Tutor time commitment in online writing centers

Introduction
As OWLS—online writing labs or centers—have grown in popularity in colleges and universities across the nation, writing center scholars have conducted research about their usefulness, tutoring techniques, and design. (Eric Hobson's edited collection, Writing the Writing Center, is one recent source that documents the trials and successes of OWLS.) Although research about online writing centers is more prevalent and, to some extent, has legitimized the existence of centers online, we find in our own experience that more research is needed to understand the unique needs of an expanding online writing center.

For example, in the Online Writing Center (OWC) at the University of Minnesota, where we both have been involved in either administration or online tutoring, concerns that demand attention include funding and staffing. Like many online centers, our OWC began as an uncharted adventure. Visualized by a graduate student in our department for a master's thesis project, the OWC—which uses a web-based interface and asynchronous tutoring through e-mail—began operating in 1997, with a staff of one graduate student working with an average of two clients per week. Now, the OWC attracts up to 200 visitors per week who seek web resources about writing and approximately 15 clients per week who request feedback on written work. As a result of the growing use of the OWC, part-time tutors were hired, and we created training materials as well as temporary administrative positions to guide the center.

The increased use raises many questions about the direction of our OWC. Which faculty and students are likely to use the center? Do we seek further funding for additional tutors? How can we continue reaching out to our university community and beyond? Can we borrow from models of face-to-face centers? As we explored these questions, we noticed that one of our bottom-line concerns about expansion became a question of time commitment. For instance, in order to staff the OWC efficiently, we have to approximate the weekly time commitments needed per tutor to make the OWC run smoothly. We quickly surmised that time estimates based on face-to-face tutoring centers were not helpful because tutors in the OWC shared anecdotally that they usually spent almost two hours per client reading and responding to the clients' papers in asynchronous sessions. We were surprised by the extent of time spent working online and wondered if the increase was due to technological difficulties in sending and receiving electronic documents or other causes. Furthermore, we were discouraged by reports that online tutoring is not likely to frequently attract students. For example, Muriel Harris notes that "a number of factors suggest that e-mail tutoring will not gain widespread popularity" (6). We concluded that we needed to find out how our online writing center operates in terms of time and tutor commitment so we could make appropriate choices about funding, staffing, and expansion.

In addition, we realized that certain audiences were emerging for the OWC, and we needed to tailor tutoring to their needs. For example, online tutors were concerned about responding to ESL clients: tutors noticed that ESL clients' requests and tutor responses focused on difficulties with mechanics and grammar instead of global issues. In addition, we noted that graduate students were also clients with unique needs. At the time this study was conducted, graduate students submitted theses and dissertations that required special attention and which were uncomfortably large projects for our tutors. To address these concerns, we wanted to find out how tutors spent time in their online tutorial sessions.

To help satisfy these goals, we conducted a "tutor-time study" to address our primary research questions. We asked these questions through a survey to find the ways in which our OWC operates in comparison with another face-to-face tutoring center on our campus, and to determine how best to address issues of expansion.

Background of study
The participants in our study included 17 tutors, all graduate students. Thirteen tutors were from the Student Writing Center, a face-to-face center in the Department of English. Four tutors were from the Online Writing Center in the Department of Rhetoric. Each tutor was given a brief survey. Face-to-face tutors were given print forms: online tutors used an electronic form. After each tutoring session, tutors recorded the total amount of time spent on the tutoring session in minutes and then estimated the ways in which the time was spent. We recognize that tutor estimates may not reflect the exact time tutors spent in these areas; thus, the survey was an informal study, but one we hoped would yield results that would inform our concerns about expansion. Each face-to-face tutor was asked to participate for either two weeks or to complete the survey for 20 tutoring sessions, whichever occurred first. Online tutors were not limited to a two-week period in the study due to the lower volume of tutoring appointments in the OWC at the time the survey was administered.

