students by providing them with correct language input is important, as many English language learners do not have the English proficiency to identify what is "correct" versus "incorrect" language usage (Harris & Silva, 1993). The writing specialists' goal in providing this extra support is to help students develop as writers while simultaneously facilitating the second language acquisition process for them.

Besides providing more direct language input, the writing specialists have also started identifying patterns of grammatical errors in student writing rather than addressing many different kinds of errors. According to Ferris and Hedgcock (2005), "It can be counterproductive … to comment on every possible problem [in student writing]" (pp. 194-195). With this concern in mind, Ferris and Hedgcock recommend focusing on "two to four major feedback points" (p. 195). In appointments with students, the writing specialists have taken this into account and have started giving feedback based on a few of the most common error types individual students have in their papers.

Reconsideration of Writing Center Services

As part of an ongoing effort to provide multilingual students with comprehensive resources, the writing center at UCI is not focusing only on written texts. The center now offers a weekly conversation hour for nonnative English speakers, including both international and Generation 1.5 students. The conversation hour was started in the

Winter 2014 quarter in response to student requests for more opportunities to improve their spoken English, as reflected in an internal report generated by Angelica Keam (2012), International Programs coordinator at UCI. In the report, students emphasized a desire for more opportunities to practice their spoken English on campus. Based on this finding, the writing center decided that providing more opportunities for students to practice would be beneficial. In the conversation hour, nonnative speakers are invited to participate in informal conversation with writing specialists and other native and nonnative English-speaking undergraduate volunteers from the International Peer Group, a student group on campus designed to help orient international students to the university. Topics vary on a weekly basis but have included American culture, music, movies, television shows, holidays, slang, and idiomatic language.

To further provide opportunities for international undergraduates to practice their oral skills, an online conversational tutoring service was created. In the summer of 2014, the writing center at UCI piloted a program designed to help international students who were returning home for the summer to continue to practice their English. Conversational peer tutoring took place via Skype in sessions that lasted approximately 30 minutes. The sessions began with small talk, and then the tutor emailed, or pasted into the text box of the video call window, an article on current issues relevant to college-age students. The tutee then read the article, and the tutor corrected mispronounced words, asked comprehension questions, and answered any questions the tutee posed. The session ended with more small talk, and the tutor wrote notes on what was covered. The tutor also took a screen shot at the end of each session, showing the duration of the entire call. For accountability, the tutors submitted the notes and screen shots to their supervisor weekly. Though the population of this pilot was too small for statistical significance, it is worth noting that tutors and tutees universally praised the program, and the small talk was particularly valued. The tutees finally felt comfortable enough to ask questions about language they had experienced in social settings but were too shy to ask about at the time, such as "What is the meaning of the word 'chill'?"

In addition to services for international students, the university community has also requested specialized workshops on how members of the community can work with the changing student population. Workshops offered by UCI's writing center have included strategies for working with L2 students designed for multiple audiences, including faculty, staff, teaching assistants, student workers, and student mentors. In addition, the center has tailored workshops on

how to improve one's writing to specific classes with large populations of international students (e.g., U.S. History in the 20th Century), at the request of the instructors. As part of a sustained response to the changing student population, workshops will continue to be offered and writing center practices will frequently be evaluated and adjusted if necessary to ensure effective pedagogy.

Reconsideration of Cross-Campus Collaboration

Our writing centers also aim to continue expanding their partnerships across campus to more effectively attend to students' needs. The UCI writing center works closely with several units, continuing to strengthen its links to the Academic English program and refining previously established partnerships with Lower-Division Writing, the Transfer Center, and the libraries to better serve the burgeoning international student population. Specific programs are now integrating writing center instructional and tutorial assistance into their designs; for example, the center's writing specialists have an agreement with Student Support Services to teach writing-lab sections of a summer bridge course. The course is offered every summer, and the labs are specifically designed for incoming international students.

At UCSD, the writing center is also participating in a summer bridge program geared toward incoming international students. The center director has collaborated with composition administrators and personnel from the university's International Center to develop a new curriculum for the program, and the center's peer mentors have been incorporated into the program as writing tutors and conversation facilitators. This collaboration seems to have borne fruit. Students in the newly designed program are passing the university's writing proficiency examination at higher rates, and they have expressed higher levels of satisfaction with the language and writing aspects of the program. They are making greater use of the writing center as a resource when they enter their first full academic year as regularly enrolled students: 49% of the 2013 program participants sought writing center services in 2013-2014 (as compared to 33% of all incoming first-year international students and 15% of first-year students as a whole). Such promising collaborations between writing centers and other campus units are one of the most positive outcomes of the increase in the university's international-student population.

Conclusion

The upsurge in international students enrolling at University of California campuses has led to important opportunities while also posing challenges for campus writing centers. On the one hand, in-

ternational students for whom English is a second language and some of their instructors are demanding that tutors take a more directive approach to working with students on their language errors. This puts student-centered writing center pedagogy, which views tutorials as collaborative learning experiences and tutors as nondirective guides, to the test. In cases where composition tutors find themselves having to explain aspects of English grammar, syntax, and vocabulary, the tutors, many of whom are undergraduates themselves, may lack the expertise or overt knowledge of English grammar to do so. On the other hand, the influx of international undergraduates has offered writing centers myriad opportunities. In fact, the writing centers on some UC campuses would not exist in their current forms or with their current staffing configurations were it not for the enrollment of so many international students. Whether writing centers on UC campuses are new or have existed for some time, the changing population of UC students is pushing us to expand our writing centers to include services that address international students' lexico-grammatical and spoken language needs. Writing centers are also expanding the repertoire of strategies for working with international L2 writers, acknowledging that these students are new not only to the US educational context, but also to the conventions of US academic discourse. The growing international student population has opened up possibilities for productive collaborations between writing centers and other units on our campuses as we work together to make sure that these important members of our university community receive the best that a UC education has to offer.

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