In Defense of Conference Summaries:
Widening the Reach of Writing Center Work

Jane Cogie

I would like to suggest that our professional marginalization results in part because we have only begun conversing with our institutions.... (Byron Stay 3)

The range of outreach projects recounted in recent journal articles, discussions on WCENTER's electronic forum, and conference presentations indicate that collectively we as writing center professionals have indeed been working to extend the conversation about one-to-one work across our campuses. Writing across the curriculum partnerships with classroom teachers (Gill; Mullin, "Tutoring for Law Students"; Soliday), satellite writing centers in dorms or specific academic departments ("Advice on Satellite Centers"), on-line writing centers (Denny and Livesey), and administrative portfolios reflecting the complex combination of teaching, research, and administration entailed in the work of writing center directors (Olson; Perdue) are all examples of the expanding presence of writing centers at our institutions. Yet if we are to extend the benefits of one-to-one work to teachers, the individuals who most influence the type of writing our students do, we need to find ways of communicating with them directly and regularly. The conference summary—the record of a tutor's interaction with a student, written up and sent to the instructor upon the student's written request—offers one of the few ways we have to extend the discussion of one-to-one work beyond the center on a weekly basis. However, this form is not universally endorsed. Some writing center professionals—including those described as "sharers" by Michael Pemberton in a 1995 Writing Lab Newsletter "Ethics" column—perceive these reports as promoting "a unified educational experience for students" and "productive relationships with faculty" (13). Others—including those described by Pemberton as "seclusionists"—see summaries as just another instance of limiting tutors to the role of "servic workers" for instructors (Pemberton 13).
I. Sharer-Seclusionist Issues

Indeed, why should writing center tutors have to report to classroom teachers? Shouldn't their dialogue with students be valued, as seclusionists argue, not as an adjunct to the composition classroom but as a central part of the developing engagement of students with writing? ("Confidentiality"). And shouldn't students be free to speak in their writing center sessions without having to worry that their words will be reported to faculty? (Pemberton 13). Writing center professionals, whether seclusionist or sharer, should strive to sustain writing centers as places where "students [can] get the 'personal touch' in instruction that [is] so often lacking elsewhere in their university experience," a virtue that seclusionists see as threatened by conference summaries (14). Indeed, if reporting to teachers amounts to simply satisfying the teacher that his or her agenda is being met and doing so at the expense of both the confidentiality of students and the quality of the student-tutor relationship, then instituting summaries would certainly be ill-advised (Pemberton 13; Crump 8).

However, writing center directors should be equally wary of assuming that sending summaries amounts to little more than an admission of second-class institutional status or an unthinking use of power detrimental to the interests of the student. The seclusionists' concern that conference summaries violate the student's confidentiality may be eased somewhat, as Pemberton notes, by sending summaries only with the student's consent and with care to omit details potentially harmful to the student (13). And concern over loss of the "personal touch" of writing centers with the use of summary reports should be lessened if the tutor not only receives the student's written consent but also confers with the student on the summary's contents.

Even with such provisos in hand, however, it is not surprising that Pemberton concludes his article with a compromise position between the seclusionists and the sharers, rather than an outright endorsement of the sharer's position favoring conference summaries (14). Whatever the configuration, summary reports are a messy form of communication. Their messiness is unavoidable given the vulnerability of teachers in the face of the authority they inevitably wield, given the students' lack of power relative to both tutors and teachers, and given "the delicate but carefully distanced relationship" that tutors must sustain "between classroom teachers and the writing center," a reality lamented by Stephen North in "Revisiting 'The Idea of the Writing Center'" (16). Despite these interlocking tensions, conference summaries are, in my experience, worthwhile since they can provide for students and tutors, consulting on what to include, the chance to reflect on their sessions-and for teachers
receiving them, the chance to extend to the classroom benefits from the writing center dialogue. Like Michigan State University's Project CONNECTS, a multifaceted writing center initiative for sharing the techniques and values of consultative teaching with writers and teachers both inside and outside the university, conference summaries have the potential to spread collaborative pedagogy beyond the walls of the writing center (Stock).

