EXPLORING THE WRITING CENTER'S ROLE ON AT-RISK STUDENTS' SELF-EFFICACY AND WRITING PERFORMANCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by Lacey Sipos

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

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APPROVED BY:

Constance Pearson, Ed.D., Committee Chair

Jeremiah Koester, Ph.D., Committee Member

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the beliefs and attitudes regarding at-risk higher education students' experiences with using their institution's writing center services at a public state university in the Northwestern United States. The research was a transcendental phenomenological approach that used psychologist Moustakas's methodical data analysis procedures and guidelines to construct descriptions that captured the essence of the lived experiences of at-risk students who participated in the study. Bandura's self-efficacy theory provided the theoretical framework for this study. Previous research continues to examine multiple factors that may contribute to at-risk student populations' underutilization of writing centers. This study involved a comprehensive analysis of at-risk students' beliefs and attitudes toward writing centers. Using purposeful sampling, participants enrolled in first-year composition courses at a public state university were selected. The researcher investigated these aspects, and conclusions were drawn after participants utilized their institution's writing center a minimum of four times. The data collection methods included interviews, journal prompts, and surveys. Findings from this research highlighted the significance of personalized support, increased perceived self-efficacy in writing performance, and the role of collaboration within the writing center environment. These results contribute to empirical and theoretical implications of the existing body of literature on writing center utilization via at-risk student populations. This study provides valuable insights into the beliefs and attitudes of at-risk students regarding writing center services, offering implications for enhancing support resources and aiding academic success among this student demographic.

Keywords: at-risk student populations, higher education, self-efficacy, writing center, writing performance

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to Josh and Amos.

To my best friend and husband, Josh. Your devotion to me and my aspirations has been unfailing over the decades of our story. You lent your ear, your time, your patience, and most beholden, your heart to offer support in all ways. Showing me that true love not only exists but that I am lucky enough to live in it and take refuge in its presence every day.

To my son, Amos. My experience as a doctoral student will forever be colored by memories of researching during nap times and writing after I have tucked you into bed and you've drifted off to dreamland. Having you along for the ride makes completing this degree mean more than I could have ever imagined. You are my inspiration! May you continue to pursue knowledge throughout your life as voraciously as you do now.

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Special acknowledgments must be made to Dr. Pearson, who nurtured and encouraged her cohort of doctoral students, lovingly guiding them week after week. I have learned so much from you at this level of academia.

The writing center at my study's site for their experienced dedication and love for their work. Only an exceptional person can lead such a staff, and this writing center's associate director is exemplary. You have taught me so much about higher education, instruction, professionalism, and what it truly means to support students. I have the utmost respect for you and am thankful you extended your love and friendship to me those many years ago.

To my loving family, who has always supported my aspirations and cheered me along the way. You are treasured.

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List of Abbreviations

Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI)

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)

English as a Second Language (ESL)

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (F.E.R.P.A.)

International Writing Centers Association (IWCA)

Institutional Approval for Pre-Proposal (L.O.I.)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Self-efficacy theory (SET)

Writing Program (W.P.)

Writing Program Administration (WPA)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of Chapter One is to describe the framework used in this transcendental phenomenological study, which aims to explore how at-risk students' writing performance and self-efficacy can be affected by using their institution's writing center. This transcendental qualitative research focuses on at-risk students' perceptions of their writing performance and levels of self-efficacy after visiting their institution's writing center four times in one academic quarter. This first chapter provides the background of literature relevant to the historical, social, and theoretical aspects that align with writing performance and self-efficacy as it concerns at-risk students in higher education. Chapter One also describes the problem statement, purpose statement, and significance of the research, along with the research questions. The key definitions and summary conclude the chapter.

Background

Writing is a fundamental skill that is necessary for success in many academic disciplines, as well as in many professional fields. However, simply teaching writing skills to at-risk student populations in first-year writing courses is not enough. Declining trends in college readiness have significant implications for students' academic success in higher education (Sandoz et al., 2017). An essential aspect of addressing this issue is the development of strong academic writing skills. Self-efficacy is crucial in helping students develop as effective writers. A multi-faceted approach can support the underprepared and, thus, at-risk student populations in college, which would include developing successful writing skills and a collaborative yet supportive learning environment that emphasizes building self-efficacy. By prioritizing these fundamentals to learning, students can become more motivated, confident, and effective writers, increasing their chances of success in higher education and beyond.

Historical Context

While there is no single right way to develop a curriculum, in 2011, President Obama's State of the Union Address discussed the significance of higher standards for all students (Parkay et al., 2014). What ensued from the President's appeal for higher standards was mass curricular reform from state education departments, school districts, and individual schools to create an exact and authentic method to assess student learning in primary education (Parkay et al., 2014; Wilder & Yagelski, 2018). Statements were produced on macro-levels detailing the knowledge and skills students should acquire under the new strenuous standards, specifically in English, science, and mathematics (Nix et al., 2021; Parkay et al., 2014). To bring a sense of homogeneousness to the standards that span the entire Union, the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) was organized. CCSSI was tasked to develop common K -12 English and mathematics standards designed to prepare students best (Parkay et al., 2014). Supporters say CCSSI was long overdue and was a strong declaration of the country's commitment to education. At the same time, critics saw an overreaching federal government that lacked evidence to support its inadequate claims on the matter (Nix et al., 2021; Parkay et al., 2014).

These higher standards that progressed the educational system profoundly affected higher education, specifically the first-year college writing course curriculum. The design of CCSSI drove this concept of "college readiness" to be exceedingly important in any discussion about students' preparation for postsecondary education (Levine, 2019). Expectations of demonstrating independence, building strong content knowledge, and responding to varying demands of progressive writing skills are a few of the criteria that determine an individual's college readiness (Carter-Tod, 2022; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). The purpose of this context is not to provide an analysis of these

shifts but to establish that the CCSS impacted the way reading and writing are taught across the K-16 continuum, including the first-year writing college curriculum. CCSS's college readiness endeavored to align high school exit and college entrance standards (Wilder & Yagelski, 2018; Young, 2014). It could be understood, then, that CCSS for English language arts & literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects, specifically when it comes to college readiness, would align and be complementary to the Council of Writing Program Administration (WPA) outcomes statement for first-year composition courses. This is not the case, and the culprit is the absence of the practice of rhetoric for the CCSS and the necessity of rhetoric for the WPA.

Rhetoric, a socially and ideologically situated practice, is absent from the CCSS. This is a foundational shortcoming central to the theory and practice of first-year college composition courses in higher education (Spier, 2021; Young, 2014). As outlined by the WPA Outcomes, and thus the principles that underlie the curriculum for first-year composition courses, the idea of rhetoric and its cultural positioning of every negotiated act amidst the writing process is an embedded learned standard for higher education (Carter-Tod, 2022). Yet, high school graduates who have met the CCSS standards could still be set up to struggle in the first-year college composition course (Young, 2014). While the notion of at-risk students struggling in first-year college writing courses is not a new phenomenon, the gap between the common core preparation of students in their primary education and expectations set in their first-year college writing courses exacerbates the struggles that the cohort of at-risk student population face (Dix et al., 2020).

Social Context

There are very few activities in today's digital world that do not involve a form of reading, writing, and comprehension. Being a skilled reader and proficient writer is essential in all aspects of life, like checking social media, texting, emailing, etc. Nevertheless, writing is not a simple or single task. Writing is a recursive process in which writers sway back and forth along a writing continuum of various components: planning, drafting, sharing, evaluating, revising, editing, and submitting (Sanders et al., 2020). The process of writing begins almost as a conversation in which the speaker and the audience are present (Eodice et al., 2019). This relationship serves many purposes in and outside of a first-year writing composition course or higher education in general. Within the writing process, a problem is identified, explored, and defined; solutions are suggested, tested, and cast off or accepted (Sanders et al., 2020). Being proficient in the writing process gives an individual power over shaping their ideas clearly and concisely (Eodice et al., 2019). Students at risk in higher education have several factors in their lives that impact their lack of academic success (Horton, 2015). Creating avenues to develop writers' writing process, especially voice, is an educational goal for at-risk students enrolled in first-year writing composition courses (Wargo, 2020).

Students need time to write to foster writing abilities and understand the writing process. It is essential for writers to have time to engage in the recursive writing process and interact with teachers and peers concerning their writing, along with the purpose and intent behind what they are trying to achieve with that writing sample (Eodice et al., 2019). Writing centers offer writers the opportunity to interact with others about their writing in a non-evaluative platform (Lunsford, 1991). When students can share their progressing writing, it can serve as a stimulus for their writing process beyond what they are working on at that moment. This collaborative writing process helps writers find their voice as they are faced with making choice decisions (Maffetone

& McCabe, 2020). The writer's voice comes from the choices made while writing: the words, the organization, the content, etc. Every writer has a unique voice through their use of language, which can be particularly impactful for at-risk student populations (Horton, 2015). Since voice relies on the writer's background of experiences, knowledge of the subject, and attitude or beliefs toward the issue, the writer's agency is also nurtured when refining this craft within the writing process (Wargo, 2020).

Understanding one's worth through engaging in the writing process can help students gain confidence in their writing and energize them to persist in their education (Eodice et al., 2019). In addition to at-risk student populations being affected by the consistent struggle in their first-year writing college courses, institutions in higher education are seeking avenues to understand at-risk students' particular efforts to intervene with resources to help with persistence and retention (Horton, 2015). Public state universities are desperately trying to manage small budgets while maintaining high persistence and retention rates. To do this, evaluating student-centered resources is often necessary to see which resources have the most gains (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2018). At-risks college students are the most affected by the worsening gap between "college readiness" preparation and first-year writing college curriculum. Considering this reality, higher education institutions have the most benefit from this proposed research as they will be equipped with data to help them better understand the lived experience of at-risk students using a student-support service like a writing center.

Theoretical Context

Moving away from a prescriptive approach and emphasizing the importance of collaboration, dialogue, and individual agency, writing centers are student-centered and process-oriented student resources. Writing centers aim to be places where writers can engage in

conversations about their writing, and tutors act as fellow writers rather than authority figures (North, 1984). North (1984) is often considered the critical text in developing writing center theory and practice. Lunsford (1991) explored the ways in which writing center work traverses more significant debates around the concept of literacy and education in society, arguing that writing centers play a critical role in helping students become more critically literate and engaged community members. Other scholars who have contributed to the pedagogical work of writing centers include Boquet (1999), who argues that writing centers should focus on helping writers develop their own individual writing processes, and Grimm (1996), who emphasizes the importance of building a community of practice in the writing center. All of these are prime examples of a student-centered resource that has the ability to redirect assessment focus from course competence to the writer's perceived competence development through emphasizing the role of self-evaluation, coaching, and repeated practice (Schmidt & Alexander, 2012).

The theoretical work on self-efficacy and writing centers emphasizes the importance of providing writers with the individualized feedback and support they may not receive in their composition courses and helping them develop their agency and voice over their writing (Maffetone & McCabe, 2020; Wargo, 2020). By building writers' self-efficacy, writing centers can help instill greater confidence and independence in writers, which leads to improved writing proficiency and overall academic success (Bielinska-Kwapisz, 2015; Bond, 2019). The individualized feedback and support that writing centers offer also have the potential to build writers' self-efficacy, which is a crucial factor in the development of writing proficiency (Devet, 2015; Yancey et al., 2014). Even further, some studies have explored how writing center staff can build writers' self-efficacy through pedagogical approaches (Williams & Takaku, 2011). Writing center staff helping writers develop their agency and ownership over their own writing

helps achieve writers' self-efficacy, for example, by providing writers with strategies for goal setting, managing their writing process, and reflecting on their growth (Devet, 2015). In the setting of writing centers, self-efficacy is a principal factor that can influence a writer's confidence in their ability to write and, possibly more notably, their willingness to seek help from their writing center again.

The scholarly literature on the topic has identified several key findings. Writing centers positively impact at-risk students by improving their writing skills and overall academic performance (Bond, 2019; Eckstein et al., 2020). Additionally, writing centers provide at-risk students with a supportive and inclusive environment (Eckstein et al., 2020). In separate studies, a key finding is that writing centers have been found to help students develop self-efficacy by supporting their individual development as writers by giving them ownership over their work and individual progress (Boquet, 1999; Devet, 2015). Another key finding is that collaboration and dialogue are critical elements of pedagogical approaches for writing centers to be successful and effective (Grimm, 1996; North, 1984).

Conceptually, the growing body of research has investigated how writing centers can support at-risk students who are often less prepared for college-level writing; thus, they face various challenges in higher education coursework, specifically first-year college writing courses. Investigations focus on understanding the unique challenges that at-risk students face and how writing centers can help address these challenges. My study will focus on the narrower population of at-risk students, giving them the opportunity, in their own words, to express their lived experience of using the writing center and report on their self-efficacy developed, if any, through the collaborative approach the writing center used. By doing so, writing centers may

position themselves into a more centralized role in higher education by promoting academic success and retention for this cohort of students.

Problem Statement

The problem is that the at-risk student population consistently struggles in their first year writing college courses in higher education institutions. While higher education institutions have free student-centered support resources, like writing centers, at-risk student population cohorts often need more confidence and motivation to seek out such student resources independently (Nallaya et al., 2022). While some may imagine that the usefulness of a writing center is to enable student writers to produce "better" writing, their most efficient use is to train writers to be more confident in the collaborative process of writing and to transfer that confidence in writing to all their writing situations (Lunsford, 1991).

The traditional writing center framework is understood as an independent space, separate from the curriculum, where a student can work on writing abilities unattached to the subject matter (Kilgore & Cronley, 2021). The student is in charge of the collaborative session and sets the pace of the agenda. The literature supports the idea that the use of writing centers is critical to strengthening students' writing abilities within writing-intensive courses as they offer one-on-one help specific to writing, omitting the extra strain of content knowledge expectation (Shelley et al., 2020). Supporting at-risk student populations in higher education with writing centers has been studied (Heaser & Thoune, 2020; Wilder & Yagelski, 2018), as well as supporting at-risk student populations in higher education through building self-efficacy (Wei et al., 2022), but little in the realm of direct relationship between using writing centers to impact at-risk student populations writing performance through developing self-efficacy.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the beliefs and attitudes regarding higher education at-risk students' experiences with using their institution's writing center services in a public state university in the Northwestern United States. The participants in this study were purposefully selected based on the following criteria: students enrolled by an academic advisor in the English 110 Composition and ENGL 111 Writing Program. At this stage in the research, beliefs and attitudes will be generally defined as self-efficacy that is fostered through visiting an institution's writing center four times.

