

## With Our Powers Combined

### *Teaming Up with the Writing Center to Improve Information Literacy*

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Write, Research, Revise (WRR) is a partnership between the Library and the Russell E. Horn Learning Center at Penn State Harrisburg, a campus of The Pennsylvania State University serving approximately 5,000 graduate and undergraduate students. This program provides two-on-one appointments, combining research and writing help for students in freshman-level, introductory writing courses. During WRR, participants have a scheduled appointment with a librarian and a writing tutor to comprehensively workshop nearly-completed research papers. At the appointment, students receive feedback and strategies to improve both the writing and research components of their assignments. Participating students and course faculty responded positively to the program. None of the participants previously utilized individual research assistance from campus librarians, and they indicated a greater willingness to seek help from the library in the future.

### Introduction

Collaboration between libraries and writing programs/centers is common on college campuses (Baer, 2016). These collaborations take many forms, from high-level curriculum planning that incorporates collaborative pedagogical approaches within the disciplines or the expansion of composition programs, to co-locating reference and writing services in one building. Regardless of the collaboration type, information literacy assistance from librarians and composition-improvement strategies from writing tutors seem to go hand-in-hand to support improvement of student research writing skills. Library and writing center collaborations can be tailored to meet the needs of students as well as the strategic goals of the college or units involved.

In seeking new opportunities to collaborate between these related units at Penn State Harrisburg, a suburban college campus serving 5,000 students, many approaches were explored. Ultimately a unique course-related, appointment-driven program called Write, Research, Revise (WRR) emerged as a partnership between the Harrisburg

Campus Library and the Russell E. Horn Learning Center. This paper will examine the types of collaborations frequently represented in the literature, explain the rationale and procedure for creating WRR, and identify areas for additional research in the area of library and writing center collaborations.

## Literature Review

Much library literature discusses the wide-ranging collaborations between libraries and writing centers or libraries and composition programs. This review focuses on the main methods of collaboration, which were considered as potential models for WRR. Overall, the collaboration models typically fall into two main categories which may overlap: programmatic and co-location.

### Programmatic Collaborations

Programmatic collaborations take many forms, but commonly involve working directly with the writing or composition programs to integrate information literacy into the existing curriculum (Norgaard, 2004), or developing a new course with direct input from librarians and writing center professionals (Simons, 2017). These collaborations foster research writing skills in tandem with the core curriculum for a given discipline. They can place the services that support all students' research within the context of the course, rather than recommending assistance as an afterthought for struggling students. By including and normalizing research and writing assistance within a course or curriculum, students may be more likely to use the services readily and find them helpful (Bowles-Terry, Davis, & Holliday, 2010). A light programmatic approach was considered for WRR, focusing on the core composition curriculum required for all students. Deeper programmatic collaborations may require rewriting curriculum or creating new courses as described in Bowles-Terry et. al. (2010) and Simons (2017). The significant time and resource commitment for such a collaboration were beyond the scope of this project.

### Co-location Collaborations

Bringing research and writing services together in spirit through programmatic collaboration can also lead to tying them together physically through co-location or providing an alternate service point within the library or writing center. Co-location plans may also arise from a campus's lack of space, funds, or both (Ferer, 2012). Academic libraries are often targeted for space reallocation as print collections are removed in favor of online resources and stacks are repurposed in the face of demands for new student learning environments (Palomino & Gouveia, 2011). Lack of individual space or limited funding are not challenges that spurred the creation of WRR, but these are serious considerations for many academic units. In addition to these challenging circumstances, an aim to better serve students can spark co-location plans that bring related service areas into one location or building (Dallis, 2016).

Co-location may strengthen the connection between academic service partners by eliminating the need for students to walk from one building to another in order to receive academic support services for the same projects. "If a reference librarian or reference services were available in the Writing Centre, the 'lonely walk' to the reference desk located in the library could be avoided and instead students would be able to access virtually a one-stop shop," (Palomino & Gouveia, 2011, p. 133). There is benefit to students and the campus community viewing research and writing as intermingled processes; however, there is concern that co-location could be viewed negatively by administrators who might misinterpret these collaborations as unnecessary duplications of effort (Mahaffy, 2008). In terms of improving students' information literacy and writing skills, is it enough to bring two related services together in one space? Should libraries and writing centers collaborate more formally than simple co-location to emphasize the interrelated nature of research and writing?