11. Making Conference Summaries Meaningful

In one of the few articles to recount the consequences of conference summary use, "Empowering a Writing Center: the Faculty Meet the Tutors," Peter Carino speaks of his unrewarding experience with this form. In response to his tutors' lack of feedback from teachers and lack of pride in their work, he instituted "a report, a brief (2-to-3 sentence) synopsis of the session," followed by a request for a reply from the instructor (2). These forms failed, Carino notes, to instill the hoped-for "sense of professionalism and pride in tutoring," eliciting only a 10% to 15% response rate (2). Lack of written response from instructors, however, seems too narrow a test of the potential of conference summaries to affirm the role of writing center tutors. Other, less tangible results of summaries should not be ignored, namely the increased benefits of writing center collaboration they offer tutors, tutees, and the instructors of tutees.

The ability of all three parties to use the reports meaningfully depends, however, on the type of summary a writing center adopts. A two-to-three sentence write-up, such as Peter Carino cites as failing, leaves tutors little room for anything but the bare bones of what was covered in a session (2). But tutors writing an extended paragraph of up to six or seven sentences can offer a compressed version not just of what was covered but also of how it was covered. Including the latter information is crucial since the process of a session is at the heart of writing center work-if indeed our mission is to provide students with strategies they can internalize to become better writers (North, "Idea" 438). Including the "how" in conference summaries not only gives tutors and students useful perspectives on their sessions with each other but also supplies faculty with otherwise unavailable perspectives on their students and their own teaching. As Linda Flower points out, classroom teachers are often left to base their assumptions about the thinking processes of their students on the written product, yet the written product "can be an inadequate, even misleading, guide to the thinking process that produced it" (21). Conference summaries emphasizing the collaborative process of the tutoring session as well as the aspects of the written product covered can add to the
teachers' insider knowledge of their students as writers and thus to their ability to shape meaningful classroom and one-to-one conference activities. To speak specifically to the objections of seclusionists, I would maintain that, particularly when including this focus on the tutoring process, the conference summary serves not as a mere "service" report to instructors but rather as a report that shares with instructors the benefits of writing center pedagogy.

For this extended process-version of summaries to work, tutors, as part of their training, must explore and come to appreciate the difference between productive and unproductive summaries as others supporting such reports have noted (Mullin qtd. in Crump 9). Understanding this difference is critical since summing up a collaborative session, particularly when the audience is the student's classroom teacher, is a complex job. This job, however, is made easier and more meaningful if the structure of the writing center reinforces the value of conference summaries as it does at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, my home institution. While our writing center has about 20 hours of drop-in sessions a week, the majority of the sessions are devoted to regular weekly appointments. The tutors, a mix of graduate assistants in English and Linguistics and undergraduate student workers and practicum students, meet with the same students for 50 minutes each week for as much of the semester as the student wishes. Regular appointments are available to students across the curriculum on a first-come basis. On average, 40% of the students attending are specifically referred by an instructor; the rest are essentially self-referred. Beyond the pressure of the grade, attendance is voluntary. Given the regular weekly appointment format, which produces, on average, six conferences per student a semester, many instructors receive more than six summaries each term, enough to involve them in the one-to-one process. And the 50-minute session allows time for tutor and tutee to confer on what summaries should include. To counterbalance the extra work writing these reports demands of tutors, I gained approval to cut back the tutoring hours required of graduate students by one hour per week.

A commitment from the writing center director is necessary as well if conference summaries are to benefit the student, tutor, and teacher pedagogically. Since tutors must write these complex reports rather quickly, the director must not only train tutors to write the summaries but also read the summaries for surface errors, unclear or undiplomatically worded sections, and lack of attention to the collaborative process. This procedure may seem unnecessarily interventionary. Yet that need not be so. When I "proofread" summaries, I never do so with the assumption that I know better than the tutor how the summary should read. Rather I am there, much as the tutor is for a tutee, to give feedback on a form that must be written with care, given the potential for harm to the student and
disagreement with the teacher and the potential for benefits to all three sides of the tutoring triangle. In many cases, the tutor and I decide that no change need be made. Some may feel that the director's time could be better spent. Yet the extra time is, in my experience, valuable since it allows the director an on-going dialogue with tutors about the collaborative process of their sessions with students.

To assess the value of conference summaries not simply for me as director but also for the instructors, tutors, and students involved, I surveyed all three groups. Before reporting the results, however, I will sample a few summaries to further define the form and the roles they can play when an emphasis on the collaborative process is included.