Significance of the Study

This study will contribute to the knowledge base of lived experiences of at-risk students in higher education using their institution's writing center, a voice that is not prominent in the current research. The resulting findings will inform higher education stakeholders about the specific benefits writing centers can offer this population of students. This study contributes to the literature from a theoretical, empirical, and practical perspective, as discussed below.

Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical significance of this study is rooted in participants' perceived self-efficacy influencing their writing performance (Bandura, 1997). Participants' sense of self-efficacy is promoted by utilizing their writing centers in higher education (Williams & Takaku, 2011). Self-efficacy is a person's belief in their ability to succeed in a particular situation, and, thus, has a significant impact on academic performance, including writing performance (Bandura, 1997). Students can become more confident and motivated writers, which leads to stronger writing skills and improved academic outcomes just by building students' self-efficacy in writing (Williams & Takaku, 2011). In context to writing, students can benefit from working in

collaborative writing groups, receiving feedback from peers, and engaging in reflective writing practices (Regaignon & Bromley, 2011). Students' confidence and writing skills are developed by working in a supportive and collaborative learning environment (Boquet, 1999).

Empirical Perspective

The research is empirically significant because it will add to the literature on how at-risk students perceive the utilization of their writing centers when it comes to self-efficacy and writing performance. Participants would reflect on their efficacy as first-year writing college students who visited their institution's collaborative writing center and reflect on how it motivated or encouraged their confidence in writing (Bandura, 1997). The research is limited regarding how at-risk student populations in higher education perceive writing centers influencing their self-efficacy and writing performance. As more students are entering higher education underprepared and deemed at-risk, additional research on finding cross-curricular solutions that not only help with improvements in their writing performance but their retention as well needs to be conducted (Devet, 2016). This study would add new research to the literature about writing centers' influence in higher education.

Practical Perspective

This transcendental phenomenological study, whose participant population consists of at-risk college students enrolled in a first-year writing course, aims to learn about their perceptions of a writing center's role in influencing their self-efficacy and writing performance at a public state university in the Inland Northwest Region of the United States. This study is particularly significant to the study’s site and other public state universities like it that have overwhelming large student cohorts that are deemed at-risk coupled with shrinking budgets to support them

(Gansemer-Topf et al., 2018). All the while, writing centers are often underutilized and outwardly perceived as simple editing services when in fact, they do much more (Boquet, 1999).

Research Questions

To understand the lived experiences of at-risk students who have visited their institution's writing center, the following central research question and sub-questions will guide this study.

Central Research Question

How can at-risk students be supported cross-curricularly by using their institution's writing center services?

Sub-Question One

What are the experiences of higher education at-risk students using their institution's writing center services?

Sub-Question Two

What attitudes do higher education at-risk students have toward using their institution's writing center services?

Sub-Question Three

What beliefs do higher education at-risk students have about using their institution's writing center services?

Definitions

1. *At-Risk Students* – Vulnerable student populations: academically underprepared students (DeNicco et al., 2015), racial minority students (Niu, 2015), first-generation college students (Cataldi et al., 2018), low socioeconomic status students (Sandoz et al., 2017), and nontraditional age students (Rabourn et al., 2015).

2. *First- Year Writing Course* – Also known as first-year writing, freshman composition or freshman writing; this course is a requirement of most college and university curricula in the United States and is the only specific course required of all students, regardless of their majors (Wilder & Yagelski, 2018).
3. *Self-Efficacy* – An individual's belief in their capacity to act in the ways necessary to reach specific goals, which include confidence in their ability to exert control over their own motivation, behavior, and social environment. (Bandura, 1997).
4. *Writing Center* – A space at most higher education institutions in the United States that aspires to strengthen writing pieces by collaborating with students to help them have a more defined understanding of their writing process (Carillo, 2020).
5. *Writing Center Pedagogy* – Advocates for a collaborative, nondirective teaching philosophy and prioritizes helping students with higher-order concerns such as structure and organization rather than lower-order concerns such as grammar and syntax (Liu & Harwood, 2022).
6. *Writing Performance* – A term used in first-year writing courses that encompasses a comprehensive evaluation of a student's writing abilities which takes into account the quality of the writing and the writer's ability to organize, develop, and support their ideas. By demonstrating these skills and abilities, students can successfully meet the expectations of the course and improve their writing skills (Wu & Schunn, 2021).

Summary

The unpreparedness of college-ready freshman students is daunting and continues to add to the at-risk student population enrolled in higher education; however, some resources can be used to support and improve this cohort's retention rates (Dix et al., 2020). More specifically,

researchers have acknowledged that writing centers can support at-risk students' success in first-year writing courses through their social and collaborative approach (Heaser & Thoune, 2020; Wilder & Yagelski, 2018). Studies have also found that writing centers have the ability to build a writer's self-efficacy (Devet, 2015; Wei et al., 2022; Yancey et al., 2014). The problem is that while the likelihood of incoming college freshmen being identified as at-risk is mounting, student-center resources like writing centers are under constant budget constraints having to appeal their worth to higher education administrations that impose the continuous threat of budget cuts (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2018). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study will be to describe the lived experiences of higher education at-risk students who have used their institution's writing center services. This chapter laid the foundation of past literature and will guide this study to offer new perspectives on the beliefs and attitudes of at-risk students enveloped through a writing center's approach.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A systematic review of the literature was conducted to explore higher education at-risk students' experiences with using their institution's writing center services in a public state university in the Northwestern United States. This chapter offers a review of the research on this topic. The self-efficacy theory is discussed in the first section, followed by a review of recent literature on writing center pedagogy and first-year writing college curriculum competencies. The literature review will discuss the relationship between developed self-efficacy's cross-curricular benefits on at-risk student populations. Lastly, a gap in the literature is identified pertaining to the student experience of integrating writing center pedagogy and resources into the first-year writing college curriculum of at-risk student population cohorts; this will aid in exploring the relationship between using writing centers to impact at-risk student populations in higher education cross-curricularly.

Theoretical Framework

There has been a growing interest in empirical research, both qualitative and quantitative, concerning the topic of implementing student-centered resources like writing centers to support students in higher education. Furthermore, at-risk student attrition has been a higher-order concern for higher education institutions for the last several decades (Hassel & Giordano, 2015). So much so, universities have been researching best practices to cross-curricularly support this cohort of students as more colleges face large cohorts of incoming first-year students struggling to meet college readiness competencies. Additionally, researchers have recently examined the validity and practical applicability of how a strong sense of self-efficacy motivates student success.

Self-Efficacy Theory

The concept of self-efficacy was first proposed in 1977 by Psychologist Albert Bandura (1977). Bandura employed social cognitive theory to frame self-efficacy theory (SET). Self-efficacy, then, is broadly defined as a learner's beliefs about their own judgment or aptitudes of their abilities to organize and implement courses of action required to achieve a designated goal (Bandura, 2007). The crucial claim of the self-efficacy theory was that students are more likely to engage in tasks that they believe they can complete successfully. This means that if an individual has high self-efficacy for a particular task, they are more likely to put in the effort and persevere through any challenges, resulting in improved performance. If an individual has low self-efficacy for a particular task, they may dodge it altogether or give up easily when faced with various challenges, resulting in poor performance (Bandura, 2007). Bandura's model suggests four conditions that must be present to stimulate a behavior change: *attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation* (Horsburgh & Ippolito, 2018). Bandura (2007) identified that a strong sense of self-efficacy is "concerned not with what one has but with belief in what one can do with whatever resources one can muster" (p. 646). Motivation is also a component of self-efficacy learning theory, along with regulating thought processes, performance levels, and emotional balance (Bandura, 2007).

Self-efficacy learning theory is associated with higher success as it can be applied to one's mental and physical health, academic success, professional choice, and socio-political engagement as it promotes a sense of strong, individual competence. As Bandura (1997) explained, self-efficacy promotes self-respect, self-regulation, and self-perception. These can be obtained from four basic sources: events directly experienced by the individual (mastery experiences), indirect experiences learned from others (vicarious experience), verbal persuasion,

and the emotional and psychological state of the individual (Bayir & Aylaz, 2021). Mastery experiences are the experiences gained when a new challenge is practiced and then accomplished, resulting in the acquisition of new skills; vicarious experiences are gained by observing a role model per se; verbal persuasions refer to the constructive impact that words have on someone's self-efficacy; and, lastly, the emotional and physiological state of the individual denotes the importance of overall health and well-being in the creation and continuance of self-efficacy (Ooi et al., 2021).

Over the last two decades, there has been a shift in thinking about how best to encourage student learning in higher education. Self-efficacy theory is one of those striking shifts as it challenges previous pedagogical thinking and practices by contributing to a redefinition of obtaining student success. For learners to gain knowledge and be successful, they must actively engage in arenas where there are opportunities for success, self-reflection, constructive feedback, and where self-efficacy itself is modeled. The concept of self-efficacy is connected to the issue of at-risk student populations' persistent struggle in first-year writing college courses, as well as how writing centers could be of use to support this specific cohort of students in higher education because, as Bandura (2007) suggests, one's confidence and a strong sense of agency to complete a task are paramount for success. Self-efficacy theory, by nature, is individual-centered and built on students' preexisting knowledge, which is similar to the goals of writing centers in higher education. Both foci are on active collaborative learning and reflective dialogue (Van Bergen & Parsell, 2018).

A student's development of self-efficacy is a central predictor of academic performance across time, through various environments, and in different groups (Ayllón et al., 2019). First-year writing courses are a requirement of most college and university curricula in the United

States and are the only specific course required of all students, regardless of their majors (Wilder & Yagelski, 2018). For an at-risk student in higher education, a failure in one vital area of college could mean dropping out entirely. English composition is a nexus, a key to retention, as it is both a point of failure and an opportunity to create university-wide skills for success. A minimal level of competency in English composition extends to practical writing skills that can cross curriculum and assist students in other areas of their coursework.

Related Literature

College-level writing is often a source of concern among undergraduates enrolled in public state universities. It can be an even heavier area of concern for the at-risk student population at those same universities, who may be starting college with many barriers and obstacles that very well jeopardize their ability to graduate. While defining the term *at-risk student populations* is exhaustive, it is a common theme that this populace of students often lacks a robust support system to help navigate the challenges of college, nor do they have firm convictions in their confidence to succeed (Ahn & Davis, 2023; Rheinheimer et al., 2010). First-generation students have a 92.2% higher dropout rate than students whose parents hold bachelor's degrees or higher. Students from low-income households are 79.3% more likely to drop out than those from higher-income households (Hanson, 2022). These statistics emphasize the potential for student support services, like writing centers (Bond, 2019), to help at-risk students attending public state universities. As the literature will discuss below, writing centers' have much to offer to support at-risk students in higher education through their collaborative approach, and high levels of self-efficacy have cross-curricular benefits for all students.

Self-Efficacy Beliefs

Bandura (1977) put forth self-efficacy beliefs that, when obtained, learners are better equipped to rely on their resourcefulness and ingenuity to affect their learning growth. The multidimensional construct of self-efficacy beliefs depends on personal factors (motivation, goal setting, attribution, and learning strategies) and social factors (Teng & Wang, 2023). Beliefs in this learning theory can also impact a learner's mental health in managing reactions to anxiety and stress (Teng & Wang, 2023). It is essential to recognize that personal factors and social factors interrelate and conjointly influence self-efficacy beliefs throughout an individual's life (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997).

Personal Factors

Personal factors are attributes, internal to the individual, that shape perceptions, thoughts, and behaviors which, in turn, influence self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997). Self-efficacy beliefs and motivation are heavily intertwined. As both Schunk (1991) and Zimmerman et al. (1992) found that students with strong self-efficacy are likely to be more motivated to engage in challenging tasks and show persistence when faced with obstacles. Students who believe that their efforts will lead to successful outcomes are more likely to set challenging goals for themselves. Goal setting is also a tenant of the self-efficacy belief system. Setting challenging yet attainable goals can enhance self-efficacy as it requires effort and skill development. Through this, students' belief in their ability to achieve specific goals increases (Bandura, 2001; Schunk, 2003). Those with high self-efficacy attribute their successes or failures to their own efforts, while those with low self-efficacy attribute the same outcomes to a lack of abilities. This is termed attribution in self-efficacy theory and can greatly impact one's self-efficacy beliefs (Zimmerman, 2002). Lastly, effective learning strategies, such as seeking feedback, practicing,

and using problem-solving techniques, can strengthen self-efficacy by providing confirmation of proficiency (Bandura, 2001).

Social Factors

Social factors involve interactions with the social environment, an external influence on the individual, and have a significant impact on an individual's self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997). Social modeling involves observing others who are successful at a particular task. As Teng and Wang (2023) study showed, when students see peers with similar abilities succeed, they are much more likely to believe in their own capacity to perform that task successfully. Along with social modeling, social comparison has the ability to strengthen self-efficacy. Students' self-efficacy is likely to be higher when they believe they are similar or more competent than their peers who have succeeded. Of the external influences on the individual concerning self-efficacy beliefs, social support is a significant contributor as it provides direct encouragement, reassurance, feedback, assistance, and support from others (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997). Finally, cultural and societal factors have an increasingly significant role in today's college student populations (Bikos et al., 2021). Cultural and societal factors can be defined as gender norms, societal stereotypes, and dominant beliefs about success and achievement within one's culture that influence individuals' confidence in their abilities and, thus, their self-efficacy (Pajares, 2002; Zimmerman et al., 1992).

Self-Efficacy Beliefs and Writing Performance

Self-efficacy beliefs shed light on writers' perceived metacognitive control over their behavior and performance (Ostergaard & Allan, 2016; Teng et al., 2022). These beliefs can predict learners' writing performance because self-efficacy judgments influence choices, expended effort, perseverance in tackling new writing tasks, and anxiety when sustaining

writing-related effort (Pajares & Johnson, 1996; Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997). Teng et al. (2018) examined the relationship between correlations of writing self-efficacy motivational beliefs and writing performance through model comparisons. The researchers found that writers with a strong sense of self-efficacy tend to have increased evidence of reflective thought during the writing process, demonstrated by processes like creating detailed outlines before writing and revising initial drafts more extensively (Teng et al., 2018). As presented by Teng and Wang (2023), learners' perceptions of their abilities in writing goals, tackling writing tasks, and weathering feedback in writing may determine writing outcomes. To complete a college-level writing task and translate thoughts, feelings, and ideas into written form, learners must successfully engage in three interconnected tasks: planning, transference of ideas, and reviewing the draft (Matzen, 2020; Ostergaard & Allan, 2016).

