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Cultivating Diversity in the Writing Center: A Critical Analysis of the Writing Associate Selection Process

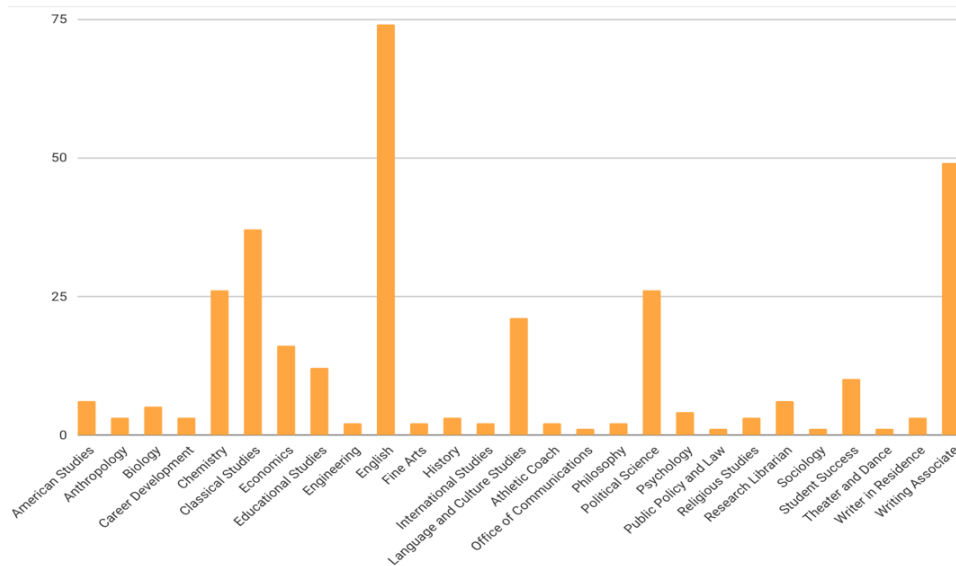
Introduction

At the Trinity College Allan K. Smith Center for Writing and Rhetoric, our number one priority is providing comprehensive writing tutoring and support for each and every member of our campus community. In line with this goal, our center prides itself on our welcoming values of inclusivity, diversity, and compassion. These values are reflected in the curriculum of our tutor-training course, RHET 302, in the content of our staff meetings, and in the culture of our work environment. As a Writing Associate, it is easy for me to see these values being incorporated into our work, but are we successfully broadcasting these messages to our campus community? While statements of inclusivity and written affirmations of our beliefs are certainly nice gestures, I argue that our staff members are truly the face of the Writing Center and its values. Writing Associates are the living, breathing embodiment of the writing center; we are carefully selected as representatives for the center among our peers. However, if one were to peruse the list of Writing Center Associates that is located on our website, they would be confronted with an overwhelmingly white and female list of faces and names. Additionally, the current Writing Associates are overwhelmingly humanities majors and domestic students. Are

we truly advancing the goal of diversity and inclusion, if our own staff does not represent the intellectual and demographic diversity of our campus community? At this point, it is important to acknowledge that as a predominantly white institution, with a population of students that mostly call the United States their home, it is to be expected that the Writing Associates program would also be predominantly white, domestic students. However, our program should strive to meet and exceed proportional representation for students of color and international students among our staff. Now, I do not claim that the problem is a lack of commitment to this desire on the behalf of Writing Center leadership. Rather, the goal of this paper is to investigate the extent to which the nomination and application process is limiting the diversification of the Writing Associates program.