III. Sample Summaries: The Process Emphasis at Work

Some of these reports, it is true, may serve simply as a record of the student and tutor carrying out the teacher's agenda, as in the following example:

We continued working on the volcano experience paper. Meredith found your check marks indicating the number of errors in the line to be helpful. I went through the second page and placed check marks as you had done on the first page. She used the check marks to zero in on the errors. As before, she has a good idea of where the errors are in the lines. She is getting good at looking for and identifying complete and incomplete sentences.

This summary, beyond its record-keeping function, might seem to confirm the role of writing center tutor as handmaiden to the instructor; the tutor dutifully records having followed the instructor's lead, not only on what issue to address but on how to address it. Yet, there are instances, arguably such as this one, in which the instructor's comments do provide a productive focus for student and tutor. Indeed, the minimal marking approach, promoting as it did the student's involvement in editing her own paper, helped the student progress. As for the summary itself, it kept the teacher informed of the benefits of the process she had initiated.

Most summaries, unlike the summary just discussed from Meredith's session, recount an agenda more fully initiated by the tutor or student. Yet like the summary of Meredith's work, they reveal the roles the student plays in the conference and thus help student and tutor reflect on their collaborative process and help the teacher avoid having to "diagnose and teach a thinking process in the dark," with only the written product to draw on (Flower 21). For example, a summary may note students recognizing a problem, setting an agenda, or employing a
strategy—such as listing or glossing. The following summary gives clear sense of the student's increasingly independent role within the conference:

We started the session with Kerry telling me what her letter was about. In the process, I asked her questions that helped her identify her key points and then recorded them for her. Reading through the list, she realized she had no clear focus—or too many. She then identified which/what she really wanted to write about (explicit language in movies). With some discussion, she was able to write her way through the basic rhetorical strategies: (1) state problem; (2) give examples of the problem; (3) call for change and suggest ways to initiate change. After that, I explained how these strategies would help her audience.

From this summary, Kerry as well as her tutor and her teacher could see that the tutor helped her with the process of identifying "her key points." Yet they could also see that Kerry was able to move on to find and solve the problem with the focus of her essay. Another summary reflects a student who has reached yet more independence in analyzing her essay:

Kathy was concerned about the transitions between paragraphs her draft for the ad review. She went through and glossed each paragraph. Through this exercise she saw which paragraphs were unfocused and was able to develop a simpler outline of her paper. She decided to change her paragraph order to better organize the paper.

Conference summaries can also indicate a problem with an assignment without demeaning the student or teacher, as the following two excerpts show:

Quinn and I took turns reading his form letter to each other to find obvious errors, e.g., run-on sentences and fragments. He was uncertain about the assignment because he's never written a form letter. We reviewed the instructions several times until he became comfortable with them ....

Today, Tess brought in a "sentence embedding" worksheet and mentioned she was having difficulty writing sentences out of the blue to match the styles of the sample sentences. I suggested she write these model sentences within the context of her first two papers and her draft for the third—that is, she used scenes,
information, description, etc. from the familiar context of her papers, and plugged them into the models.

The tutors in both excerpts did not skirt the difficulty with the assignments but stated the problem so as to emphasize not a flaw in the assignment or the student but rather the one-to-one work that moved the session forward. The tutors thus tactfully informed the teacher-if he or she was ready to listen-of a problem with the assignment for this particular student and potentially for the other students in the class. In dealing with such issues, tutors, however tactful, risk ruffling the instructor. Yet that risk seems worth taking since otherwise the instructor may remain unaware of the potential problems. Indeed, in the second instance noted above, the teacher responded to the summary, telling the tutor that she "loved what [he] did with the embedding exercise." In both these instances, tutors are in a small way becoming "agents of change in writing pedagogy, helping teachers create better assignments, letting teachers know what students are having trouble with," as Marilyn Cooper advocates in her article, "Really Useful Knowledge: A Cultural Studies Agenda for Writing Centers" (103).