The planning phase requires writers to produce ideas, set goals for their writing task, and organize information. Next, the transference phase requires learners to transfer ideas into a textual product. Finally, the review stage involves revising the text. All of these phases explained above necessitate executive control over the writing process, showing the significance of self-efficacy beliefs and connected metacognitive strategies for writing (Ostergaard & Allan, 2016; Teng et al., 2022). Empirical studies have been conducted to explore the effects of self-efficacy beliefs on writing performance. For example, studies have found that self-efficacy beliefs had far more significant effects on writing achievement in a college English course for weaker students when compared to stronger students (Brouwer et al., 2016; Jones, 2008). Similarly, a study across the primary and secondary education continuum showed successful support for the effects of self-efficacy beliefs, specifically involving their influence on writing conventions (Zumbrunn et al., 2020).

Self-efficacy beliefs can vary in strength and application (Bandura, 2001). To measure the influence of self-efficacy beliefs on writing performance, the Writing Self-Regulatory Efficacy Scale was created to broaden self-efficacy beliefs and explore possible multidimensional outcomes (Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994). It involved 25 items students rated their perceived capabilities clustered under three broad categories: planning and revising their writing, confidence in writing achievement, and setting goals to manage writing activities (Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994). From there, writing self-efficacy assessments were created contingent on education level that evaluated writers' judgments of their confidence in applying grammar, usage, composition, and mechanical writing skills (Pajares & Johnson, 1996; Pajares, 2007).

More recently, research has found that gauging self-efficacy in academic writing can illuminate the challenges writers face in conducting writing and designing learning opportunities that develop self-efficacy beliefs can aid in academic success cross-curricular (De Clercq et al., 2018; Fokkens-Bruinsma et al., 2021). One study showed a positive correlation between student writers' self-efficacy and the specific aspect of writing, revision (Chen & Zhang, 2019). In other research, data from a writer self-efficacy scale showed a significant interrelationship between writing self-efficacy beliefs and motivation among university students (Teng et al., 2018). Comparably, a study found that a student's beliefs about their writing ability during a writing task had a direct bearing on the value writers assign to that task (Wright et al., 2019).

Writing Centers

Writing centers are spaces for students of all writing level abilities to receive collaborative feedback and guidance on assignments by tutors who may be undergraduate students, graduate students, or professionals (Kilgore & Cronley, 2021; Liu & Harwood, 2022).

While they may differ in daily practices, most writing centers in North America have closely aligned the tutor's role with a collaborative pedagogy and dialogic approach to learning (Aldohon, 2021; Carillo, 2020). In the public state university's case, a student may seek out the writing center for diverse reasons, if they seek them out at all. Common motivators for undergraduate students included being directed by professors for credit or encouraged by professors for extra credit (Maffetone & McCabe, 2020; Pfrenger et al., 2017), and graduate students were intrinsically compelled to strengthen their writing (McDaniel, 2018).

The Evolution of Writing Centers

An overview of the key stages in the evolution of writing centers is important to understand the impact that these student-centered resources could have on at-risk student populations today. Writing centers have late 19th-century origins where they were staffed by faculty members or graduate students who focused on individualized remedial help for struggling writers (Boquet, 1999; North, 1984). It was in the 1960s and 1970s that writing centers, influenced by the process movement in composition theory, shifted their focus to the writing process, encouraging students to engage in revision, multiple drafts, and peer collaboration (Harris, 1985; Jaffe et al., 2021). To further peer collaboration, peer tutoring was introduced to emphasize an academic space where students can learn from each other and support each other (Aldohon, 2021; Devet, 2015). A decade later, writing centers established a foothold in higher education as a valuable academic resource and grew in formalized programs and structures not only within their respective institutions but as a field in higher education with the founding, for example, of the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) (Grimm, 1996; Lunsford, 1991).

Writing centers expanded into multiliteracy and multimodal approaches to impart a broader understanding of writing to include diverse forms of communication in addition to the traditional print-based texts such as visual, digital, and oral communication skills (Bell & Hotson, 2021; Grouling & Grutsch McKinney, 2016). Currently, writing centers have increasingly focused on the themes of inclusivity and social justice to create equitable writing environments. The literature suggests a few ways this is being accomplished: delivering extended support for multilingual and international students, addressing issues of gender, race, and social justice within writing instruction, and promoting the inclusion of diverse voices and viewpoints (Carter-Tod, 2022; Eodice et al., 2019; Houston, 2021). Writing centers are spaces within higher education that have the ability to easily adapt and innovate their existence to respond to changing educational landscapes, technological advancements, and evolving student needs, all the while sharing the understanding of writing as a complex and social process through their individualized, collaborative support (Carter-Tod, 2022; Shafer, 2012).

Pedagogy

Writing center pedagogy is rooted in its purpose: to collaborate with students and have a conversation about writing and the writing process (Maffetone & McCabe, 2020). A writing center is a place for tutors or knowledgeable experts to observe a writer's process and offer validation while leaving corrections up to the writer. Ultimately it is a collaborative approach where writers talk with someone about their writing process while developing their writing with someone who can listen and offer feedback on the process (Lunsford, 1991; Luyt, 2022). Luyt (2022) found that similar to in-person writing center support, online writing center presence facilitated helping students see the intersections between their academic assumptions about knowledge and their own understanding of the writing process. It is as much a philosophy of

producing knowledge and communicating between students and staff as it is a physical space in an educational setting where these two groups meet (Lunsford, 1991).

Knowledgeable staff in writing centers work with students to identify and solve communication problems and evaluate and build a greater understanding of the writing process while being aware of and negotiating differences (e.g., disagreement, diversity, power differentials) (Eckstein, 2019). The redirection of writing center pedagogy has moved away from Storehouse and Garret Center ideas which are somewhat similar in that advice from knowledgeable staff is prescribed, and writing skills/strategies are provided to individual learners and settled on the Burkean Parlor Center (Lunsford, 1991), which illustrates this knowledge of discourse as a conversation that has already begun, long before any individual enters it, continuing long after they leave (Houston, 2021). Writing center pedagogy is highly sensitive to its practice of collaboration in regard to avoiding the reinforcement of hierarchies (e.g., a teacher-centered approach, tutor-centered approach) to achieve the Burkean Parlor Center in which knowledge is socially constructed, and power is constantly negotiated and shared between the parties involved. In this way, a careful, diligent form of collaboration is pursued at writing centers to foster student agency over their writing and their position within a history of evolving writing styles and norms (Houston, 2021). Maffetone and McCabe (2020) findings concluded that collaboration, without this sensitivity, has the ability to perpetuate the status quo and squelch diversity when writing center staff are not all aware of the power dynamic and the balance of control.

Current Practice

Current writing center pedagogy embraces a post-process approach to writing, meaning that writing is not a fixed system of prescribed rules for how a writer should communicate but

rather socially and politically embedded, that writing and truth, in general, are generated through a transactional context (Giaimo, 2019; Shafer, 2012). This post-process pursuit delineates itself against positivism and emphasizes instead the contingent nature of writing within the transactional context of the writer and audience. Shafer (2012) found a key component of the post-process approach to be, unequivocally, the pursuit of raising awareness of the political and ideological dimensions of any piece of writing. In this way, students learn how to keep their own voice while maintaining the ability to navigate academic discourse (Maffetone & McCabe, 2020; Pfrenger et al., 2017).

Writing centers in higher education institutions provide a range of support services to students to develop their writing skills. A comprehensive review of the literature reveals numerous ways writing centers operate as a student-centered resource in higher education, including individualized sessions, group sessions, workshops, and collaborating with faculty across disciplines. Most pertinent to this transcendental phenomenological qualitative study are their individualized sessions where students receive feedback on their various writing projects. Writing center staff collaborate with students to address specific writing concerns and offer guidance on high-level or low-level concerns to help students develop effective writing strategies (Farrell & Tighe-Mooney, 2015; Haen, 2021). These individualized sessions are frequently inclusive in their assistance as they offer specialized assistance for students of English as a Second Language (ESL). Writing center staff often have professional expertise in supporting non-native English speakers to offer guidance on academic conventions and language usage to help these students become more proficient English writers (Bell & Youmans, 2006; Jackson & Myatt, 2021; Mdodana-Zide & Mafugu, 2023). Although some scholars are advocating that this area could be developed further (Foung et al., 2022; Zhao, 2017).

Writing centers also offer group sessions and workshops on assorted writing-related topics. Group sessions and workshops seek to deliver practical tips and strategies to enhance student attendees writing (Efthymiou & Fallert, 2022; McKinley, 2011). Predictably, many writing centers successfully provide online services to support remote or distance learners (Harwood & Koyama, 2020). This may include video conferences (Kwan, 2023) and written feedback sessions allowing students to access the same writing assistance found on campus (Rambiritch & Carstens, 2022). Another avenue writing centers utilize to support students are through a collection of online style guides and grammar handbooks, which are available for students to consult for self-study (Bell & Hotson, 2021; Moghabghab et al., 2021). Existing studies did identify that writing centers do need to timely invest in the further development of these online materials to produce a more gainful experience for students (Bell & Hotson, 2021).

Collaboration is at the foundation of writing center work, and it does not stop at student support. Writing centers in higher education institutions collaborate with faculty members to support writing-intensive courses across disciplines (Fry et al., 2019). Writing center collaboration can be found with instructors to design writing assignments, to integrate writing instruction within specific subject areas, to help assess and evaluate student writing proficiency, and to contribute to ongoing discussions regarding writing instruction (Jaffe et al., 2021; Quynn, 2020). While the practices may vary across institutions, the field of writing center pedagogy continues to evolve as innovative research and best practices continue to emerge.

Professional-Staffed and Peer-Staffed

A review of the literature indicates that the staffing of writing centers around the United States typically falls into one of two typical categories: professional-staffed or peer-staffed. Depending on who is providing the writing support, the expertise each type brings to the center

has some key differences. While both structures adhere to the significant benchmarks of the collaborative student-centered resource, the choice between professional-staffed or peer-staffed depends on their respective educational institutions' needs for the writing center and the student population it serves (Latham & Ahern, 2013). Professional-staffed writing centers employ qualified, advanced degree-holding individuals with mastery in writing instruction, composition theory, and tutoring methods (Fels et al., 2021; Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2014; Sherwood, 2021). A writing center staffed by peers has undergraduate and graduate students who have shown exemplary writing skills (Carillo, 2020; Fitzgerald, 2022). Stock and Liechty (2022), through their study of transcripts analysis and a post-training survey, found peer-staff are in the same academic environment as their peers seeking writing assistance and are more apt to relate to the same challenges and concerns.

Numerous studies have examined the impact professional-staffed and peer-staffed writing centers can have. Professional staff in writing centers often possess a deeper understanding of writing theory, research, and best practices in the field (Fels et al., 2021; Kilgore & Cronley, 2021; Sherwood, 2021). Their feedback is more comprehensive, and their guidance and support are more holistic (Fels et al., 2021; Levin et al., 2021). A peer's expertise, however, is situated within their own experiences as writers and as students (Driscoll, 2015; Fitzgerald, 2022). This is manifested through their authentic insights and strategies shared based on their personal experiences (Driscoll, 2015; Stock & Liechty, 2022). While peer staff receives professional development, their principal contribution is that they are often more attuned to the immediate concerns of their peers (Stock & Liechty, 2022). Regardless of the structure, both peer-staffed and professional-staffed writing centers provide a student-centered resource that delivers support and guidance to individuals seeking assistance with their writing skills, offering resources,

feedback, and strategies to improve their written communication (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2013).

Collaboration

Through the use of these collaborative writing practices, students can see themselves as valued participants in their knowledge formation (Carillo, 2020; Jaffe et al., 2021). Furthermore, McDaniel (2018) found that writing at the college level requires consistent support over time, and writing centers can address cognitive and emotional barriers to writing to aid in advancing the students' writing process. Specifically, to help with the writing process, the writing center experience, with its integrated collaborative space, can improve students' "rhetorical attunement, awareness of audience, and agency over their writing" (Maffetone & McCabe, 2020, p. 53).

A collaborative writing center experience can be achieved in several different ways. One study found three emerging themes to achieve this collaborative writing center experience: active listening to the writer, confidence building, and collaborating on the writer's goals (Aldohon, 2021). While writing centers offer an enriched experience through collaborative feedback, the multiple and continued visits to writing centers permit writers to adopt a more sophisticated understanding of writing and view themselves as capable writers (Maffetone & McCabe, 2020; Pfrenger et al., 2017). The prescribed level of ideal interaction from the writing center tutor to the writer within a session varies within the literature from the tutor should intervene as little as possible (Aldohon, 2021) to a deliberate collaboration that is case-by-case based on the writer's needs (Jaffe et al., 2021) to there are no parameters clearly defined around the level of interaction within the collaborative effort at all (McDaniel, 2018).

Writing Centers Misunderstood

Collaboration and discussion may be at the foundation of writing center success as viewed from within, but not all students, faculty, nor administrators fully understand the Center's purpose and the full range of support (Kilgore & Cronley, 2021). Many within the public state university community and beyond are still unaware of their pedagogy and abilities. Faculty and students alike often perceive writing centers as a place for struggling students to get help fixing their papers. Professors commonly encourage their struggling students to seek out their university's writing center, which perpetuates this misunderstanding between what the writing center is and what, in theory, it does—to support writers of all abilities and of all levels (Giaimo, 2019; Morrison & Nadeau, 2003). When endorsing the student-centered resource as simply a fix-it shop, there is a missed opportunity to edify and normalize the writing center as a space for collaboration and feedback, two vital components of the writing process (Harris, 1985; North, 1994).

This misunderstanding of the writing center is also perpetuated in student experiences with the centers, as one study found that students wanted to use the writing center to improve their grades and did not necessarily weigh in improving their writing performance long term (Denny et al., 2018). When engaging with first-year writing programs, offering a training process for new instructors with tutoring demos and a tutorial on writing center philosophy helped create an informed relationship between instructors and the Center staff (Maffetone & McCabe, 2020; Wargo, 2020). This training also resulted in instructors seeing writing center staff as experts who could help their students develop their writing as opposed to editing (Maffetone & McCabe, 2020). A different tactic to aid in the campus-wide comprehension of writing center services is to ally with similar student-support services with similar knowledge goals.