Nomination Process

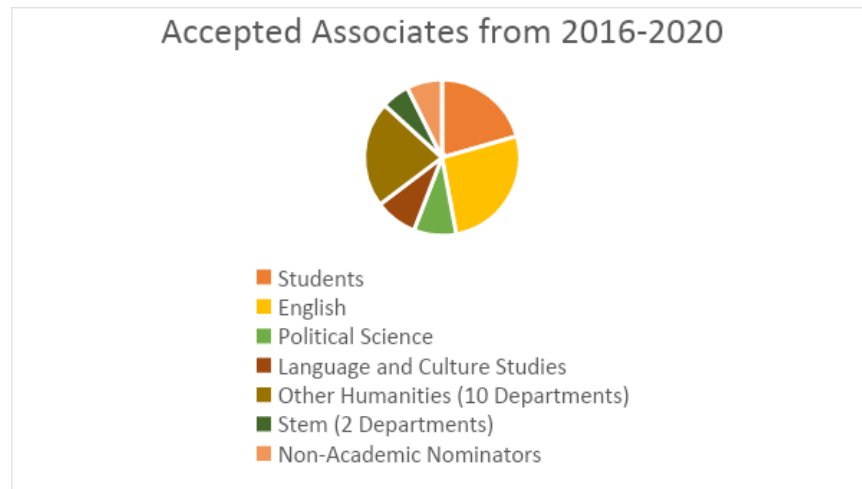
In the spring of each academic year, the Writing Associates program solicits nominations for potential program applicants from faculty, current Writing Associates, and student-facing staff members. This endeavor generally yields around 70 nominations, about 40 of whom go on to apply for the program. In the letter sent to faculty, it is explicitly expressed that the Writing Center has a specific interest in “students who can relate to students from different cultures” (O’Donnell), but is this interest being met with a diverse pool of nominations? We don’t have institutional data on the demographic backgrounds of students who have been nominated for candidacy to the Writing Associates program. However, we do have record of the academic departments, campus offices, and Writing Associates that have nominated students. Thus, my first step was to analyze the past five years of nominations and determine where these nominations are originating.



After being provided the appropriate data* from Administrative Assistant, Carolyn (Lyn) Kelly, and compiling a list of every nominator from the last five years of nominations, I categorized these nominations by department and sorted them into the graph shown above. In doing this, I discovered that the two groups that nominate by far the most students are English/Writing and Rhetoric professors and Writing Associates. Conversely, I noted that only two STEM departments were represented in the data from 2016-2020, and together these departments (Chemistry and Biology), had only nominated 31 students (Kelly, Lyn) While I was unsurprised by the low number of STEM nominations, and the prominence of English department nominations, I was actually a bit taken aback by the huge number of students who had been nominated by Writing Associates. Now of course, the nomination process is only one component of the Writing Associate selection process. To further my investigation, I decided to look into which departments or groups were nominating students who actually went on to be accepted into the program. Below, I've included a pie chart depicting the portion of Associates within the last five years that were drawn from each group of nominators.

*Student names were omitted from nomination data before being provided to me, to protect student privacy.

Due to the low volumes of accepted students from many groups, the only categories of nominators who got their own color on the chart were the four which had six or more students accepted into the program.



Note: Students who were nominated by multiple parties are reflected under BOTH groups by which they were nominated.

While this data does generally mirror the nomination numbers that I compiled in the first graph, I was still surprised to see how many of the Associates from the past five years were student-nominated. Of the departments with greater than six students accepted, student nominations tied with Language and Culture Studies for the highest acceptance rate. I do acknowledge that acceptance rate is not the best metric to rely on in this case, since there is so much variation between the numbers that are nominated from each group. However, considering the prevailing perception is that Writing Associates are generally faculty nominated, it seems remarkable to me that more than 20% of our Writing Associates from the past half-decade have been nominated by students (Kelly, Lyn).

Nomination Process – Initial Conclusions

After reviewing the data and determining how Writing Associates are being directed into the program application process, I can now consider an informed hypothesis as to why our writing center staff trends so heavily towards the same demographic groups. While I am confident that a multitude of factors contributes to this phenomenon, based on the data I compiled it seems as though student nominations could be playing a role. While the remarkable number of student-nominated applicants who are accepted into the Writing Associates program is clearly a testament to excellent judgement on behalf of our student workers, it could also be perpetuating the homogeneity of our staff. As a general pattern, people tend to gravitate socially towards individuals who are like themselves. Thus, it seems logical that students are often nominating applicants who share many of their own qualities, simply because they exist in the same social sphere. For example, if a Writing Associate's social circle revolves around her house full of female roommates, then this Associate's pool of friends and acquaintances from which to choose nominees is most likely disproportionately female. This principle also makes sense if it is applied to the writing center's lack of academic diversity. If most Writing Associates are humanities majors, then they are unlikely to interact academically with many students in the math or biology departments. Since they are given the chance to get to know the humanities students in their classes on an academic and collaborative level, then it is natural that these students might receive student nominations to apply to the program.