Unfortunately, examination of intentional research paper workshops or appointments involving both library and writing professionals at once is not prominent in the literature. Holly Jackson (2017) conducted an email survey of 117 college/university libraries and writing centers and found that 14% (49 respondents) indicated they had a collaborative method of “individual student appointments,” however, no definition is provided for what these appointments explicitly entail (p. 282). Palomino & Gouveia (2011) mention coincidental collaborations between students, librarians, and writing tutors occurring in a co-located learning commons space, “representing the truly symbiotic relationship that exists between researching and writing the academic paper,” although these collaborations were not the main focus of their co-location program (p. 139). It is quite possible that similar informal collaborations may occur in co-location setups as described in Meyer, Forbes, & Bowers (2010), where the librarians and writing tutors provide appointments in close quarters; however, they are not mentioned.

For many libraries and writing centers, it may not be feasible to create permanent co-located services. Some campuses utilize temporary or regularly scheduled service hours in a location other than the library in order to reach students who may not come to the library for various reasons. Jackson (2017) found that 14% of respondents to the email survey also indicated that they have a writing tutors embedded within their library, and 4% (12 respondents) have librarians embedded at a campus writing center. The effectiveness of these collaborations is not explored within the scope of the study. Long-term co-location collaborations are a more permanent option, but the flexibility of alternative services points can be another solution to addressing research and writing in one space, especially for new collaborations or those attempting to determine its feasibility.

### Alternative Service Points

It may seem intuitive that combining complementary services such as research help and writing assistance in one location would increase student use of both, but there appears to be a limit to its success. Studies that put a twist on roving reference by providing library reference points elsewhere on campus reported mixed results: there is some use of additional services in a new location, but simply placing a librarian in the writing center or other campus space for general referrals shows limited impact in the literature. Using this approach, Mahaffy (2008) found an average of two students per week were assisted by a librarian co-located in the writing center three hours per week, however, there were some weeks with no referrals at all. Del Bosque & Chapman (2007) reported on a pilot which placed librarians in many locations across a campus, including the writing center. Over the course of 19 librarian-staffed hours at the writing center, only four reference interactions occurred. Kuchi, Mullen, & Tama-Bartels (2004) chose a higher visibility location, rather than the writing center, and reported heavy usage at an outpost in the campus student center. Unfortunately, the majority of questions were directional rather than the research assistance the librarians hoped to provide. It is important to consider the usefulness of new service points across a campus if few to no students use them or ask research questions of the staff stationed there. Programs may end up as an ineffective use of staff time and effort.

Weekly drop-in reference services at the Learning Center were initially proposed as a new collaborative project. Considering the limited use of similar services in the literature, this idea was abandoned in favor of a temporary and timely alternative service point. For many students it seems that the “teachable moment” of an impending research paper deadline is the best time for a meaningful individual reference consultation (Attebury, Sprague, & Young, 2009). Therefore, coordinating a program to coincide with the assignment deadlines of a particular course known for utilizing the services of the writing center may have a greater impact in terms of reference questions, rather than waiting for reference questions to appear.

Many iterations of collaboration with crucial campus partners in student academic success are covered in the literature but they have faced lack of use and difficulty in promoting the service successfully, particularly those involving alternative service points (Meyer, Forbes, & Bowers, 2010). WRR was conceived with these particular challenges in mind. Providing library reference assistance within the Learning Center would be beneficial in theory, as

students are often there to seek help for research papers and some will specifically need help with the research component. Could student buy-in be gained without some type of hook? Would they utilize the service enough to deem it necessary?

## Write, Research, Revise

In an effort to increase student use of key academic support services and ultimately improve students' research, writing, and information literacy skills, a librarian and the writing coordinator at Penn State Harrisburg created a collaborative program to provide just-in-time research and writing assistance in a single appointment format to students in a mandatory introductory composition course. Dubbed "Write, Research, Revise" (WRR), this program took its name as a play on the "three R's" of yore: reading, writing, 'rithmetic. The Harrisburg Campus Library regularly provides course-related library instruction as well as on-campus and online research consultation services, supported by four full-time liaison librarians and a number of part-time reference associates. The campus Russell E. Horn Learning Center employs both full- and part-time writing tutors with Master's degrees who provide student tutoring through individual appointments and course-related instruction. WRR was initially conceived as a simple co-location project that would bring library research assistance services to an alternate service point in the Learning Center. The plan expanded to include a targeted collaboration headed by one full-time librarian and the Learning Center's full-time writing coordinator. Together they conducted all scheduled appointments.