Student-support services with similar knowledge goals being grouped or housed together is often a theme at public state universities in an attempt to create ease of access and usability. Through the similar knowledge goal of literacy, clarity in what the writing center experience is can be obtained: where research (library) meets writing (writing center) in one convenient place to create a common language for all members at their institution to access these interconnected resources (McDaniel, 2018). McDaniel (2018) relied on research methodologies from writing center scholarship to explore models for integrated graduate student literacies to apply integrated academic literacies and threshold concept constructs to the development of student literacies. Although it was not the intent of their research, a study found that universities that had their writing center housed within a multi-subject learning center showed a significant and positive correlation between frequent writing center visits with greater academic success for students enrolled in developmental writing courses (Pfrenger et al., 2017). Despite their statistically supported academic success, writing centers and as well as other student support services continue to be a place that is misunderstood on public state university campuses (Giaimo, 2019). This could be attributed to its continual marginalization as they do not offer grades or evaluative assessment (Maffetone & McCabe, 2020; Shelley et al., 2020), making their academic goals an immeasurable construct of the collaborative experience.

Writing Centers and Self-Efficacy

The existing body of literature offers worthwhile insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with writing centers influencing college students' self-efficacy, offering potential avenues for future research. Through writing centers' diverse support, whether staffed by peers or professionals, students receive guidance and feedback on their writing to navigate various aspects of writing and the writing process, which has been shown quantitatively through

surveys to positively impact their self-efficacy beliefs (Epstein & Draxler, 2020). As a result of knowledgeable and constructive feedback throughout their writing process, students can gain confidence in their writing abilities which is another way writing centers can be utilized to increase self-efficacy (Bergey et al., 2019; Haen, 2021). Furthermore, by means of individualized sessions, students participate in developing their writing techniques and composition strategies (Farrell & Tighe-Mooney, 2015; Haen, 2021; Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2022). When they apply these learned skills, Epstein and Draxler (2020) research discovered that student writers are more likely to perceive themselves as competent writers, enhancing their self-efficacy in future writing tasks.

Through the work within individualized support at writing centers, students are offered a medium to recognize their capabilities and strengths (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2013; Schmidt & Alexander, 2012). Indeed, empirical research shows a positive impact on students' self-efficacy by offering a space that provides concentrated assistance based on their unique writing obstacles and concerns (Williams & Takaku, 2011). Writing centers can serve as a supportive space within higher education where students can express their writing anxieties and receive encouraging and empathetic feedback (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2013). (Ekholm et al., 2015). Implementing the Writing Feedback Perceptions Scale, an adapted version of the Self-Efficacy for Writing Scale, and the Writing Self-Regulation Scale, Ekholm et al. (2015) revealed validation of students' efforts helps them overcome self-doubt, build confidence in their writing abilities, and operate as a nurturing environment. Writing centers, especially peer-staffed writing centers, design a setting for role modeling, which contributes to increased self-efficacy (Callinan et al., 2018). Interacting with peers, or writing staff trained to promote the collaborative model, can spark and motivate students to believe in their own potential (Bielinska-Kwapisz, 2015;

Ekholm et al., 2015). Writing centers' impact on self-efficacy may vary depending on student experiences, institutional goals, staff effectiveness, and other circumstantial factors.

First-Year Writing College Curriculum

The academic rigor of college-level coursework alone can lead to several challenges and struggles for incoming college freshmen; however, additionally, when high schools are not adequately preparing students for college, it can affect those students greatly (Jack & Sathy, 2021). This often can lead to freshmen not keeping up with their coursework, receiving poor grades, and lacking confidence in their abilities (Jack & Sathy, 2021). Writing is a process, and trusting the writing process to gain transferable knowledge is crucial to the first-year writing course (Matzen, 2020). This means that students must learn to trust themselves as writers and trust their abilities (Taczak, 2022). This is hard to achieve if their confidence is taxed.

First-year writing courses, also known as freshman composition courses, are classes that are typically required for all students in their first year of college or university (Wilder & Yagelski, 2018). They are designed to build the fundamental skills needed for college-level writing and research (Spier, 2021; Wilder & Yagelski, 2018). These classes aim to help students develop the ability to write clear, well-organized, and analytical essays that are based on researched evidence and rhetorically situated (Graham & Perin, 2007; Wilder & Yagelski, 2018). First-year writing courses concentrate on the writing process, including planning, drafting, and revising. These courses also present students with the conventions of academic writing, for example, the use of appropriate tone, structure, and style (Ostergaard & Allan, 2016). First-year writing courses hold an essential role in higher education to prepare students for success in their academic and professional pursuits (Darling-Hammond, 2017). Ostergaard and Allan (2016) five-year study found classes closely aligned with their institution's first-year writing program's

focus on rhetoric, research, revision, and reflection along with an added multiple-layer of support to be most beneficial for vulnerable students. With their cross-curricular importance, first-year writing courses offer valuable writing knowledge and practices that transfer into other college classes and beyond (Taczak, 2022; Wilder & Yagelski, 2018).

Challenges in Curriculum

The first-year writing college curriculum has been subject to various criticisms and challenges within the literature that are important to recognize as they affect at-risk students' success and overall writing performance (Heard, 2014; Lynch, 2012; Mills et al., 2019). Much of first-year writing programs have a standardized curriculum, which limits the ability of educators to modify a course that best meets the needs and curiosities of each student. This lack of flexibility can result in an inability to meet the diverse writing abilities and backgrounds of individual students (Wargo, 2020; Wilder & Yagelski, 2018). This one-size fits all curriculum increases the undesired outcome of disengagement as the curriculum may not align with the experiences, interests, and cultural backgrounds of the students, thus, leaving them unmotivated and struggling to connect with readings and prompts (Armstrong et al., 2021; Estrem et al., 2018). One study criticizes first-year writing college classes as gatekeeper-oriented courses that have not so eloquently or successfully engulfed the instruction of competencies in both reading and writing (Armstrong et al., 2021).

Other scholars in the field argue that the first-year writing college curriculum needs to put more emphasis on multimodal and digital literacies such as writing for online platforms, communicating with visual components, and offering a deeper understanding of digital rhetoric (Dickinson & Werner, 2015; Rodrigue, 2017). Moreover, there is support for the first-year writing college curriculum to further address the transference of writing skills across disciplines

and into professional theaters (Mills et al., 2019; Sommers & Saltz, 2004). On this theme, there is criticism that first-year writing courses put too much emphasis on general writing skills and that they do not adequately prepare students for the specific writing demands of their chosen discipline and varying genres (Hassel & Giordano, 2015). Driscoll and Cui (2021) found that 78% of instances of writing transfer were invisible to undergraduate students.

Co-Requisite Courses

While the criticisms and challenges of first-year writing college curricula vary across institutions and programs, one way the field reconciles these challenges is with co-requisite courses. When students score below standards in English or mathematics, students are required by their university to complete remedial courses. Traditional remediation costs students time and increased tuition. To raise degree completion rates, other avenues are explored to help students get remediation benefits without the added delay of college-level credit coursework (Barhoum, 2017; Martorell & McFarlin, 2011). One increasingly popular option is co-requisite remediation, as mentioned by Adams (2020) and Parisi and Fogelman (2021), where college students register for remedial courses alongside their college-level coursework. There are many variations when researchers refer to a corequisite remediation model; however, it often means up to a three-credit college workshop course paired with the institution's English or math first-year courses (Adams, 2020; Parisi & Fogelman, 2021).

Co-requisite courses such as writing labs and tutoring have become an important complement to first-year writing courses to support at-risk students (Heaser & Thoune, 2020). These courses provide additional support and help to develop students' writing skills. Co-requisite courses have gained popularity recently as a strategy for improving student success rates in higher education to help at-risk students who struggle with foundational or gateway

courses on their journey to complete their degree programs (Heaser & Thoune, 2020; Petillo & Anuszkiewicz, 2023). These courses positively impact student writing skills as they provide more personalized feedback and support (Adams, 2020; Harrington & Rogalski, 2020). Co-requisite courses have recently gained popularity in various institutions across the United States as a strategy for improving student success in college (Petillo & Anuszkiewicz, 2023). This popularity in higher education of co-requisite courses reflects a mounting recognition of the need to provide additional support to at-risk students.

Co-requisite courses do their remediation contemporaneously, eliminating the time lag and, thus, reducing the opportunity for renewed skills to fade out before they are needed (Adams, 2020; Coleman & Smith, 2021; Drysdale & McBeath, 2018). In addition, students may be able to use their time more efficiently, focusing their efforts on the specific content they need for their college courses (Kane et al., 2021). The results of corequisite remediation have demonstrated a streamlined pathway for completing developmental and freshman requirements, reducing the number of exit points, and attaining better retention and graduation rates (Jaggers et al., 2015; Xu, 2016). The structure replaces the traditional remedial (developmental) course in English and mathematics. The co-requisite design's unique challenge is combining two classes, developmental and disciplinary content, which requires instructors to figure out how to integrate the two courses and what to prioritize (Avni & Finn, 2021). Other significant challenges in implementing co-requisite models include limited buy-in among faculty, advisors, and students, scheduling and advising logistics issues, and limited preparation and support for model design and instruction (Adams, 2020; Woods et al., 2019).

Curriculum changes like co-requisite offerings demand a sensitive new awareness of the purpose of why college remediation exists. Essentially moving away from the practice of

blocking underprepared students from taking college-level courses until they appear ready to the practice of boosting the likelihood that these same students will complete their first college-level courses without interruption by the concurrent enrollment of a co-requisite (Avni & Finn, 2019). Numerous studies have examined the impact of corequisite remediation and have consistently shown that it is more effective than traditional remediation (Brown & Bickerstaff, 2021; Woods et al., 2019). At the same time, more than one study has shown that academically underprepared students profit from a concentrated focus on building fundamental academic skills through a remedial series (Barhoum, 2017; Coleman & Smith, 2021). It is necessary to understand how academically vulnerable students are best served in higher education, and a growing body of evidence demonstrates that this corequisite configuration prepares students to be more successful in their college-level courses. Research also suggests that these benefits are seen across various corequisite remediation models. Furthermore, corequisite remediation is more effective for all demographic groups, including English language learners, compared with traditional prerequisite models (Avni & Finn, 2021; Xu, 2016).

Combining corequisite remediation with other interventions, such as comprehensive student support, may increase its long-term effectiveness. Newer research addresses questions of institutional responsibility for establishing a culturally responsive and supportive climate for learning (Brown & Bickerstaff, 2021; Museus et al., 2017). This cultural reform may mean reframing remedial support beyond the faculty-driven classroom. One study examined a partnership between academics and student-support services designed to incorporate diversity and access to shift learning purposes beyond institutional priorities for speedy remedial exits and lead students to have confidence in their abilities (Keith et al., 2020; Parisi & Fogelman, 2021). Research shows that tutoring benefits students' confidence and positively impacts their academic

performance despite the existing barriers, including readiness and lack of significant resources (Fernández-Martín et al., 2022; Heaser & Thoune, 2020).

Writing Performance and Cross-Curriculum Benefits

An extensive review of the literature acknowledges several key themes related to strong writing skills' cross-curriculum benefits. Cross-curricular is an educational approach that emphasizes the interconnectedness of knowledge by combining content, skills, and concepts from multiple academic disciplines (da Silva-Branco & Woods-McConney, 2021). Writing is the fundamental form of communication in academia (Graham & Harris, 2016). When a student has strong writing skills, they are able to effectively communicate their ideas and arguments and convey complex concepts and theories (Murphree, 2015). A study conducted by Abad-Jorge and Kronenburg (2020) examined the impact of writing skills on students' achievement in a capstone project proposal for the healthcare management field. The researchers found that developed writing skills helped students expand their knowledge of the healthcare system as well as their leadership and problem-solving skills. Moreover, research conducted by Tila (2022) has highlighted the positive impact of writing across the curriculum. The study focused on the benefits of assigning writing in economics courses and found enhanced comprehension and critical thinking abilities across different subject areas.

Writing assignments in first-year writing college curricula often require students to gather, evaluate, and synthesize evidence, students can practice their critical thinking skillfulness within higher education (Wilder & Yagelski, 2018). These critical thinking and analysis skills are transferable across disciplines within higher education, allowing students to approach problems and topics from many-sided perspectives (Del Col et al., 2021; Graham et al., 2020). Researchers have found that this holistic understanding allows students to bring forward a more

comprehensive and nuanced analysis of complex issues as well as increases components of their overall well-being (Del Col et al., 2021; Trolian & Jach, 2022).

Strong writing skills paired with the know-how to research facilitate a student's ability to locate, evaluate, incorporate, analyze, and synthesize relevant sources, which supports this idea of students being able to present their findings in a coherent and organized manner within academia (Seifert et al., 2019). Many academic disciplines beyond English Composition obligate students to formulate arguments that are persuasive and logical. Strong writing skills can help students with peer collaboration as it extends the ability to communicate their ideas effectively, bridge gaps in knowledge, and facilitate meaningful connections between individuals with different backgrounds and areas of expertise (Murphree, 2015; Murray et al., 2022). Liszka et al. (2022) study showed that students working in interdisciplinary teams to propose solutions to the problem showed appreciation for the contributions of their peers, valued the opportunity to work with others from other disciplines, and had gainful individual learning growth. Furthermore, as Murray et al. (2022) found, this collaboration fosters real-world challenges that require creativity, teamwork, and the ability to tackle complex problems collectively. Students who develop these transferable cross-curricular skills are academically and professionally better equipped to adapt to different disciplines and approach unfamiliar subjects and interdisciplinary projects with confidence (Taczak, 2022; Wilder & Yagelski, 2018).

At-Risk Student Populations

At-risk students in higher education are individuals who may have challenges or barriers to success in their academic pursuits. While these challenges and barriers can be defined in a myriad of ways, it is often found that they include at least one of these criteria: a lack of financial resources, inadequate academic preparation, and personal and familial responsibilities (Chen &

Nunnery, 2019). Thus, students who often struggle in higher education might include those who come from low-income families, have limited educational opportunities, have limited access to resources and support services, and/or face other personal or societal barriers (Dix et al., 2020). Researchers have steadily uncovered that low-income and first-generation college students are much more likely to be racially minoritized, immigrants, parents, and often older than their peers (Chen & Nunnery, 2019; Perez et al., 2021).

A significant factor that contributes to the struggles of at-risk students in higher education is financial restrictions. Many at-risk students come from low-income families, which can make it difficult to afford tuition, fees, and all other expenditures associated with higher education (Dix et al., 2020). In 2015, 31% of students enrolled in United States postsecondary education were low-income college students whose family income was less than the federal poverty level (Chen & Nunnery, 2019); in the last 11 years, this number has been growing (Perez et al., 2021). Many at-risk students in higher education are from underfunded and underperforming school districts, so they might have a different level of skills and educational knowledge than their peers. These underfunded and underperforming school districts are also less likely to offer advanced coursework and extracurricular activities that aid in college readiness (Dix et al., 2020). This cumulative impact of a lack of financial resources, inadequate academic preparation, and personal and familial responsibilities, along with class or race marginality, can be strenuous on at-risk students and decrease their self-efficacy and sense of belonging in higher education (Ardoin et al., 2019; Jury et al., 2017; Perez et al., 2021).