Questions on the survey asked tutors to identify the following items: the type of session completed ("walk-in")
or “appointment” for face-to-face centers; “online” for tutors working in asynchronous e-mail tutoring sessions; the total amount of time spent on the session; and estimates of how time was spent discussing mechanical, global, technological, or other aspects of writing. The “mechanical” category included aspects such as attention to grammar, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and general proofreading techniques. “Global” included aspects such as overall organization, development of thesis, use of voice or tone, and large scale revision suggestions. “Technological” referred to aspects of a tutoring session that involved computer use, such as explaining to a client how to retrieve their paper electronically, uploading or downloading documents, or experiencing technical difficulties during either an online or face-to-face tutoring session that used the web. These categories were generated by the tutors and reflected how tutors divided their time. If time was spent on issues other than mechanical, global, or technological, tutors were asked to explain those issues in the “other” category. Also, tutors were asked to indicate if the client was an ESL speaker—again, a distinction suggested by tutors. We reviewed the data and compared the following items: average time spent per session; estimated time spent on mechanical, global, technological, and “other” issues; and estimated time spent on each category for ESL clients.

Results and discussion
In all, we examined surveys from 228 tutoring sessions: 77 appointments, 106 walk-ins, and 45 online, asynchronous sessions. We found online tutors exceeded face-to-face sessions in total time per session, that appointment and online tutors estimated similar times in each category, and that online sessions had significantly fewer ESL clients reported than face-to-face sessions.

“What is the average amount of time spent tutoring in an online environment versus a face-to-face environment?”
Online tutors spent an average of 93.7 minutes per session, more time than face-to-face tutors (see Fig. 1, p. 13). Sixteen of the 45 online sessions extended beyond 90 minutes: nine lasted two hours, two sessions for two and one-half hours, and isolated sessions lasted for four and one-half hours, five, and even as much as six hours. Face-to-face tutors working with appointments—these are scheduled 60-minute time slots—spent an average of 54.9 minutes per session. Nine of the 77 face-to-face appointment sessions surveyed extend their time beyond the appointment, three of which were for an extension of 15 minutes or more. Walk-in face-to-face tutors spent an average of 31.4 minutes per session. These were the most frequent sessions of the study, generating 106 records. Session times varied, with one lasting as long as 85 minutes, but in general, the times were consistently clustered around the average.

Because the average amount of time spent per online session was 93.7 minutes compared to 54.5 for appointments and 31.4 minutes for walk-in sessions in the face-to-face center, we considered this finding an important difference between face-to-face and online (asynchronous) tutoring. But this finding raised additional questions for us. We wondered if additional time spent in asynchronous tutoring related to technology. That is, did technology impede the efficiency of tutorials? According to our findings, the answer is no. Our findings suggest that only 13.6% of time spent tutoring online related to technological problems. Although technological problems perhaps cannot be eliminated completely from online tutoring centers, we are relieved to find that tutors did not estimate the majority of their time spent in this category. After all, with differences in computers, computer languages, browsers, and a variety of email packages, potential problems with technology abound. Rather than technological problems, online tutors in our study suggested that time was spent “transcribing.” It happens that some of our tutors print out documents, respond to the author by writing on the document, and then re-enter those comments electronically. This practice certainly seems inefficient: we were not aware this practice was occurring and have since addressed it in tutor training.

“How do online tutors estimate they are spending their time during tutorials?”
According to our findings, there are strong similarities between online sessions and appointment-based, face-to-face sessions (see Fig. 2, p. 13). Tutors in both of these categories indicated that they spent a relative amount of time between global and mechanical issues, with an emphasis on global. Walk-in, face-to-face appointments differed a bit from the other types of sessions in that an average of 50% of total time was estimated as spent dealing with mechanical issues. Figure 2 (p. 13) demonstrates the breakdown of the percentages of time spent in each category for each set of tutors.

In the mechanical category, tutors working online and in face-to-face appointments spent about one-third of their total time, while walk-in tutors spent about half of their total time with mechanical concerns. In the global category, we again found another similarity between tutors with appointments and online tutors: both spent about half of their time in this category. As expected, online tutors spent more time dealing with technological issues (such as uploading and downloading documents); however, face-to-face tutors experienced some issues with technology as well. Unfortunately, tutors did not specify what these technological issues were, and it would be interesting to see how face-to-face and online tutors specified their uses of technology.

Face-to-face tutors (both appointment and walk-in) spent more time in the “other” category than online tutors: 9.7% of their estimated time. Face-to-face tutors specified that topics in this category usually included discussing the assignment, brainstorming, introducing clients to online research, planning research, discussing source material, discussing audience expectations for papers, and “chatting.” Online tutors spent an average of 4.3% of their
time with “other” issues. Tutors noted that this work included writing, or “transcribing” their comments into written form for the clients to use, including creating language that was free of idioms for an ESL client, and requesting more information about the audience and purpose for the paper submitted.