An issue not so easily resolved is how summaries should register, if at all, disagreements of student or tutor with a teacher's assessment of a particular issue, such as the appropriate use of a student's dialect, as in the following summary excerpt: "Millie and I worked on her assignment, 'My Most Memorable Experience.' We talked about dialect versus 'standard' English constructions because it was a problem identified in her corrected paper...." In this summary, the tutor did not question the ban on dialect use in the teacher's personal narrative assignment (an assignment suited, if any is, to its inclusion), though he indicated a range of audience-related options in the session in response to the student's perplexity concerning the ban. But, in designating in the summary the reason for dealing with the issue, "because it was a problem identified in her corrected paper. . . " he by no means endorsed the teacher's exclusion of the student's dialect. While it would have been preferable had the tutor felt free to raise this issue openly with the teacher, he held back, and I concurred in his decision, to avoid endangering the status of the student in the class and in the Writing Center. It seemed better to protect the student's relationship with the teacher than to press her right to her own language at the expense of that relationship.

In discussing several similar situations in "The Regulatory Role of the Writing Center," Nancy Grimm argues that by withholding from teachers ways in which rigid notions of literacy can distort student involvement in writing, writing centers become part of the system that suppresses the voices of students even if the suppression is carried out in
the name of protecting students (11-12). As Grimm quite rightly points out, writing center work is not politically neutral (18). Yet in acknowledging, as she does, that writing centers are not about to stop "[assisting] students in the work of accommodating academic culture," Grimm makes it clear she is not advocating a total break with the "cultural forces that limit [writing center] work" (21). She proposes instead that in seeking to broaden unnecessarily limiting notions of literacy, writing center professionals and tutors should work within situations involving teachers and administrators who are themselves open to exploring change (21-22). To apply Grimm's terms to the role of conference summaries, summaries have the potential—such as in emphases on the collaborative process and in non-confrontational reflections of teacher practice—to ready the ground for small changes in the "discursive terrain" that Grimm calls on writing centers to foster to achieve "a more democratic practice," more responsive to individual student needs (22). Yet on more controversial issues, such as those raised in Millie's situation and in the similar situations recounted by Grimm (11-12), summaries may indeed function to "keep things in place" (11) to avoid the repercussions for the student of bringing tensions with the instructor into the open.

In emphasizing the benefits of conference summaries in a 1997 discussion of summaries on WCENTER's electronic forum, Joan Mullin affirms their use with full awareness of the teacher-tutor difficulties that can arise: "I would never trade the learning circle we complete when we—the student, tutor, and faculty member—collaborate [in conference summaries]. Yes, that is too fine a word for some of our interactions, but the student in our wc gives (written) preference to whether he/she wants a report to go to the instructor..." ("Confidentiality"). As Mullin recognizes and Millie's situation attests, not all interactions between teachers and tutors meet the ideal one might hope to attain were the tutor-student-teacher dynamic less complicated. But the complexity of that dynamic is no reason to banish a form that reflects that complexity back to us—at times in our uneasy comments on problematic assignments, at times in the student responses we recognize must remain confidential—especially if banishing the form comes at the expense of potential benefits to all involved. Indeed, the sensitivity of the tutor-teacher relationship reveals the power tutors have, despite their ambiguous position in the academic hierarchy (at once at the center and the periphery of the university's work), to effect the classroom teacher and foster the "learning circle" the conference summary can complete.
IV. Survey Results: Faculty Perspectives

Yet, is there any indication that conference summaries with their emphasis on the collaborative process have any significant impact on the faculty who receive them? Do the faculty indeed register the perspectives on the student's writing process and their own teaching that summaries make available? My survey of faculty at my institution, in which 60 instructors out of the 130 contacted responded, confirmed the value of the weekly reports for the responding instructors (see Appendix A). The surveys were sent to teachers in a variety of departments whose students had been served by the writing center: Administration of Justice, English, Forestry, History, Journalism, Linguistics, Political Science, Recreation, Sociology, and Work Force Development, to name a few. The replies, however, were anonymous. Only one instructor out of the 60 felt that the conference summaries were not worthwhile. In response to a question on use of the summaries, most cited ways the reports aided their work with students, and some noted insight gained into aspects of their own teaching.