Diversity in the Writing Center – Acknowledging the “Culture of Power”

In the beginning of this paper I questioned the efficacy of the Writing Center's efforts to promote demographic and academic diversity and collaboration without a thoroughly diverse

staff that adequately reflects these values. Now, it is important to elaborate further on why representation of students from different backgrounds is important in our work on campus. While countless scholars and activists have written about the importance of representation for marginalized or minority groups, I took great interest in the ideas of activist and writer, Paul Kivel. In his essay “The Culture of Power,” Kivel explores how power dynamics are a hindrance to inclusion in social, professional, and academic life. He explains that a culture of power is created when the more powerful members of an organization are the cultural focus and leadership personnel. When marginalized groups encounter such organizations, they often feel out of place or unwelcome in that group or space. This can often prevent members of these marginalized groups from being able to work freely and effectively under the weight of this culture (Kivel 2-4). For generations in America, cultures of power have been used both consciously and unconsciously to exclude and intimidate racial minorities, women, and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

In many ways, cultures of power are inextricable from our society. However, this does not excuse individual institutions and organizations from culpability in maintaining these toxic cultures within their spaces and staff. At the Writing Center, we are tasked with the important responsibility of supporting student writing. At a liberal arts college like Trinity, success in writing is truly crucial to a student’s overall success in college. If students of color and international students (two groups underrepresented in the Writing Associate program) feel intimidated or out of place within our space, they could be at a disadvantage academically compared to the students who feel represented by the makeup of our staff. I argue that this issue is only magnified in the tutor selection process. It is one thing to grow comfortable interacting with an organization that may have a degree of racial or national homogeneity, but it is another to

actually seek employment within that group. Our data shows that more than 40% of nominated students do not actually apply to become a Writing Associate (Kelly, Lyn). Undoubtedly, some of these students do not apply due to a lack of availability, disinterest, or an inability to fit RHET 302 into their course schedule. It is also likely that many of these students do not apply due to a shortage of confidence in their ability to attain the position, or intimidation by the application process. Based on the weaknesses in the diversity of our staff, and the theory advanced in Kivel's "The Culture of Power" I contend that the makeup of our team of tutors is a factor in influencing or deterring student applications to the Writing Associates program. If students of color, international students, or students from non-humanities academic backgrounds, don't see themselves represented within the current writing center staff, then they might feel as though our workplace is not going to be welcoming to them.

Now, I recognize that applying the culture of power principle to academic disciplines is a bit of an extrapolation. However, applying this theory to power dynamics more broadly can help us understand how we can cultivate the most inclusive and diverse environment possible. If the surviving perception is that the Writing Associates program is a place for English and Humanities majors, STEM students could face obstacles to empowerment and confidence in writing within our space. If we are unable to cultivate diversity in all forms among our staff, we will always be limiting the potential of our Writing Associates program, and the work of our Writing Center as a whole.

Applying to the Writing Center – Application

After the nomination process has put forward around 70 names for consideration, the Writing Center sends application information out to these students, encouraging them to submit

an application and apply for the program. All applicants are required to submit a two to three-page personal statement, a writing sample, and a faculty reference (O'Donnell). The general tone of this letter is encouraging and straightforward, with an emphasis on explaining the logistics of the application. Because of this, I do not perceive any of the language in this letter to be exclusionary or intimidating to potential applicants. While the letter does refer to the program as "highly selective" (O'Donnell), this is an honest assessment of our program, and I do not think that we need to misrepresent the prestige of the program in order to encourage applications.