“How do ESL clients shape online tutorial time?”

While we expected that the Online Writing Center would serve many ESL clients, this study revealed that only a small number of online clients were non-native speakers of English. Face-to-face sessions, both appointment and walk-in, had almost three times as many ESL clients as online sessions. In our survey results, face-to-face appointment tutors had 33 sessions with ESL clients (42% of their total sessions); walk-in, face-to-face tutors had 31 ESL sessions (30% of their total); online tutors had six sessions where clients were indicated as ESL (13% of their total sessions). We use the term “indicated” because online clients are not required to provide any information identifying them as ESL clients—we had to rely on the tutors’ guess.

In addition to finding that our OWC accommodated fewer ESL clients than we expected, we discovered that online ESL sessions took far less time than we expected: 57.5 minutes per online session with ESL clients. This amount of time was comparable to face-to-face appointment sessions, in which ESL sessions averaged 56.8 minutes. Amounts of time spent on global, mechanical, technical, and “other” issues were also quite similar to non-ESL sessions (see Fig. 3, p.13).

This survey revealed that instead of ESL clients, graduate students emerged as more frequent clients of our OWC (10 of a total 44 sessions); furthermore, this audience demanded more time from online tutors. Tutors noted that the types of documents graduate students submitted (theses, dissertations) were very labor intensive. Because graduate students continue to be a population we serve, we determined that tutors need more training to respond to larger documents that may be unfamiliar to them.

Through this study, we recognized that we need to make more efforts to identify the audiences served by our OWC. However, this task is somewhat difficult in online environments. We previously relied on domain traces to learn about our audiences, but we realized that domain traces are ineffective indicators. For example, domains could be traced to two large categories: University of Minnesota domains, and domains outside of our university. In either category, we were often unable to identify audiences beyond these larger classifications. So, for instance, only nine of the 45 sessions—or six clients—that the OWC served were not identified as University of Minnesota students. One client used an email address not consistent with those of our university, but there is nothing to indicate that the other five clients are necessarily not UM students: many students prefer personal email accounts over their UM account. Domains provided are quite common, such as “Hotmail,” “Yahoo,” and “AOL.” (Also, there is nothing to indicate that UM accounts are necessarily UM students—someone could submit a paper using a friend’s account, although we have no anecdotal evidence to support this practice.)

We learned that different means would have to be arranged if we wanted to find out who our specific clients are (perhaps through an online form that asks clients to identify their affiliation, school/workplace). However, this method of gathering demographic information is more problematic online than in face-to-face centers. Whereas face-to-face centers typically ask clients for information at the beginning of a session, online clients often find such requests invasive and simply wish to remain unknown to tutors. In addition, many of the OWC tutoring staff find that asking for demographic information online breaches Internet privacy rights. Clearly, identifying online audiences is a need, and the OWC tutoring staff continues to debate ways for learning more about their audience.

Future plans

Although the estimates of time from the tutors in this study are not exact, they do reflect tutor impressions of how time is spent online and face-to-face tutorials. We are very interested in tutor impressions of time spent in both online and face-to-face tutoring and find their responses valuable in directing the future focus of our expanding center. From our results, we discovered that online tutors spend on the average nearly twice as much total time as face-to-face tutors. Considering this finding, we could take a number of directions to address this time commitment. For example, we could try to impose a time limit for online tutoring. Or, we could spend more time training online tutors to comment online rather than transcribing print comments to electronic form. We can also use this finding to determine weekly schedules for tutoring, as well as determining decisions to hire tutors based on need.

The finding that online tutorials were similar to face-to-face, appointment-based tutorials supports our belief that tutors are focusing on global as well as mechanical concerns, and that technology issues are not an overwhelming obstacle in online tutoring. We are encouraged by the responses from tutors in this regard. Finally, the informal study helped us identify the populations that the Online Writing Center serves. We anticipate planning ways to work more effectively with audiences such as ESL and graduate student clients, and we look forward to continuing efforts to expand the Online Writing Center.

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Works Cited

Harris, Muriel. “Using Computers to Expand the Role of Writing Centers.” Electronic Communication Across the


Fig. 1. Total Tutor Time

Fig. 2: Percent of Time in Each Category

Fig. 3. Percent of ESL Time in Each Category