Comments by two of the study's respondents indeed reflect the stereotype of writing center tutor as subservient to the teacher. One of these instructors stated that the most useful aspect of the summaries was that they allowed her "to evaluate if I felt the best use of the tutor's time was being made." The other replied that "it was very helpful to know that my specific suggestions for improvement were being addressed." While both remarks suggest a concern for the "unified educational experience for students," valued by the sharers Pemberton cites (13), they also suggest a chain of command-or the sort of power-based "triangulated relationship" Grimm complains of in discussing writing center politics ("Rearticulating" 527); they certainly do not reflect the three-way conversation or "tria-logue" one teacher respondent saw as fostered by summaries. Other responses, while entirely positive, are fairly predictable, such as the 13% that cited using the information to measure the student's effort or the 3% that indicated using it to determine the student's grade.

The responses that most reinforce conference summary use were those in which instructors noted the insights the summaries provided into their students as writers and into their own teaching. For instance, 28% of the survey's respondents reported using perspectives gained on the writing problems and processes of students in their own one-to-one sessions with them; 10% said they referred to the summaries in their comments on student papers. For these teachers, writing center talk helped shape teacher-student talk. One commented: "I followed through, emphasizing the same areas as the tutor in evaluating student papers." A second instructor pointed out, "I regularly used information from the conference summaries in commentary on graded papers. It was nice to be able to write..."
so and so told me you were working on this problem, and it seems to have helped."

Specific comments by instructors on the effect of summaries on their one-to-one meetings with students are worth quoting as well. Conference summaries led one of the responding instructors to "make a stronger effort to discuss writing with those students [who attend the writing center] as a kind of follow-up." Another appreciated being able to use the summaries to establish a context for one-to-one teacher-student sessions: "I found [the summaries] very helpful indeed. They gave me a detailed account of my student's paper-in-formation. I could see the hard work she and her tutor put in. I discussed the reports with the student. The reports were a nice entree for me into discussions with the student about her paper." These teachers confirm that the summary can become, then, not just a lead-in but also an aid to individualizing the teacher-student conference by providing for the teacher an understanding of the individual student's writing process. This is a significant advantage to student as well as teacher, particularly since instructors are usually forced to limit the length of their one-to-one sessions.

Further reinforcing the advantage of summaries for students are the 10% of the teacher responses citing use of the reports to focus teaching and design exercises for students. For example, one teacher states: "The summaries aided me in my conferences and interactions with my students. They gave me a deeper understanding of the specific problems each student experienced and allowed me to create practical strategies for teaching them." Another commented, "The information [on the problem areas of students] is helpful because I don't have time to sit down with every student every week to see what type of help each one needs! However, I can use this information to design supporting exercises, and I did." The weekly reports also helped teachers assess various aspects of their own classroom presentation. One instructor stated: "The conference summaries were very helpful in a general sense, to give me an idea of where I need to be clearer, and what kinds of things I might cover for the whole class." Another teacher specifically liked the feedback on "how clearly I have (or haven't) presented my assignment." The perception that power travels only from teacher to tutor, sometimes taken as a given in writing center politics, is undermined by these examples.

Thanks to conference summaries, then, a significant portion of the teacher respondents became part of a "learning circle" of student, tutor, and teacher. If students feel that such a learning circle stifles or distorts their relationship with their tutor, they can opt not to have summaries sent to their instructors. While it can be argued that the teacher's power of the grade may, in a sense, coerce students into consenting to the summary reports, it can also be argued that a writing
center's unilateral decision not to offer the conference summary as option is, to some degree, coercive as well. But I should let the students their tutors speak for themselves on the value of conference summaries.

V. Survey Results: Tutor Perspectives

In my survey of writing center tutors, I asked the tutors to answer open-ended questions on the advantages and disadvantages of summaries for the three groups involved (see Appendix B). Fifteen of the 38 tutors contacted responded. (Approximately half of those contacted were no longer tutoring in the Center at the time of the survey.) While the tutors did see faults with the summaries, virtually every tutor responding asserted that our Center should continue to use them. When asked specifically about the benefits of these reports for the tutors writing them, 6% said they help indicate areas needing work in future sessions; 30%, that the give the tutor and student a sense of the student’s progress; and 30%, that they provide time to evaluate the productivity of a session. Thirteen percent used them to rethink their tutoring strategies. To quote one tutor, "The writing center conference summary serves as an outlet for gathering thoughts and evaluating the productivity of a particular session. This is undoubtedly the most important and beneficial role of the conference summary for the tutor. It is a way to reflect on and hopefully improve your skills as a tutor." And finally, 26% liked conference summaries because they helped create a dialogue between the teacher and tutor.