The only potential problem I see within this letter, is the section calling for a faculty reference. For many students, especially underclassmen, the solicitation of a reference letter is an intimidating process. While the letter does not specify that the reference should be written by a professor other than the nominating party and does put restrictions on the academic fields that the reference authors should be drawn from, some students might worry that these requirements exist on the subconscious level. For example, a student might be concerned that having the nominating professor write their reference could hurt their chances or be fearful that having their calculus professor attest to their communication skills might seem unconvincing. These assumptions matter, because they may prevent qualified and competent students from applying to our program. For the many Writing Associates who enter the program as Sophomores, the application process occurs during the spring of their Freshmen year. This means that they've only had one complete semester as a student at Trinity and have hardly had a chance to acclimate to college life. For many students from low-income, first generation, or international backgrounds, their first semester may be spent enduring the culture shock that comes along with being dropped into a predominantly white, elite liberal arts institution. They might not have had the chance to get close to more than one professor during their time at Trinity, so they could be

hesitant to apply if they don't feel like it is acceptable to have their nominating professor write their recommendation. Similarly, STEM students, who could be taking predominantly STEM courses, may not have had more than one class that was writing-heavy. Furthermore, students in STEM disciplines may be unsure if it is acceptable to have a math or science professor discuss their experience with the student's writing.

Applying to the Writing Center – Interview

The third, and final, component of the Writing Associate selection process is the interview. This interview, co-conducted by an Allan K. Smith Center faculty member and a current Writing Associate, is how prospective Associates are evaluated on their competency as face-to-face communicators. Since tutoring is a job that requires a great deal of skill in interpersonal communication, a successful interview is the final bar that applicants must clear in order to receive an offer of employment from the Writing Center, and they must clear this with flying colors. As Writing Associates tend to be a sociable group of students, the interview process is one that feels natural for many applicants. However, interviews can carry a whole new level of stress for students who do not speak an academically accepted dialect. At most American colleges and workplaces, and yes, on Trinity's campus, Standard Academic English (SAE) is the predominant form of communication both in writing and in formal academic or professional settings. However, substantial numbers of people studying and working in this country, and on our campus, do not speak with an accent or dialect that conforms to this version of the English language. These students who natively speak with a notable accent or with a dialect dissimilar to SAE often face disadvantages in an interview context.

In their study on the impact of accent and dialect in job interviews, Holly Carlson and Monica McHenry investigated whether these factors correlated with a perception of higher or lower employability. They identified three prominent dialects in spoken American English: African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Spanish-influenced English, and Asian-influenced English. The latter two are considered to be accents, due to the fact that they are distinguished by the pronunciation of words. Both Spanish-influenced English and Asian-influenced English are most commonly spoken by individuals who learned English as a second language. Conversely, AAVE is a true dialect that is common within (but not exclusive to) the Black community (Carlson and McHenry 71).

The study asked human resource management personnel to listen to audio recordings of actors belonging to each dialect and assign them a comprehensibility and employability score. The actors recorded multiple sets of the same script, with different levels of accented or dialectic speech within the different versions. Ultimately, the study found that the strength of an accent or dialect had an impact on the actor's employability ratings (Carlson and McHenry 78).

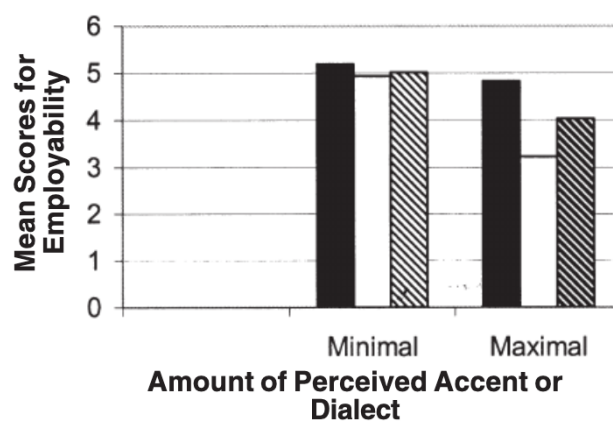


FIGURE 2

Group by Amount of Interaction on Employability

Note. ■ = Spanish-influenced English; □ = African American Vernacular English; ▨ = Asian-influenced English.