## Planning

The initial co-location idea sparked from the relocation of the Learning Center from outposts within the Library and other campus buildings to one location in a new student center. This move necessitated an outside walk for students to obtain services from both resources. The Library and Learning Center had not recently engaged in formal collaboration, and a recently hired librarian and a writing coordinator wanted to explore new ways for the units to collaborate to further student success. Many students were drawn to the new Learning Center space, making it an attractive option for an alternative library service point. Drop-in hours with a librarian were initially considered, but scheduled appointments were favored instead, as blocks of unscheduled appointments could simply be canceled.

Through conversations, the librarian and the writing coordinator developed an idea to specifically target this new service to freshmen in the required introductory English composition class, ENGL 015. These students frequently seek help with their papers at the Learning Center and often need assistance with the research component, which the Learning Center does not provide. Additionally, the Library and the Learning Center have long-standing relationships with the composition program coordinator, and provide in-class support through one-shot instruction to every ENGL 015 section each semester. A novel collaboration was proposed: rather than drop-in librarian appointments in the Learning Center, the librarian and writing tutor would work in tandem to support this student group. Instead of sending students from place to place, this arrangement would review the entirety of research papers in one appointment, therefore saving student time as well.

## Targeted Course

ENGL 015, the introductory English composition course WRR serves, culminates in the creation of a writing portfolio that includes two research papers. Students taking this course are in their first or second semester of college and it serves as an introduction to academic writing. Throughout the semester, students work on various drafts of their papers, expanding them and adding sources. In addition to professor feedback, students often enlist the help of a writing tutor. Requirements for the research papers do not strictly limit students to citing peer-reviewed scholarly journals and the library instruction session covers strategies for identifying several types of acceptable sources,

including books, newspapers, and websites. It should be noted that students typically write argumentative papers that rely on statistics and data best supported by authoritative resources such as reference books, government resources, and occasionally, scholarly journal articles.

Assistance to ENGL 015 courses is strong from both the Library and Learning Center. Reference questions related to this particular course are not strictly tracked. A librarian provides one-shot information literacy instruction to each section, totaling 29 sections in fall 2016, when WRR was first offered. The Learning Center does keep statistics of course-related appointments. In fall 2016, 447, or nearly 33%, of 1368 total writing appointments were related to ENGL 015. For this reason, it seemed plausible that students might need additional assistance with their ENGL 015 assignments. WRR was therefore framed as a “second-shot” session to give students personalized attention, much like what they would receive in an individual research consultation at the library. In one-shot sessions for large entry-level courses, which typically average 25 students and are usually 50 minutes in length, it can be difficult for the librarian to address each individual student’s research topic and help them develop a focused research strategy. Individual research consultations are always presented as an option, but it is unclear if students are requesting help from the Library at the same rate as the Learning Center.

It is possible that some ENGL 015 students received one-shot instruction prior to their need, thereby decreasing their engagement with the session. The large number of sections necessitates spreading sessions out, over a two-month period. To remedy this potential gap, WRR was designed to fall at the most intense point of need: during the two weeks prior to finals, when ENGL 015 students would be revising their papers for their final portfolio.

Creating a program to serve 29 different sections of one course can be a monumental challenge, but WRR benefitted from ENGL 015’s common syllabus and course structure. At the point of the semester when WRR would be offered, all students in the course would have developed theses and written nearly complete paper drafts. Therefore, students would not be at the beginning of the research process. This would prevent misuse of WRR appointment time developing a topic or locating background information, which would be more appropriately addressed in standard writing appointments or research consultations outside of WRR. In fall 2016, appointments were limited to ENGL 015 students and were one hour in length.

## Pilot Implementation

As it was a pilot program with limited staffing, a total of six appointments were available over two days. WRR was held in the Learning Center to capitalize on student familiarity with the writing tutors. WRR was advertised on fliers at the Learning Center and the Library, on their respective Facebook pages, and through ENGL 015 instructors who announced the program in class and encouraged students to sign up. Advertisements emphasized the “two-for-one” collaborative nature of the service. Students booked appointments in advance using the Learning Center’s online or in-person scheduling resources. All appointments filled ahead of the program. In the event of a cancellation or no-show, available appointments were offered on a walk-in basis to students at the Learning Center. A few students waited in the Learning Center during WRR, hoping a slot would become available. It should also be noted that regular writing appointments were offered during this time – WRR students were specifically seeking the help of both professionals at once.