The main drawback that 66% of the respondents saw summaries having for themselves as tutors was, as one tutor put it, "the time they take away from my sessions and from the students." The same tutor went on say, "I always ask the student to participate in the summary. I don't want to send something to the teacher without conferring with the student." Other drawbacks varied. For one respondent, the summary's open-endedness made it sometimes difficult to know what to include. For another, the concern was that "If a student is concentrating on a single element or if progress is slow, the reports are redundant each week during that period." A final disadvantage noted was that it "seems awkward to admit that a session wasn't as productive as it could have been." Yet despite this pressure, the same respondent praised conference summaries as allowing the tutor "to keep track of... progress" and "affirm the value of the student's writing center work."

As to the benefits tutors saw summaries having for students, 60% felt that they motivated students to work on their writing by informing their instructors of "their dedication and progress." Some might interpret this perceived advantage as symptomatic of the teacher’s dominance in
the tutoring triangle and thus as more negative than positive. Indeed, one tutor felt summaries, because directed to the instructor, "might be a bit intimidating perhaps" for the student. Yet the same tutor saw them as a "catalyst" for teacher-student discussion: "Some students may be shy about talking with teachers, but if they know a teacher is aware of their problems, it's easier to bring the problems up and ask questions." Another tutor concurred with this advantage: "The conference summaries benefit students by making their instructors aware of their writing processes and revision strategies. This creates better communication between instructor and student." Altogether, twenty percent of the responding tutors saw the reports as helping students establish a productive relationship to their instructors.

A related benefit of the summaries, as seen by 26% of the tutor respondents, is the "self-validation" it provides for students. According to one tutor, through the summaries "they can see what we've done and how they've progressed." Another said of this benefit, "students can feel they are really accomplishing something when we summarize all the work they do during each session." Another, more directly pedagogical benefit of the summaries for students, as seen by 13% of the tutor respondents, is in the metacognition they provide "as the closing activity and review of the session": "Doing the conference summaries with the students enables many of them to remember the major issues that were tackled during the tutorial session."

VI. Survey Results: Student Perspectives

Perhaps most important for determining the value of conference summaries is the assessment of them by the tutees themselves. 30 tutees out of 85 contacted completed the survey on the advantages and disadvantages of the summaries for themselves as students and for their relationship to their tutors and teachers (see Appendix C). Of the 30, five happened to be students who had chosen not to have conference summaries sent to their instructor: two because they felt the information would not seem relevant to their instructor, two because they were unsure how the work summarized would be perceived by their teacher, and one because the writing reviewed was not related to a specific course. All 25 of the respondents who chose to have summaries sent cited the reports as helpful. 80% saw them as valuable to themselves as students; 60% saw them as valuable to their relationship with their tutor; and 68%, to their relationship with their instructor. Only two out of all the respondents saw the summaries as having any drawbacks. Both mentioned sometimes feeling
discouraged by the review of the problems covered in the session. Yet, even for these students, the reports were positive overall. One of the two stated as well that such a review is "a positive thing to grow on" and that it "keeps the instructor informed"; the other emphasized that the discouragement was balanced by the progress also reflected in the summary.

Comments by tutees on the summary's advantages overlap significantly with the advantages seen by the tutor and instructor respondents. On the summary's value to the tutee alone, one tutee replied, much like a number of the tutor respondents, "It helps me gain further insight into our sessions," and another, "It helped give me a more objective point of view on my writing abilities." Concerning the advantages of the summary to the student's relationship to the tutor, some comments focused on indirect benefits accrued to the student through benefits to the tutor: "It helps my tutor realize what I need help with, what my strong and weak points are," and "they help my tutor see progress and where I am at." While these comments might be seen as reflecting the students' sense of their own role as subsidiary, other comments sum up the benefits of the reports to the student and tutor as a team: "They have helped both of us to help me become a better writer" and "in our sessions, we have good talks about what I am going to write; then we see it on paper; then [in the summary] we see what I did."