(Carlson and McHenry 78)

As demonstrated in the bar chart above, the maximal level of accent or dialect correlated with a decrease in employability scores for all three groups. Something interesting to note is that the “employers” came from a multitude of racial and ethnic backgrounds, indicating that individuals who may share similar backgrounds to speakers of these accents and dialects could also perceive them to be negative within an interview context.

The results of this study have important implications for the Writing Associate interview process. It is possible that our interview process is playing a role in the general homogeneity of the Writing Center staff. In accordance with the data, applicants who speak with an accent or speak in a distinctive dialect are put at a disadvantage when compared to applicants without these qualities. Within our campus community, this could include international students, bilingual students, first-generation students, students from the south, students from rural areas, and many more. It is likely that many of these students are cognizant of the negative ramifications of speaking their natural dialect within an academic setting, and therefore might be unduly stressed about their way of speaking during the interview session. Similarly, students who opt to alter the way that they speak in order to conform to SAE might take frequent pauses, or speak with diminished fluency and coherence due to the unnatural feeling of speaking a non-native dialect. Finally, our faculty interviewers are not immune to the influences of implicit biases, and it’s certainly possible that some interviewees may have been perceived by the interviewer as less competent or articulate due to their natural way of speaking.

Conclusion – My Recommendations

The intention of this paper was not to simply critique our current team of Writing Associates, our Writing Center administrators, or our Writing Associate selection process.

Rather, my aim was to identify and evaluate areas for potential improvements, relying on the principle that increasing the diversity of our student workforce in the Writing Center will improve our effectiveness as a pedagogical institution and help us to equally support every student on Trinity's diverse campus. Consistent with this goal, I have assembled a brief list of recommendations for reform within the Writing Associate selection process. This list is by no means exhaustive, and I would encourage future research into this topic by future Writing Associates. There is much that I was unable to cover within this paper, since the idea of diversity is one that is so huge and convoluted. With all of this said, I hope that the implementation of these recommended changes can move us one step closer in cultivating the most academically and demographically diverse group of Writing Associates possible.

Recommended Changes:

- 1. Solicit student nominations from students outside the Writing Center.**
Based on the number of student-nominated applicants who are accepted into the Writing Associates program, these nominations are clearly very successful in bringing qualified tutors into the Writing Center. In order to expand the potential for student-nominations outside the social and academic circles of Writing Associates, I propose that the Writing Center solicit nominations from student leaders across campus. Ideally, these would be students from diverse student communities including, but not limited to, leaders of cultural houses, First-Year Mentors, and leaders of academic honor societies.
- 2. Encourage consistent faculty nominators from underrepresented departments to speak with their colleagues about putting forward nominations.** This would not only recognize the contributions of STEM professors who have been reliably sending in nominations but could also prompt other faculty members to consider nominating qualified students to apply for the Writing Associates program.
- 3. Clarify the expectations for faculty recommendations: allow for the nominating professor to write the reference letter and specify that STEM professors are welcome to write recommendations.** While more outgoing or confident students might obtain this clarification through communication with Writing Center leaders or administrators, providing this information in the letter itself could empower and encourage more nominated students to complete an application.
- 4. Encourage interviewers to be cognizant of the impact that accent and dialect can have on their perception of the student, as well as the student's performance in the interview.** Everyone is influenced by implicit biases and subconscious observations about people. Interviewers should actively try to address their implicit biases whenever present, but particularly when interviewing students who may not naturally speak an academically endorsed version of English, or who speak with a noticeable accent. Similarly, interviewers should take note of indications that students might speak a different dialect of English (such as a student mentioning that they grew up in a bilingual home) and give some leeway for heightened stress or diminished fluency of speech in these circumstances.

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