To help at-risk students in higher education succeed, it is vital for colleges and universities to deliver accessible support and resources. Due to jobs or personal obligations to their family, at-risk students may find it challenging to attend high-impact practices hosted by

their institution, known to promote retention (Ardoin et al., 2019; Perez et al., 2021). Thus, colleges offer wide-ranging academic and personal support services, including academic tutoring and advising, as well as financial and career counseling tailored to at-risk students' needs and availabilities (Perez et al., 2021). Mentoring opportunities also benefit at-risk students' success in higher education by connecting them with professionals who can provide guidance and encouragement (Means & Pyne, 2017). At-risk students also profit from college policies and practices that foster a sense of belonging and community on campus, like college initiatives that promote inclusivity and celebrate diversity and student organizations or clubs (Pedler et al., 2022). A sense of belonging and community at the college they attend has a positive impact on the academic outcomes of all students, especially those who are at risk, by aiding in their academic persistence (Ahn & Davis, 2023; Pedler et al., 2022).

Studies have proven that at-risk students who use support services offered by their institutions are more likely to persevere in their studies and reach their academic goals (Heaser & Thoune, 2020; Nallaya et al., 2022). For example, a study at a college in the Midwest region of the United States found that at-risk students who participated in a comprehensive college transition program that ensured integration of these student-centered resources were more likely to persist in their studies and earn a degree or certificate than those who did not participate in the program (Perez et al., 2021). However, significant studies like Dix et al. (2020) are being conducted in higher education to explore the descriptions and understandings of higher education professionals who support at-risk students and are finding that there are conflicting views of the at-risk definition and efforts to normalize at-risk.

At-risk students, who may face challenges or barriers to success in their academic pursuits, often struggle in first-year writing college classes (Darling-Hammond, 2017). These

classes are required for all students and are designed to build the fundamental skills necessary for college-level writing and research (Wilder & Yagelski, 2018). Yet, at-risk students may need more academic preparation or familiarity with academic writing conventions making it difficult for them to succeed in these first-year writing college classes (Dix et al., 2020; Heaser & Thoune, 2020). First-year writing classes can also be specifically challenging for at-risk students because they will most likely be required to write about personal or, in many cases, sensitive topics (Ostergaard & Allan, 2016) which may elicit feelings of exposure or distress. Another specific challenge is the added pressure of the unfamiliar expectations of the class and the professors (Nallaya et al., 2022).

Given these challenges or barriers to success, first-year writing classes must be structured and taught in an inclusive and accessible way for at-risk students (Nallaya et al., 2022). This incorporates additional campus support and resources, such as writing centers (Lunsford et al., 2013), tutoring (Gibbons, 2014), and workshops (McKinley, 2011). Moreover, creating an inclusive classroom and supportive environment (Lloyd, 2017) can benefit at-risk students by making them feel comfortable and more confident in their writing abilities.

COVID-19 Influence on At-Risk Student Populations

The novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) wreaked havoc on nearly every sector of the world and expanded prevailing inequalities that persist regarding at-risk student populations in higher education. Some sources have identified the COVID-19 pandemic as a ‘wicked problem’ (El Masri & Sabzalieva, 2020; Sezen-Barrie et al., 2023). Wicked problems are understood as complex, unique, and nonlinear that tend to highlight pre-existing struggles in a community (Sezen-Barrie et al., 2023). If the solutions to a wicked problem are not provided quickly, they can have long-term harm on the community (Peters, 2017).

Most scholars exploring this field of research focused on identifying the range of impact COVID-19 has had or will have on students. Numerous studies on this topic have similar findings in that COVID-19 considerably affected people's mental health and behavior (Gazmararian et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2021; Voltmer et al., 2021). More specifically, studies showed increased levels of stress and anxiety have persisted, as well as depressive symptoms among college students due to technological concerns, being away from home, practicing social isolation, reduced income, and uncertainty about their university education and future employment (Browning et al., 2021; Xiong et al., 2020). Similarly, Lederer et al. (2021) study determined that COVID-19 has significantly disrupted college students' lives and that the significant health risks they already faced have worsened. Vulnerable populations in higher education are growing as many more college students are suffering from increasing amounts of mental health conditions, especially anxiety and depression (Lederer et al., 2021; Lipson et al., 2019). This notable concern is mounting as mental health problems have been connected to decreased academic success rates (Eisenberg et al., 2009).

COVID-19 impacts have been observed in universities across the world (Browning et al., 2021; Keržič et al., 2020). Of note, the declining mental health of college students had been on the rise even before the pandemic, with students reporting increased levels of anxiety, depressive moods, and lack of self-esteem (Eisenberg et al., 2009; Holm-Hadulla & Koutsoukou-Argyraki, 2015). Therefore, students now need additional resources and services to deal with the pandemic's physical and mental health repercussions to succeed in college (Browning et al., 2021; El Masri & Sabzalieva, 2020). COVID-19 particularly intensified inequalities for students from marginalized groups and low-income students by emphasizing issues of enduring problems

such as equity and diversity within higher education (Milliken et al., 2020; Oleschuk, 2020; Sotto-Santiago et al., 2021).

Post-Pandemic Student Services Role

A considerable body of literature supports prioritizing and expanding student support services to mitigate this COVID-19 negative influence on college student populations (El Masri & Sabzalieva, 2020; LeViness et al., 2019; Sezen-Barrie et al., 2023). LeViness et al. (2019) found, however, that student demand for services surpasses campus resources available. With enduring budget cuts for institutions in higher education, studies concluded that these student-centered resources must be prioritized and invested in to foster student success (El Masri & Sabzalieva, 2020; Lattie et al., 2019). College resources do need to use innovative approaches for adapting their services (Lattie et al., 2019), like using new methods to locate students at risk and connect them to services (Brown, 2018). Recognizing that the most marginalized student populations in higher education were disproportionately affected by COVID-19, it is crucial to create spaces where students can participate in relaxed collaborative and informal mentoring activities to aid in equitable opportunities and bridge achievement gaps (Howley, 2020; Lipson et al., 2018).

Summary

Within higher education, self-efficacy is a significant predictor of academic performance, particularly for at-risk students who lack the necessary tools and skills to succeed in college-level courses; however, at-risk students often have low levels of self-efficacy or minimal belief in their abilities to achieve a specific goal or task (Nallaya et al., 2022; Perez et al., 2021). This can be severely evident in first-year writing courses, as academic writing is a complex skill that requires confidence and belief in one's abilities. It makes sense then that when at-risk students develop

high levels of self-efficacy, they are more likely to be more confident and motivated in their first-year writing courses and overall writing performance.

Writing centers provide a supportive environment where at-risk students can receive guidance, feedback, and support to help develop their writing abilities and personal skills like confidence and motivation. In congruence with the principles of self-efficacy theory, writing centers are a community within higher education that has the ability to encourage a sense of belonging as at-risk students see their own progress and, through individualized feedback, receive recognition for their struggles and efforts (Chen & Nunnery, 2019). The relationship between at-risk students in higher education, self-efficacy, and writing performance is complex and multifaceted. However, the potential for writing centers to bridge this under-preparedness plays a critical role in determining the academic success of at-risk students, chiefly their writing performance (Ardoin et al., 2019)

Using self-efficacy theory, the reviewed literature discusses how writing center use affects at-risk students' performance as writers in their first-year college writing courses. Supporting at-risk student populations in higher education with writing centers has been studied (Heaser & Thoune, 2020; Wilder & Yagelski, 2018) and their effectiveness at supporting at-risk student populations in higher education through building self-efficacy (Wei et al., 2022). But little in the realm of understanding the essence of at-risk student populations' lived experiences from using writing centers to impact cross-curricular writing performance through developing self-efficacy has been studied.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of at-risk students experiences with using their institution's writing center services in a public state university in the Northwestern United States. At-risk students' persistence and retention continue to be a concern within higher education, especially concerning writing performance (Devet, 2016; Dix et al., 2020). This chapter serves to present the methodology and research design for this study. The necessary elements are organized into the following sections: research design, research questions, setting and participants, researcher positionality, procedures, data collection plan, trustworthiness, and summary. These sections help readers understand the steps of this research and the research design procedures that were conducted. Moreover, they justify the reasonings behind the procedures that were conducted and explain the data analysis from the researcher's perspective.

Research Design

A transcendental phenomenological design was used for this study as it is a philosophical approach to qualitative research that seeks to understand the human experience through individuals' perceptions and shared experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Using its philosophically complex principles—epoche, noema, noesis, noeses, and noetic-- transcendental phenomenology enhanced the study of human experiences through its methodologies (Moustakas, 1994). Chiefly, transcendental phenomenology is rooted in the idea that a researcher sets aside all bias or predetermined ideas, the epoche, to see the phenomena through a naive lens, thus allowing the essence or true meaning of the phenomena to surface (Moustakas, 1994). Epoche is a researcher's complex, ongoing, mindful process of intentional acts to identify and quarantine naturally

occurring thought patterns of beliefs, thoughts, or judgments to achieve a pure data collection that unveils the phenomena' meaning (Moustakas, 1994).

The noema is not the actual object but the phenomenon that is experienced, illustrated as "not the tree but the appearance of the tree" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 29). Noema (or noematic meaning) meaningfully attributes significance to what the individual sees, thinks, touches, or senses. (Moustakas, 1994). As noema is the perception of the object, noesis is the functionality of the consciousness. In other words, the way the thing is perceived and its correlation to its experience. This way, "for every noema, there is noesis; for every noesis, there is a noema" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 30). Noesis is expressed as "bring into being the consciousness of something" (p. 69) and, thus, understood as how a noema is experienced. These tenets of transcendental phenomenology are essential to understanding this type of study's design. To put it succinctly, noema is the observable phenomenon; noesis is the inner construction that initiates the interpretation of the noema; the noetic framework produces noematic meaning; and the epoche safeguards the process (Moustakas, 1994).

I conducted a qualitative phenomenological study that explored the beliefs and attitudes regarding at-risk students' experiences with using their institution's writing center services to give power to those underrepresented voices in higher education and glean a better understanding as to how the writing center can be more supportive or accessible to this cohort of students. The transcendental phenomenological approach was well suited for my research as it aimed to understand several individuals' shared experiences of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using psychologist Moustakas's (1994) approach with its methodical steps concerning data analysis procedure and guidelines for constructing the descriptions, I was able to study the participants' shared experience of using the writing center. I am confident in my

abilities as an unbiased researcher to have analyzed the data into themes to form textural descriptions of what participants experienced and structural descriptions of those experiences. Both these textural and structural descriptions helped me understand the essence of the experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Transcendental phenomenology was practical for this study as this style provides logical, methodical, and consistent design elements that guided the formation of an essential description of the experience. What is critical to the transcendental phenomenology approach was identifying a phenomenon to understand (which I did) and having individuals who could provide a description of what they had experienced (which I accomplished). From this, two questions were asked, the "how" and "what" that was experienced, which provided the concrete framework for unveiling the essence of the phenomenon.

Research Questions

The study was guided by one central question and three sub-questions. The study's findings provided a discussion and some answers to the following questions:

Central Research Question

How can at-risk students be supported cross-curricular by using their institution's writing center services?

Sub-Question One

What are the experiences of higher education at-risk students using their institution's writing center services?

Sub-Question Two

What attitudes do higher education at-risk students have toward using their institution's writing center services?

Sub-Question Three

What beliefs do higher education at-risk students have about using their institution's writing center services?

Site and Participants

Higher education institutions continually seek knowledge regarding why students are not persisting to graduation to increase retention (Evans et al., 2020). Writing centers support all students in ways that surpass simply writing performance. At-risk students are among the student population at public state universities who struggle with writing performance and need more confidence to seek out student-centered resources like writing centers. This study provided a better understanding of this population's writing performance and level of self-efficacy after visiting their institutions' writing center. The purpose of this section is to describe the setting and participants that form an integral part of any phenomenological study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This chapter also characterizes the participants with a specific focus on the criteria for being selected in the research study. By conducting research at a public state university that is that state's premier public diversity-serving institution, in which 1 in 3 students are from diverse backgrounds, and over 50 percent are the first in their families to attend college, the data collected showcases information needed to establish abundant themes. Furthermore, the information gathered was utilized to demonstrate how writing centers improve student persistence in this demographic and increase retention rates.

Site

The site for the research in this study was a corequisite English course paired with its institution's writing center at Ponderosa University, a public state university in the Northwestern United States. Ponderosa University is located in an urban-rural city with roughly 13,000

residents; however, it is an estimated 20 miles from one of the state's larger cities and is revered for its commitment to providing accessible and affordable education to a diverse student body. It offers various undergraduate and graduate programs across disciplines, including education, business, health sciences, engineering, and liberal arts. This site was chosen for this project because this public state university in The Northwestern United States is recognized for its student population being first-generation college students from diverse backgrounds and nontraditional students; thus, many of its incoming first-year students are deemed at-risk. The university has a diverse student population, attracting students from various backgrounds and disciplines. The total student enrollment is approximately 11,000, including undergraduate and graduate students. The university offers a wide range of academic programs across multiple disciplines, particularly emphasizing liberal arts and sciences. The necessary permissions and approvals were obtained from the university administration and relevant institutional groups to gain access to Ponderosa University.

The corequisite English course, which we called ENGL 110, is a shift in its approach to developmental writing. Instead of underprepared writers enrolling in a pre-college, non-credit-bearing composition course, they are registered in what will be referred to as Writing Program (W.P.). This W.P. is designed to offer students whose writing placement scores would have placed them into non-credit-bearing composition courses an opportunity to enroll in a credit-bearing, first-year composition course with paired 2-credit supplemental instruction. The curriculum for this supplementary instruction course focuses on clarifying, expanding upon, and modeling the writing assignments required in a credit-bearing, first-year composition course; required one-on-one sessions at the writing center support this coursework. The institution's writing center is located in a Learning Commons. Across the nation, Learning Commons are

highly revered as allocated spaces in campus libraries that spark collaborative learning.

Participants

This study's participants are university students whose advisors have enrolled them in the Writing Program (W.P.) English courses: ENGL 110 and ENGL 111. The W.P. educates unprepared, at-risk student populations in myriad ways, including college composition readiness. Adult learners enrolled in the W.P. are part of the at-risk community, classified by the university's admissions office, and statistically require a supportive approach to develop soft skills to stay on a successful academic path. The transcendental phenomenology included research from 10 students enrolled in the W.P. English courses ENGL 110 and ENGL 111 in the fall quarter of 2023. A purposeful sampling method was used to identify participants for this study.