The process of collaborating with the tutor on the summaries was valued as well by 68% of the tutees. Counter to the tutors who perceived the review of summary contents with tutees as too time consuming, one student cited the "enlightenment [the process] brought me"; another stated, "it helps me become aware of what I have done in each session"; and a third, "it gave me a better view of what I needed help on." According to these latter tutees, then, the conference summaries and the collaborative process they involve do not diminish the quality of the student-tutor relationship as suggested by the seclusionists; they heighten it.

The student perspectives on the advantages of the reports to the student-teacher relationship are perhaps the most interesting because they affirm the uses the teacher respondents made of these reports. Thirty-two percent of the students responding highlighted individualization of instruction by the classroom teacher as a worthwhile summary by-product. One student commented that because of the conference summaries, his instructor "knows what he can cover with me to help me succeed in his class." Another said the summaries "help the instructor see what writing level I am at." A third noted that the teacher "would get to know me on a more personal level (school work-wise) by monitoring my progress" through the summary reports. And the positive impact of summaries on teacher feedback noted by the teacher respondents was also noted by several tutees. One student stated that as a consequence of the summaries,
"my instructor seems to encourage me and is always referring to how I have improved because of the writing center."

In their survey responses overall, the 25 student respondents who agreed to sending the weekly summary report strongly endorsed its use. Yet it is important to note that despite their clearly articulated approval, 67% of them indicated favoring a new section for optional student comments on sessions (see Appendix C). And 42% indicated wanting a copy of the summaries for their own files. An even greater percentage of the students not requesting conference reports, 72%, favored the new, exclusively student section; 71% of this latter group favored offering a copy for the student. With this clear indication of the desire for even greater student participation in the summary process, we have since added both features to our summary form.

VII. The Conference Summary, a Problematic Yet Valuable Form

As the results of the three surveys indicate, the conference summary, at least as employed at my institution, is a difficult but, on balance, worthwhile form. Although, as noted by one tutor, summaries may initially be intimidating for tutees, they carry with them the potential to help tutees move beyond intimidation to establish a working relationship with the teacher. And although, according to at least one tutor, the "open-ended" summary burdens the tutor with having to characterize in brief the complex reality of a collaborative session, it also gives the tutor the opportunity to reflect with the student on progress made and to provide teachers with insights into the writing processes of tutees. The form may lead teachers to see aspects of their own teaching that may need to be clearer, yet the teachers can benefit from that insight and from insights into the individual process and progress of their students. They can also gain, as Joan Mullin notes in the context of a 1993 WCENTER thread on sharing student records with faculty, simply from the chance to see that "we weren't writing students' papers." With that misunderstanding cleared up, the chance for true collaboration in which tutor and teacher start to "share the same language" becomes possible (Mullin qtd in Crump 8).

Joan Mullin concludes one of her posts in this WCENTER thread on the conference summary by saying, "It works for us ... but probably not for all" (9). And indeed the structure of some writing centers and the nature of the community they serve may make conference summaries impractical-particularly the more time-consuming process version of summaries that we use-and their rewards less apparent. And yet the potential of this form to reinforce the value of their collaborative process for writing center students and tutors, and to extend the benefits of that
process to the teacher, seems noteworthy. Particularly deserving of attention in the survey results, because it counters prevailing views, is the testimony by the instructor respondents on the positive changes to their own one-to-one conferences and classroom teaching-changes corroborated by a significant number of tutees. If nothing else, this testimony by teachers, tutors, and students should problematize the notion that to sustain a productive, trusting relationship with tutees, writing centers must limit the flow of information to faculty as much as possible. And it should call into question rejecting summaries merely out of a desire to quash the "service" or "handmaiden" stereotype of the writing center. While there are, without doubt, teachers who still perceive writing centers as in service solely to them, the real sense in which conference summaries serve is in helping the teacher become, as Mina Shaughnessy puts it, "a student of new disciplines and of his students themselves in order to perceive both their difficulties and their incipient excellence" (238).

Note:

The SIUC Writing Center conference summary form evaluated in the three surveys reprinted in Appendix A, B, and C includes the following sections: an informational section with blanks for the name of the student, instructor, and course, and the type of assistance sought; a section with a checklist of the problems addressed; and another for the summary "notes." With each summary, instructors receive a separate form through which to respond.

Questions in all three surveys have percentage totals that exceed 100%. In Appendix B, question 2b, the excess is due to a rounding error in the remaining cases, to the fact that respondents cited more than one benefit or drawback per question.