Appointments consisted of the librarian and the writing tutor each reading one of the drafts, targeting their respective area of expertise, either the writing or the choice and incorporation of sources. After finishing with the draft, the librarian and writing tutor discussed areas of strength or potential improvement with the student, then switched papers and continued the process. In discussion of the draft, the librarian targeted particularly good sources, weak sources, and areas or statements that would benefit from the support of cited sources and discussed these with the student. Due to the length of the appointment, time was available for individual database tutorials to find additional or better sources to support the student’s argument. The librarian could also discuss a research strategy with the

student, as well as cover source appropriateness. Appointments all involved three-way conversations, demonstrating how research and writing are interdependent processes.

## First Semester Challenges

A primary issue in many of the research papers was incorporation of news articles that reported the findings of a study, rather utilizing the study itself. This created a teachable moment – news articles are often more readily understood, but they are secondary sources and may be less authoritative than the original study. The primary source would also provide more context for the results. The lack of scholarly sources was not entirely surprising: students in ENGL 015 are not required to limit their resources to scholarly journal articles. However, it was an impetus for an information literacy discussion regarding the importance of primary sources. These moments also served as a starting point for guided practice using the library databases to find the original studies. Some students used personal blogs or other questionable websites as the basis for statistics or other perceived facts. In these instances, the librarian and the student worked to uncover the original source for the data, which often came from government agencies or other organization reports. Government websites are covered as reputable sources in the one-shot, however, students had difficulty finding this information on their own. WRR provided an opportunity to fill that knowledge gap.

## Initial Assessment

The librarian created a basic post-survey using Qualtrics to collect feedback anonymously, including questions related to previous usage of the Learning Center and Library, plans for future use, and feelings about the WRR program (Appendix). The writing coordinator who collected student information as part of learning center data gathering emailed all participants a link to the survey. Two of the six participants responded and each had positive feedback. The students had received one-shot information literacy sessions through their course, but they had not previously consulted with a librarian for research help. After participating in WRR, each respondent said they would now be more likely to ask a librarian for research help in the future. Additionally, both respondents said that WRR should be offered again. In conversation with participating students and follow-up from faculty, responses to the program were also positive and indicated support for WRR.

## Expanded Pilot

Taking our participants' suggestion, Penn State Harrisburg offered WRR again in spring 2017 and expanded appointment offerings. In the second semester iteration, the program was expanded from strictly ENGL 015 students to include ENGL 202, the next level of composition, which focuses on writing in the disciplines. There are four distinct versions of ENGL 202 which serve students in the humanities (202A), social sciences (202B), science/technical writing (202C), and business writing (202D). Course offerings for spring term included 30 sections of ENGL 015, including those offered to ESL students as ESL 015, nine sections of ENGL 202A, one section of ENGL 202B, 13 sections of ENGL 202C and ten sections of ENGL 202D. Due to the increase in course sections, appointments were increased in number, from six to 32, and decreased in length, from 60 minutes to 30 minutes, to accommodate a greater number of students. The appointment dates were split equally between ENGL 015 and ENGL 202, and the same advertising and scheduling methods were used.

In an effort to help students well before their final deadlines, appointments were offered at midterm. Students in both levels of English composition are required to submit drafts of their work throughout the semester for instructor feedback and would likely have something due around that time period. Two days of appointments were offered; no one signed up. The end of semester deadline appears to be much more motivating than midterms.

Of the 32 appointments offered in Spring 2017, 19 were filled. WRR continued to be popular with ENGL 015 students, and all appointments for ENGL 015 sessions were filled either in advance or by walk-ins. The fact that the increased number of appointments for ENGL 015 all filled is particularly promising. WRR struggled to find a foothold with ENGL 202, filling only three appointments with students from different sections. ENGL 202 students were less prepared for their sessions and primarily needed help with topics and starting the research process. WRR appointments were beneficial to get the ENGL 202 students started, but initial brainstorming did not fit with the original concept of the program, which required a complete or near-complete paper for review.