Researcher Positionality

I am an adjunct instructor in the English department at a public state university and a writing consultant at the same university's writing center. A recent study conducted has demonstrated "the need to address issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in U.S. higher education contexts so that educational leaders can live out the espoused values of their institutions as they work to transform students into responsible citizens" (Barnett, 2020, p. 20). Everyone working in higher education must always consider how to carry out and drive the vision and commitments of their respective institution and the ladder's framework on diversity, inclusion, and equity. The university I work for has many strengths in representing its diverse student population. In fact, the university's Office for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion attributes the institution's diversity to its success. It explains that its students come from "43 states and 70 countries. More than 1 in 3 are from diverse backgrounds, and over 50 percent are the first in

their families to attend college" (Eastern Washington University, 2024, para. 1). This pledge to an inclusive and equitable campus was recognized in 2019 by receiving the Higher Education Excellence in Diversity (HEED) award.

I have had the pleasure of collaborating with several on-campus resources that support this mission: College Assistance Migrant Program (C.A.M.P.), McNair, which helps low-income students and students from historically underrepresented ethnic groups to enroll in a Ph.D. program, and TRiO that provides various support services for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. I believe higher education, like all others in the education system, needs to work tirelessly to adapt and continue to represent the multiplicity of students attending their campuses, which rapidly diversifies (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020), and to ensure to meet the changing needs of diverse groups of students equitably and extend support to at-risk student populations.

Interpretive Framework

The interpretive framework for my study was social constructivism. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), in social constructivism, "individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work" (p. 24). Through their individualized and unique understanding, particular meanings are developed that correspond to the individual participant's experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, these meanings are shaped through interaction with others, and the researcher is motivated to find the complexities within these various understandings. The researcher relies on participants' views of the situation and allows a theory or pattern of meaning to be inductively developed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher plays an essential role as they acknowledge how their own interpretation of the research stems from their own experiences: personal, cultural, and historical (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This knowledge and truth found in the researched inquiry are created by the exchanges and relations

between individuals within a society. As a social constructivist researcher, the emphasis on the co-construction of knowledge was a guiding light that, to me, supported an equitable approach to finding new understandings that can support all learners.

Philosophical Assumptions

When conducting a qualitative study, philosophical assumptions are embedded within interpretive frameworks that researchers use. Together, interpretive frameworks and philosophical assumptions explicitly guide research choices and interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My positionality on the philosophical assumptions-- ontological, epistemological, and axiological-- helps my audience understand the lens through which I see the world and approached my transcendental phenomenological study.

Ontological Assumption

Ontology is a philosophical assumption that asks the question: "What is the nature of reality?" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 20). This guiding philosophical assumption embraces the notion that reality is constructed of multiple realities from multiple different perspectives. From the perspective of the interpretive framework of a social constructivist, ontological beliefs understand that there are multiple realities that can be constructed through lived experiences and interaction with others (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Individuals who participated in this phenomenological study could have variable realities, meaning that what may be a reality for one individual is not necessarily the same for another (Moustakas, 1994). For this reason, I approached this study with the ontological position that though experiences may differ between participants, common themes emerged as clusters of meaning, which provided valuable insight into the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The nature of reality, then, is what was being solicited by experiential data from several individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

An important aspect of the social constructionist interpretive framework is that there is not one reality but many realities “that can be articulated based on the values, standpoints, and positions of the author” (Daly, 2007, p. 33). With this in mind, I present this study’s findings as one possible interpretation to understand these individuals’ experiences.

Epistemological Assumption

Epistemological beliefs are a philosophical assumption that asks the question: “How is reality known?" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 20). To achieve this, the researcher explored individual evidence based on individual views. Studies in the field are important as they build contexts for understanding individual views. An emphasis was assigned by the researcher to distance themselves from the research to build an objective barrier. From the perspective of the interpretive framework of a social constructivist, epistemological beliefs understand that “reality is co-constructed between the researcher and the researched and shaped by individual experiences” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 35).

An important epistemological assumption of the social constructionist interpretive framework is that there is not one reality but many realities “that can be articulated based on the values, standpoints, and positions of the author” (Daly, 2007, p. 33). With this in mind, I presented this study’s findings as one possible interpretation to understand these individuals’ experiences. Scharp and Thomas (2019) contend that researchers should consider how their specific positions and personal experiences contribute to their interpretations of participants' lived experiences when engaged in the critical research process. Taking this into consideration, as a white, native English speaker, middle-aged, heterosexual, married woman, I have never identified as an at-risk student in higher education. Instead, I have been working with the at-risk student population in higher education for nearly a decade as an English instructor and as a

writing center consultant at a public state university. Being immersed in supporting, serving, and teaching at-risk students in higher education, however, allowed me to relate to the participants and develop trust even though I have never been categorized by higher education as an at-risk community member within higher education. Furthermore, not identifying as an at-risk student in higher education allowed me not to transpose participants' experiences with my own.

Axiological Assumption

Axiological beliefs are a philosophical assumption that asks the question: "What is the role of values?" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 20). Within this philosophical assumption, the researcher recognized that biases will be present regarding the researched content or area of study, and judgments would be made based on the researcher's positionality. From the perspective of the interpretive framework of a social constructivist, axiological beliefs understand that values are respected and negotiated amongst individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Axiological beliefs seemed the most difficult as I had to have an ongoing, sophisticated understanding of self-awareness interfolded into practice. Working as a writing consultant at a writing center and being an English instructor, I have an effusive position toward effective writing and communication; however, I believe I easily bracketed my personal values and biases to find the truth of the phenomenon from the data that contributed to understanding how to best support at-risk student populations in higher education.

Researcher's Role

I am a current instructor of English Composition at the public state university to which the study took place. I am also a writing center consultant at the public state university to which the study took place. Over my 10-year professional career with many different institutions in higher education, I have gained a wealth of knowledge, skills, and abilities relevant to protecting

student information. Protecting student data or personally identifiable information (PII) is imperative for student safety and security, as well as laws such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (F.E.R.P.A.) that give students control over their educational records. As an instructor completing an abundance of student conferences and as a writing consultant meeting with thousands of students in a one-on-one setting, I have developed my interviewing skills and the crucial passive roles interviewers must take to uncover the perspectives of the interview participants.

This study's participants are university students whose advisors have enrolled them into the W.P. English courses: ENGL 110 and ENGL 111. I am an instructor for ENGL 110 and ENGL 111; however, none of the participants were students enrolled in my courses. I had no personal relationships with any of the participants in this study. Moreover, it was clearly communicated to participants that their voluntary involvement in this study would not affect their grades because instructors would not have access to the data collected, their information will remain completely anonymous, and data was presented after their final grades were submitted for that quarter. Similar to writing center visits, participants had a minimum of four writing center visits, for which I was not their consultant. Additionally, the student-support service community, the writing center, did not have access to participant information at any time. As the primary instrument of data collected in this study, I integrated the critical step in the qualitative research of bracketing personal past knowledge (Patton, 2015). With such a robust professional career enveloped in higher education and academic writing, the use of bracketing helped me account for my personal experiences and biases relevant to the phenomenon in this study (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). A barrier to credible qualitative research can result from inadvertently or intentionally influencing findings based on researcher biases (Patton, 2015).

Hence, information about my background was included in this section that acknowledged relevant past experiences, such as my work at the institution of study and as a writing center consultant in higher education.

Procedures

The first procedure for this transcendental phenomenological study was the submission and approval from Liberty University's IRB (see Appendix A). The submission and approval to the university site where the study was taking place was next, which included the Institutional Approval for Pre-Proposal (L.O.I.) Submission, the Institutional Approval for Proposal Submission, and the institution's own Institutional Review Board (IRB) Human Subjects Research Application approval form. No data was collected without IRB approval. The following procedures were implemented upon receiving approval from the IRB at Liberty University and the necessary approvals from the site location. First, I coordinated with the instructors of the Writing Program (W.P.) English 110 and English 111 cohorts to provide a student roster for the quarter from each one of their classes. Then I recruited participants from classes to locate 10 participants. Selecting 10 participants through purposeful sampling for this research achieved saturation by reaching sufficient diversity and by keeping data collection, analysis, and depth manageable (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with open-ended questions regarding the phenomenon in this research. Participants then completed and submitted journal prompts after the individual interview to allow reflections on questions and possible additional responses about shared experiences relevant to the phenomenon in this study. Surveys were conducted at the end of the quarter and centered around themes and patterns developed during individual interviews. This prompted the data analysis stage of the study by using qualitative methods such as bracketing, clustering, and

coding. Lastly, I complied with standards and stored all data collected securely and protected the collected information until it is to be destroyed: which will be three years after completion of the study.

Permissions

Prior to conducting this study, permission was first requested from Liberty University's IRB (see Appendix A). Next, the necessary permissions were solicited from Ponderosa University, the site where the study was taking place, which includes the Institutional Approval for Pre-Proposal (LOI) (see Appendix B), the Institutional Approval for Proposal Submission (see Appendix C), and the institution's verbal recruitment form (see Appendix D). Permission forms for participants were also supplied under the Informed Consent Document (see Appendix E), where student participation in the study was understood as explicitly voluntary, and they would not be placed at any undue risk (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Recruitment Plan

The sample pool for this study was 150 individuals. A qualitative method's sample size is comparatively small, which allows for a more in-depth examination of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To achieve adequate saturation, this transcendental phenomenology consisted of data collected from 10 at-risk students at Ponderosa University who were enrolled in the Writing Program (W.P.) English courses: ENGL 110 and ENGL 111. A purposeful sampling method was used to identify participants for this study. Purposeful sampling is a primary sampling strategy used in qualitative research and is described as the selection of individuals and sites for study because the researcher can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Collection Plan

This research study utilized Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenology which is focused on descriptions of the experiences of participants rather than the interpretations by the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To collect abundant data to understand the essence of the experience of the participants, three data collection methods were used. The three data sources in this study were collected in the following order: interviews, journal prompts, and survey questions.

Individual Interviews Data Collection Approach

Transcendental phenomenology traditionally involves focused interviews with a collective group that has shared the same experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These multiple interviews were in-depth, which is a critical component of this data source to collect data from the persons who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ten individuals were interviewed and asked fifteen open-ended questions during the interviews that focused on participants describing their experiences to gather textual and structural data. This data source of rich interviewing ultimately provided a strong understanding of the participants' shared experiences.

Interviews took place at the institution's writing center, where the participants were enrolled. Participants were provided a Google doc to sign up for an interview session that worked best for their schedule. Research objectives and ethical considerations were shared with participants, as well as communication that the participant could abstain from answering any interview question or voluntarily remove themselves from the study at any time. Interviews consisted of 15 open-ended questions and follow-up questions, when applicable (see Appendix

G). All interviews were audio-recorded on two separate devices for transcription and quality purposes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please describe your educational background and current proposed major. CRQ
2. Describe how you feel about attending a 4-year-university. SQ1
3. How would you assess your writing skills and performance: weak, satisfactory, or strong? Why? SQ1
4. Describe how you feel when tasked to research, read, and write at the collegiate level. SQ1
5. Describe practices you use when completing academic writing assignments prior to visiting the writing center. SQ1
6. Describe your challenges when trying to complete an academic writing assignment for a college class. SQ2
7. Explain any circumstances in which you have been to a different institution writing center. SQ1
8. Describe your thoughts on the writing center. SQ2
9. Describe how you feel after visiting the writing center. SQ2
10. What experiences have you had at the writing center that prepared you to complete an academic writing assignment? CQR
11. Describe practices you learned at the writing center that you can use in your academic writing process. SQ2
12. What obstacles or barriers do you have that hinder visiting the writing center? SQ2

13. Describe your thoughts on being required to visit the writing center for course credit. SQ2
14. Describe your thoughts on using the writing center all four years of college without being required for course credit. SQ2
15. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences with writing centers? SQ2

Questions 1 and 2 worked on building rapport with the participant. Questions 3 and 4 were designed to identify the participants' proficiency or academic comfort in writing. Questions 5-7 established context prior to writing center use. Questions 8-14 were designed to provide clarification and a deeper understanding of how participants view the writing center. Question 15 is unstructured and was used to create a space for participants to add anything they deem worthy of this phenomenon. Committee members, who are experts in the field, reviewed these questions.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

The data analysis procedures for this study employed Moustakas's (1994) Modified Van Kaam approach. To achieve this, preliminary coding and grouping were commenced by listing every quote relevant to the phenomenon. All data was treated equally, with no selection being more important than another. Next, every line of the interview's transcript was scrutinized to evaluate if it was essential to the participant's lived experience of the phenomenon as well as if its meaning could be condensed to find the potential significance (latent implications). If not, it was eliminated. An exploration of the remaining transcription was categorized into groups to form themes. Once themes were generated, they were compared and contrasted to the original dataset to ensure they were a trustworthy representation of the participant's experience. Each participant was provided an individual textural description that utilized verbatim transcription

lines from the participant. Individual structural descriptions were then completed to examine the social, emotional, and cultural relationships between the participants' interviews. A table was created to outline themes from each participant to identify reoccurring and prominent themes across all the participants. Social, emotional, and cultural connections of participants' experiences were examined, taking special considerations to find common elements that were the most significant factors in their experiences. Lastly, both the textural and the structural descriptions were synthesized to provide a comprehensive understanding of the lived experience of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015).

Journal Prompts Data Collection Approach

Journal prompts data collection was used as a second data source because English composition in higher education and the use of Ponderosa University's writing center is what I explored, so having a written component was essential for participants to engage in. Also, it is a good pairing (given my formerly explained topic) to achieve one of the contrasting foundational considerations, describing the essence of a lived phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were given 50 minutes to complete each prompt in class. Participants were given a journal prompt and asked to generate a 400–600-word response to an experience connected to the writing center (see Appendix H). While the presentation of self-efficacy can vary significantly via the individual, building confidence and believing in oneself is at its core (Bayir & Aylaz, 2021).

The content of these prompts reflects Bandura's self-efficacy theory and his discussion on belief sets (Bandura, 1977). Bandura identified that a strong sense of self-efficacy is "concerned not with what one has but with belief in what one can do with whatever resources one can muster" (Bandura, 2007, p. 646). Self-efficacy, then, is broadly defined as a learner's beliefs

about their own judgment or aptitudes of their abilities to organize and implement courses of action required to achieve a designated goal (Bandura, 2007).