## Second Semester Challenges

The common research paper issues for ENGL 015 remained the same in the second semester of the pilot: lack of primary sources, and reliance on questionable sources. Campus librarians make a significant effort to provide one-shot instruction sessions to each section of ENGL 202, however, the students at WRR lacked focus for their projects and were unfamiliar with or confused about the subject-specific databases they were expected to use. During WRR, the librarian was able to provide individual tutorials on the disciplinary research resources, and connect the students with research guides that would assist with their projects. One ENGL 202 student contacted the librarian for further help via email after the session.

## Second Assessment

At the end of Spring WRR appointments, the post-survey was sent out to participants. Spring saw a greater number of WRR participants, but fewer responses to the survey: one student from ENGL 015 and one from ENGL 202D. Responses were positive. Both respondents indicated they were now more likely to use both research and writing help in the future. The ENGL 015 student had not previously used either service; the ENGL 202D student had previously used writing services, not research consultations. Students once again found the program beneficial and encouraged the continuation of WRR. The coordinators had some concern about shorter appointments in the second term. Participants did not comment on or appear to notice appointments were shorter in the second iteration of WRR. It was more challenging to cover in-depth research topics in such a limited time, however, shorter appointments allowed many more students to take advantage of the program. The short appointments were most challenging for ENGL 202 students, who were less prepared and needed more assistance.

## Discussion

In the coming academic year, WRR will be offered again to ENGL 015 in the 30-minute format in order to accommodate a larger number of students. Until better recruitment strategies can be established for ENGL 202, it will not be offered for this course. Shorter appointments may limit some in-depth discussions, but it is important that more students are able to take advantage of the program. Student and faculty response to the program is very encouraging. The limited survey feedback was very positive, and conversations with both students and course faculty affirm the survey data. A faculty member specifically requested more availability of WRR in an instruction evaluation of the participating librarian. At the end of the appointments, students seemed more confident with their research, and had a concrete plan for improvement.

In future semesters, more assessment will be added to the program, including a pre-survey, with the aim to gather more feedback and gain a better understanding of the students participating in WRR. Additionally, we will work with course faculty to create a rubric and evaluate the final papers of both WRR participants and non-participants to determine any differences in the areas of citation, evaluation of sources, thesis, and presentation of argument. This

is an area of assessment missing from the literature regarding library and writing center collaborations, and would be an important component in determining the true success of such programs.

The main limitation discovered in the first year is staff capacity. With only one librarian and the writing coordinator to conduct appointments, availability will continue to be limited either in number or by time. Further expansion of WRR will be challenging without additional librarians and writing tutors to provide additional appointments. Due to reduced staffing levels in both departments, further program expansion is not likely in the coming year.

## Conclusion

The ultimate goal of WRR is to provide students with useful and efficient assistance that increases their information literacy skills. Even as its capacity was limited by the coordinators' availability, the program met this goal. Those students improved their research skills and learned about library tools, search strategies, and resource types. They also left with positive opinions of the Library and the Learning Center, which provided just-in-time assistance in a time-saving manner. They were not sent with referrals between offices and could instead sit down with both resources at once and accomplish something. These positive associations with the Library and Learning Center may encourage future use of available services and encourage the spread of word of mouth recommendations among students. Authentic student recommendations are often far more persuasive than those staff or faculty provide, and can bring in more users. More formal assessment is needed of WRR and similar collaborative projects between libraries and writing centers or programs to truly understand their impact on student achievement. Though the lofty ideal of a more informed student body through increased information literacy is the overall aim of a program like WRR, it also provides more tangible benefits to a number of campus partners: students, in terms of potential higher grades; faculty, in terms of better-quality papers; and libraries and writing centers, in terms of increased usage and relevance.

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## Appendix: Participant Feedback Survey

Thank you for participating in Write, Research, Revise.

To help us evaluate the program and provide future workshops that address students' needs, please provide feedback on your experience.

Your responses will be kept anonymous.

Q1: Before attending Write, Research, Revise, did you utilize any of the following services to improve your papers?

- Writing Tutor at the Learning Center
- Research Help through the Library
- Both Writing Tutor and Research Help
- I did not use either service

Q2: After attending Write, Research, Revise, do you plan to use any of the following services in the future to improve your papers?

- Writing Tutor at the Learning Center
- Research Help through the Library
- Both Writing Tutor and Research Help
- I did not use either service

Q3: What did you find most helpful about the session?

Q4: Is there something you wanted to learn during the session, but didn't?

- Yes
- No

Q5: Do you think Write, Research, Revise should be offered again?

- Definitely yes
- Probably yes
- Maybe
- Probably not
- Definitely not