Journal Prompts Data Analysis Plan

Following Moustakas's (1994) Modified Van Kaam approach for the journal prompts, preliminary coding and grouping entailed listing every quote relevant to the phenomenon from the prompt. All data was treated equally, with no selection being more important than another. Next, every line of the journal prompt's response was scrutinized to evaluate if it was essential to the participant's lived experience of the phenomenon as well as if its meaning could be condensed to find the potential significance (latent meanings). If not, it was eliminated. An exploration of the remaining journal prompt's response was categorized into groups to form themes. Once themes were generated, they were compared to the original dataset to ensure they were a trustworthy representation of the participant's experience. Each participant had an individual textural description that utilized verbatim transcription lines from the participant's completed journal prompts. Individual structural descriptions were then completed to examine the social, emotional, and cultural relationships between the participants' surveys. A table was created to outline themes from each participant to identify reoccurring and prominent themes across all the participants. Social, emotional, and cultural connections of participants' experiences were examined, taking special considerations to find common elements that were the biggest factors in their experiences. Lastly, both the textural and the structural descriptions were synthesized to provide a comprehensive understanding of the lived experience of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015).

Surveys Data Collection Approach

The third data source selection was survey questions because it took less time for the individual participants to complete and, since my participants were of the at-risk student population at a local public state university, I needed to make sure that the data sources I chose were balanced and would not be perceived as lofty additional work. Open-ended questions are helpful for qualitative surveys to produce long-form written/typed answers. Survey questions, as precursors or follow-ups to interviews, aim to reveal opinions and experiences that will help in the identification of themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each question on the survey list directly contributed to the research questions (see Appendix I). The survey questions also offered a fresh approach to bracketing or epoche, as some parameters around the questions being surveyed consisted of a more open-ended and reflective configuration. Surveys were completed in person during class time, and participants had 50 minutes to complete the questions.

Open-Response Survey Questions

1. Describe your writing center visit. SQ1
2. How do you feel differently about yourself or your writing capabilities since visiting the writing center? SQ2
3. What about the writing center visit made the biggest impact on you academically or personally? SQ3
4. How could the writing center's services help your academic or personal needs beyond your English Composition course? CRQ

The lived experiences of participants helped the researcher establish the phenomenon, thus assisted in rendering the complexity of the essence of the phenomenon. Having this data collected through survey questions instead of interview questions further supported the objectivization of the meanings of human experiences (Coleman & Smith, 2021), as the

participant could freely answer the questions with little to no researcher interference. The researcher then transcended the phenomena and meanings being investigated to take a global view of the essences discovered (Coleman & Smith, 2021).

Survey Data Analysis Plan

To achieve Moustakas's (1994) Modified Van Kaam approach, preliminary coding and grouping commenced by listing every quote relevant to the phenomenon from the survey. All data was treated equally, with no quote being more important than another. Next, every line of the survey was scrutinized to evaluate if it was important to the participant's lived experience of the phenomenon as well as if its meaning could be condensed to find the potential significance (latent meanings). If not, it was eliminated. An exploration of the remaining survey was categorized into groups to form themes. Once themes were generated, they were compared to the original dataset to ensure they were a trustworthy representation of the participant's experience. Each participant was given an individual textural description that utilized verbatim transcription lines from the participant's completed survey. Individual structural descriptions were then constructed to examine the social, emotional, and cultural relationships between the participants' surveys. A table was created to outline themes from each participant to identify reoccurring and prominent themes across all the participants. Social, emotional, and cultural connections of participants' experiences were examined taking special considerations to find common elements that were the most significant factors in their experiences. Lastly, both the textural and the structural descriptions were synthesized to provide a comprehensive understanding of the lived experience of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015).

Data Synthesis

The data was sorted by its correlating research question. To synthesize the data, themes were derived from the answers provided during the interviews as well as participant responses to journal prompts and surveys. To avoid potential bias, a common challenge of qualitative phenomenology studies, the researcher acknowledged intentional or unintentional personal biases and bracketed them. Bracketing ensures that the researcher set aside their own experiences and preconceived notions when organizing the data and applying thematic analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas's (1994) Modified Van Kaam approach was used, which consisted of seven steps to create a singular body of evidence of the lived experience of the phenomenon by identifying the commonalities between the composite structural-textural descriptions of each data collection method. Utilizing both the structural and textual descriptions allowed for the full articulation of participants' lived experiences regarding how they experienced the phenomenon and the context of their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

Trustworthiness

The three different data collection methods enhanced the trustworthiness of the study. Trustworthiness is a qualitative researcher's pledge to high-quality data that has rigor and credibility (Peterson, 2019). The selected data methods collection combined with the application of the Modified Van Kaam approach to analysis offers direct quotations, expert member review checks, and triangulation, which are hallmarks of the trustworthiness of transcendental qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The utilization of epoche before the first data collection method ensured the focus was on the participant's perception of the phenomenon as it relates to their institution's writing center—their writing performance and self-efficacy development (Moustakas, 1994). Four main components embody trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility

Credibility, the confidence that can be placed in the truth of the research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), was accomplished through the use of triangulation and member checking. Triangulation uses several data sources and/or methods of information from the field to identify themes repeatedly present across a particular data collection method. I achieved triangulation in my research through the data collection and analysis of interviews, journal prompts, and surveys that aimed to measure the phenomenon to see if they converge and support consistent conclusions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking also supported the credibility of this study as it was an effective way to rule out potentially misinterpreting the meaning or significance of what participants say and do (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Member checks allow participants to not only verify the researchers' interpretations of the data but add to any gaps from previous interview (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The use of member checks within qualitative research has been found to strengthen the dependability and confirmability of a study (Moustakas, 1994). Member checking occurred twofold: during the interview process and post-transcription of respective interviews. During the interviews, I restated what a participant just shared to confirm that I understood the meaning of their answer. After I composed diligent transcriptions of each interview, I requested that the individual participant read the transcription and confirm the accuracy of all personal statements.

Transferability

The conditions for transferability were presented to the reader, for the findings may have applicability in other contexts, situations, times, and populations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Strong transferability guarantees that other scholars can utilize the study to further the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To accomplish transferability, I used rich, thick, detailed descriptions

of the phenomenon of the lived experiences of at-risk students who were enrolled in a first-year writing composition course and used their institution's writing center a total of four times in an academic quarter. By supplying rich, thick descriptions, readers can establish if shared characteristics can be applied to other situations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The use of journal prompts and surveys, which were also used in this study, could easily be duplicated for related future studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Dependability

Dependability is an essential principle of trustworthiness in qualitative research as it establishes the study's findings as consistent and repeatable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A detailed account of the study's procedures was explained to the reader in preparation for the inquiry audit. At Liberty University, an inquiry audit is a thorough review of the research process and findings by the dissertation committee and the Qualitative Research Director, which was conducted to accomplish dependability further.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the degree of neutrality or the extent to which the respondents shape the findings of a study and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This neutrality is necessary to achieve a study's confirmability, to which I utilized three techniques: triangulation, audit trail, and reflexivity. I established triangulation of my data as explained above. The use of triangulation and developing detailed structural descriptions enhanced confirmability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I detailed all steps taken from the start of my research to the findings, which created an audit trail. A phenomenological idea about consciousness is that it has a reflexive aspect that concerns the researcher's principles, judgments, and practices that may have influenced the research. In the transcendental epoche, this is avoided by bracketing or

mitigating preconceptions-- both noetic and noematically (Butler, 2016; Finlay, 2008). This process of epoche supports the process that the findings of the study are shaped by the respondents and not a researcher's bias, motivation, or interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I journaled throughout the study, ensuring that I bracketed my experience as an English instructor and writing center consultant to maintain my role as the researcher and not as a participant.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were tended to before the implementation of the study. Site access and consent were provided by the public state university's IRB process (see Appendix C). Participants were given informed consent that stated participation was voluntary, and they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants' identities were protected using pseudonyms throughout the research process. A pseudonym was also used in place of the public state university to preserve the anonymity of the higher education institution that was involved. The confidentiality of data collection methods was maintained through password-protected electronic files. Any physical data was kept in a locked desk drawer. Per Liberty University's IRB, all information gathered from participants will be destroyed after three years. No risks have been identified to participating in this study. The researcher is an English Composition instructor with nearly a decade of teaching experience working with at-risk higher-education student populations. Having worked with this vulnerable population of participants, I used extreme sensitivity to their needs throughout all parts of the research study. Thus, while there may not be any immediate benefits beyond the phenomenon's scope for the participants, no risks were identified for participants in this study.

Summary

Chapter Three provided details regarding the methods and design of my study. I used a qualitative methodology with a transcendental phenomenological design approach. Data that was collected consisted of systematic efforts to set aside prejudgments regarding the phenomenon investigated (Moustakas, 1994). Data was collected in three different ways, interviews, journal prompts, and surveys to learn about the lived experiences of participants who had visited their institution's writing center. Central and guiding research questions have been restated within the chapter, and the respective connections of data collection methods to these questions were discussed. Data analysis procedures, as expressed by Moustakas (1994), were explained: including coding, clustering, and various descriptions. Credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and ethical considerations were discussed to aid in the trustworthiness of this research.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the beliefs and attitudes regarding higher education at-risk students' experiences with using their institution's writing center services in a public state university in the Northwestern United States. This chapter presents the study's findings procured through data collection and detailed analysis, along with the concluded results. This chapter offers a detailed overview of each participant, revealing the prominent themes and subthemes that surfaced from the collected data. The identified themes directly contribute to addressing the principal research question posed in this study. The data analysis resulted in the following themes: *academic challenges and barriers, socioeconomic and personal challenges, navigating student-support services, building a supportive writing community, and self-confidence and academic development.* The conclusion of this chapter presents the findings obtained from the research questions and provides a summary of its contents.

Participants

This study utilized purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015). Purposeful sampling allowed me to select 10 at-risk higher education students attending a public state university in the Northwestern United States. I selected students whose advisors enrolled them in the Writing Program (W.P.) English courses: ENGL 110 and ENGL 111. These adult learners enrolled in the W.P. are part of the at-risk community, classified by the university's admissions office, and statistically require a supportive approach to develop soft skills to stay on a successful academic path. An element of this supportive approach is to attend the institution's Writing Center. The participants' demographic data included age, gender, major, level of education, and writing

center visits. Ten participants were selected to ensure saturation would be attained with fewer participants (Patton, 2015). The participants in the study consisted of five male students and five female students. Pseudonyms were used to safeguard participants' anonymity and the study site location. The participant table is found below:

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Major	Quarter	Writing Center Visits
Ryan	19	Male	Marketing	1st	4
Aidan	22	Male	Anthropology	1st	6
Jada	18	Female	Education	1st	4
Emma	18	Female	Communications	1st	5
Jennifer	48	Female	Communications	1st	5
Dominic	27	Male	Undeclared	1st	4
Olivia	19	Female	Undeclared	1st	4
Elijah	22	Male	Education	1st	4
Daniel	26	Male	Chemistry	1st	4
Sofia	18	Female	Accounting	1st	4

Ryan

Ryan was 19 years old at the time of the research study. He was a male student who was in his first quarter of attending this university. Ryan was planning on majoring in Marketing. Additionally, he was a first-generation college student who had never used a writing center before this university. Ryan described his writing skills and performance as weak. He said, “I'm not great, amazing, or anything. I struggle with formatting. I struggle with an introduction and a conclusion and putting my stuff in order. And I struggle, rereading my work to find any

mistakes.” In addition to his academic challenges and barriers, he shared some socioeconomic and personal challenges that at-risk students experience. He explained, “Money is a huge challenge. I was just planning on working. I wasn't planning on going to college. A friend said I should come. And I'm like, that's probably a good idea. But I hadn't saved up for anything.” At the culmination of the study, Ryan attended the writing center a total of four times.

Aidan

Aidan was 22 years old at the time of the research study. He was a male student who was in his first quarter of college. Aidan was planning on majoring in Anthropology. He was a first-generation college student who went to an urban high school that primarily served poor and ethnically diverse students in a densely populated city in the region. The participant had never visited a writing center before attending this university. Aidan defined his writing skills and performance as weak. He stated, “I'm not very great at writing, but I blame high school. The public education failed me on that. Uh, I never really was good at writing, so yeah. It's a lot harder to keep up in college.” Furthermore, he expressed views about socioeconomic and personal challenges that at-risk students frequently experience:

> The biggest hurdle for me is time management. I'm only taking a couple of classes, so I have a ton of time. I think I can write later tonight and go out when it's daytime and have fun. And then you do that for a week, and you don't get much done until, like, the last few days, and then it's stressful.

At the culmination of the study, Aidan attended the writing center a total of six times.

Jada

Jada was 18 years old at the time of the research study. She was a female student who was in her first quarter of college. Jada was a first-generation college student planning on

majoring in Education. Additionally, she had never used a writing center before attending this university. She was raised by a single mother in an unincorporated urban area near a major city of her home state. Jada defined her writing skills and performance as minimally satisfactory. According to Jada:

> I've kind of always struggled with English, but it's never been like so bad that I was failing; I was kind of just passing by. So, I would say kind of satisfactory, leaning towards weak sometimes. It usually takes me a little more help to get into what I'm trying to write.

Jada shared a socioeconomic and personal challenge that at-risk students often also face about attending a 4-year university: “I was a little nervous at first because I have never been away from my mom for that long. So now I'm living on my own, and I'm going to have to get a job, things like that.” At the culmination of the study, Jada attended the writing center a total of four times.

Emma

Emma was 18 years old at the time of the research study. She was a female student who was in her first quarter of college and works full-time. Emma was a first-generation college student majoring in Communications. The participant had never heard of a writing center before attending this university. Emma identified her writing skills and performance as weak. She explained, “I would say that it's not my best skill. So I would say very weak because, like, I tend to ramble when I'm writing, and it just keeps going and going.” Emma further defined a socioeconomic and personal challenge when asked about how she feels about taking on academic writing assignments. She explained, “Understanding what like the professor is asking because sometimes they ask it in like such a professor way. So, getting started and understanding

what's being asked of you is difficult." At the culmination of the study, Emma attended the writing center a total of five times.

Jennifer

Jennifer was 48 years old at the time of the research study. She was a female student who attended community college a couple of decades prior to her current enrollment at the 4-year university. Jennifer was a nontraditional student with a declared major in Communications. The participant had not used a writing center before this current university enrollment. Jennifer defined her writing skills and performance as weak. As Jennifer described:

> I would say weak because I feel like my writing style is changing now that I'm in college. What I feel like I knew really well is all out the door in college. So normally I feel very strong, but lately I've been feeling very weak.

Additionally, the participant further explained that she "has confidence in my words and thoughts are clear and good but, when it comes to the critical and little writing details such as grammar, spelling, and punctuation I am never confident." Regardless of how the participant felt about their writing skill and performance, she was excited about attending a 4-year university. At the culmination of the study, Jennifer attended the writing center a total of five times.

Dominic

Dominic was 27 years old at the time of the research study. Dominic served in the United States Army, identified as a veteran, and was connected to the Veterans Resource Center at the four-year university he attended. He was a male student who has prior education through a military technical program, which is equivalent to a two-year technical degree prior to his current enrollment at the 4-year university. The participant's major was undeclared but was leaning toward Mechanical Engineering. Dominic had not used a writing center before this current

university enrollment. He defined his writing skills and performance as satisfactory. Dominic contended that:

> My biggest challenge when writing for a college class is trying to figure out how my instructors want me to write in college because the way I wrote before was different. So, the processes are slightly different, and the formats are different. It's definitely been a difficult transition into that writing style.

He was a first-generation college student using the GI Bill to fund his education. Moreover, he shared perspectives on the socioeconomic and personal challenges of engagement commonly faced by at-risk students: “At first, attending a four-year university didn't pique my interest at all. For the most part, the only reason I am here is because it's being paid for. It's something that's required for the job that I want to do in the future, so that's a big reason for me.” At the culmination of the study, Dominic attended the writing center a total of four times.

Olivia

Olivia was 19 years old at the time of the research study. She was a female Latino student who was a non-native English speaker. Olivia was in her first quarter of college and had yet to declare a major but was leaning toward Social Work. She was a first-generation college student who attended primary school in a rural region with a high migrant student population. Olivia had never heard of a writing center before attending this university. The participant defined her writing skills and performance as “somewhere between weak and satisfactory.” As Olivia described:

> I'd say it's between weak and satisfactory because I still have a lot to learn, and I get confused sometimes about what direction I am supposed to go in or what the task even is. I doubt myself a lot. I don't really know what to do sometimes.

Olivia also discussed a common socioeconomic and personal challenge that at-risk students frequently encounter when considering enrollment in a four-year university. She admitted, “I feel grateful, nervous, and excited because I never thought I would be at a four-year university. I always saw myself as a not-so-scholarly person, but now that I'm here, I want to make the best out of it.” At the culmination of the study, Olivia attended the writing center a total of four times.

Elijah

Elijah was 22 years old at the time of the research study. He was a male student majoring in Education. Additionally, he was a first-generation college student who had prior education at a local community college a couple of years ago. Elijah explained:

> I did go to a community college before this. But there were circumstances that I just couldn't keep going, so I took about like a, I think it's a three-year break right now, and now I'm coming back here with just a couple of credits transferred.

He defined his writing skills and performance as “in the middle of weak and satisfactory.” Furthermore, Elijah elaborated:

> I haven't ever been good at writing or English in general. Most of the time, I feel alright going into the essay or assignment to keep my morale up; however, that confidence plummets as I start to write. When my topic is restricted to a grading rubric or task I need to complete, I tend to stumble. I still put my all into my essays and assignments despite my confidence. In many cases, my confidence will be between a three and a six on a scale of one to ten.

He also mentioned a shared socioeconomic and personal challenge that at-risk students frequently confront when enrolled in a four-year university. Elijah explained that “there's obviously some stress involved with, like, just money in general. I don't have much and I'm not

working right now, so just being able to pay for classes. If I need other supplies, getting the money for that can be a bit stressful for me." Elijah had never visited a writing center before attending this university, and at the culmination of the study, he attended the writing center a total of four times.

Daniel

Daniel was 26 years old at the time of the research study. He served in the United States Air Force, identified as a veteran, and was connected to the Veterans Resource Center at the four-year university he attended. He was a male student who had prior education through a military technical program, which is equivalent to a two-year technical degree prior to his current enrollment at the 4-year university. Daniel, who was majoring in Chemistry, explained his thoughts on attending a 4-year university. He said:

> I feel like it's a big opportunity because my mom and my dad both didn't go to college. Our most recent college graduate was my grandpa. He was in the military, and then he graduated college. So I said, maybe that's what I need to do so I can pay for my school.

When asked if he feels his writing is weak, satisfactory, or strong he was concerned about the gap in his schooling. Daniel explained:

> I have not written a paper since 2015. I completely forgot how to write. I had eight years of not writing anything except for the occasional email for, Hey, I need this part for this generator that I'm working on. So when I came here, I didn't even know where to start. I didn't have any habits or anything to teach myself how to do the assignments.

Daniel discussed a common socioeconomic and personal challenge that nontraditional students experience when attending a four-year university. As Daniel described it:

> I used to be a big procrastinator, especially when I was in high school. Half the time, I didn't even do the homework because I was like, what are they going to do? Send me home. It doesn't matter. Now I'm 26 years old and going back to school. I feel pressured that I should really get my essays done earlier so that I'm not piling everything on for, like, a Friday afternoon.

Daniel did not know what a writing center was before attending this university, and at the culmination of the study, he attended the writing center a total of four times.

Sofia

Sofia was 18 years old at the time of the research study. She was a female Latino student who spent much of her primary education in Mexico before transferring to a high school in the Pacific Northwest during her sophomore year. Sofia was in her first quarter of college, majoring in Accounting. She did not identify herself as being a first-generation college student. Furthermore, she had not visited a writing center before attending this university. Sofia defined her writing skills and performance as weak. She stated:

> My level of confidence is between a 5 out of 10 because I've always pretty much sucked at writing essays. I tend not to explain very well and just get straight to the point. I also tend to get distracted when writing, like I can be talking about something that has nothing to do with the main idea of the paragraph. When writing, I struggle with coming up with a thesis or how to start the paragraph.

When asked about any socioeconomic and personal challenge, Sofia expressed:

> I've always struggled with writing essays. I would struggle with making them long and informational. Not knowing anything about the topic I was writing about. I was nervous about always asking for help. I didn't want to get help from anyone because I thought

other people reading my essays would judge me since my grammar and English is still getting there.

At the culmination of the study, she attended the writing center a total of four times.

Results

Information attained from individual interviews, reflective journal prompts, and survey questions provided abundant data, unveiling numerous themes and subthemes. This section presents five main themes and eight subthemes that emerged from this study. The five main themes were *academic challenges and barriers, socioeconomic and personal challenges, navigating student-support services, building a supportive writing community, and self-confidence and academic development.* Themes were revealed after transcription and analysis of all the data collected. Individual interviews were manually transcribed. Reflective journal prompts were responded to in person during class time, which took no more than 50 minutes. Additionally, survey questions were responded to in person during class time, which took no more than 50 minutes. Individual interview transcriptions, reflective journal prompt entries, and survey responses were entered into Delve, a qualitative data analysis software. Using Delve, the interview transcriptions, journal prompt entries, and survey responses were organized, analyzed, and coded into themes and subthemes. Moustakas's (1994) Modified Van Kaam approach was applied to emphasize the importance of participant experience, insight, and subjective interpretation in understanding the phenomenon. The essence of the phenomenon of at-risk students' experience using their university's writing center at a public state university was revealed through (1) listing and grouping, (2) reduction and elimination, (3) clustering and thematizing, (4) validation, (5) individual textual description, (6) individual structural description, and (7) textural-structural description. Table 2 contains the themes, subthemes, and

codes identified during data analysis.

Table 2

Themes & Subthemes

Theme	Subthemes	Codes
Academic Challenges and Barriers		*Feedback reception* *Interpreting feedback* *Revision strategies* *Teacher expectations* *Educational resources*
	Underdeveloped Writing Skills	*Limited proficiency in grammar/mechanics* *Difficulty constructing coherent/organized essays* *Difficulty starting writing assignments*
	Beliefs about Academic Performance/Success	*Low grades in writing assignments* *Feeling overwhelmed by academic demands* *Feeling unworthy of academic success* *Imposter syndrome*
	Beliefs about Writing Ability	*Lack of confidence in expressing ideas in writing* *Lack of confidence in understanding prompts* *Fear of judgment and evaluation*
Socioeconomic and Personal Challenges		*First-generation college student* *High school academic struggles* *Community college struggles* *Cost of tuition* *Stress and anxiety* *Navigating personal events*
Navigating Student-Centered Resources		*Exposure to resource* *Unawareness of writing center services* *Disconnected from campus resources* *Never used a writing center*
Building a Supportive Writing Community		*Impact of collaborative writing* *Mentorship and guidance*
	Collaboration	*Overcoming barriers in writing performance through writing center interactions* *Provide affirmation* *Friendly and helpful*
	Writing Center Limitations	*Lack of availability* *Struggles with rescheduling* *Overutilized resource* *Limited staff*

Self-confidence and Academic Development	***Writing Performance Development***	*Developing critical thinking and analysis* *Developing effective writing habits* *Developing a positive writing identity* *Developing a positive academic identity* *Improving grammar and mechanics* *Enhancing research and citation skills* *Incorporating feedback into revisions* *Seeking feedback at various stages* *Demonstrating progress in writing proficiency* *Gaining confidence in academic writing* *Expressing individual perspectives*
	Cross-curricular	*Developing critical perspectives on various topics* *Science* *Personal writing* *Resume* *Essays for college* *Senior Capstone*
	Self-Efficacy Beliefs	*Perceptions of writing abilities* *Shifting mindset towards growth* *Beliefs about revision and improvement* *Beliefs about voice* *Developing effective time management skills* *Overcoming writing anxiety* *Utilizing available resources for academic support*

Academic Challenges and Barriers

Academic challenges and barriers were a collective theme found throughout the individual interviews, journal prompt entries, and survey responses. When asked how participants felt about their preparedness for academic writing at a 4-year university before visiting the writing center, participants frequently mentioned previous unsatisfactory writing performance evaluations, their disbelief in their own ability to perform and succeed, and limited beliefs in their writing capabilities. Thus, three subthemes within this overarching theme surfaced from the analysis of the participants' data: underdeveloped writing skills, beliefs about academic performance/success, and beliefs about writing ability. Underdeveloped writing skills, the first subtheme, was associated with all ten participants as an academic challenge and barrier. For example, Elijah expressed in his individual interview:

> I think one of the bigger challenges is just getting started with the paper sometimes. I can get ideas down, but it's a matter of how I want to like to start. I just tend to struggle a lot with getting started on the essay and where to go. And even when I do get a good start, I tend to struggle with where I should go from there.

Next, the subtheme of beliefs about academic performance/success revealed that, in the beginning, participants had faint belief systems in their own abilities to perform at the academic level. In one response, Jada shared in her journal prompt, “In high school, I never got help with my writing, and it made me feel like I wasn't going to be able to be a good writer in college”. The third subtheme, beliefs about writing ability, showed that all ten participants had low confidence in their writing ability before visiting the writing center. As Dominic shared, “My confidence level in doing college writing assignments is low. I have always struggled with English in school, so that is a big toll on why my confidence could be so low.” The theme of academic challenges and barriers can be found in the following excerpt shared by Olivia, which describes at-risk students' beliefs before the use of a writing center. Olivia explained:

> I would say my confidence is very low when it comes to my writing ability. I constantly find myself second-guessing and questioning whether my ideas are strong enough and whether my writing is clear and coherent. I always have a fear of not meeting the requirements. Due to this, I tend to turn in work late or at the very last minute. I know I worry about getting judgment and criticism from others because I don't know what they'll think of my writing, so this always makes me have self-doubt in my ability to write.

Underdeveloped Writing Skills

All ten participants shared that underdeveloped writing skills were an academic challenge and barrier. This subtheme of underdeveloped writing skills surfaced when participants were

queried during individual interviews, journal prompts, and surveys about their perceptions of their writing abilities before using their institution's writing center. The systematic application of codes revealed this subtheme of underdeveloped writing skills. The coding process was conducted through a rigorous examination of interviews, journal prompts, and surveys. Some of the codes that emerged were limited proficiency in grammar/mechanics, difficulty constructing coherent/organized essays, and difficulty starting writing assignments. These codes serve as tags that highlight patterns throughout the dataset to locate nuanced insights essential to participants' experiences. Elijah is just one of the study's participants who expressed that their undeveloped writing skills were an academic challenge and barrier. In Elijah's writing center pre-reflection journal prompt, he explained:

> If my assignment is a research paper, from the beginning of a research project or paper, I immediately start at a three for confidence. I struggle to find my main sources. Sometimes, I even struggle with having a good topic that I can even work with. Another reason is that my structure, in general, isn't the best when I'm doing any essay. When I finish my essay and get my grade, I tend to get comments saying I could structure my sentences better, or the paragraph doesn't flow well. That being said, even as I write this, I feel like I'm not structuring something properly.

Likewise, numerous participants also disclosed that they experienced academic challenges and barriers surrounding undeveloped writing skills. As Jada shared in her interview when asked how she felt about her writing skills before visiting the writing center. Jada stated, "So it's all kind of nerve-wracking because I've never really had to do anything very like college-level writing or anything like that." Comparably, Sofia stated:

> I think I can do the research and the reading and everything, but I think when it comes to the actual writing and typing it out, I can get pretty lost. I form like okay sentences, but it just comes to the part where I have to put all that together. That's a whole other thing. I'm like AHHHH!

Beliefs about Academic Performance/ Success

The second subtheme of academic challenges and barriers that emerged when participants were asked how they felt about attending a 4-year-university was the insight and larger category of participant beliefs about academic performance/ success. Some of the codes that were utilized were low grades in writing assignments, feeling overwhelmed by academic demands, feeling unworthy of academic success, and imposter syndrome. The majority of participants felt nervous, stressed, or unsure of their current status of 4-year university enrollment. When reflecting on his standing as a first-year college student, Aidan stated in his interview, “My goal ultimately is to become more confident in my writing skills and to truly trust in myself when it comes to school. All throughout my life, I have struggled with school and don't always believe in myself.” In a separate response, Olivia shared in her individual interview, “I feel grateful, nervous, and excited because I never thought I would be at a four-year university. I always saw myself as a not-so-scholarly person, but now that I'm here, I want to make the best out of it.” More than half of the participants directly connected their weakened state of confidence in their academic performance or success to their actual writing abilities or lack thereof. This disbelief in academic writing often influences overall confidence in academic performance or success as many first-year college students will be enrolled in English composition and another course that requires research and writing to some degree during their first quarter of higher education.

Beliefs about Writing Ability

The third and last subtheme under academic challenges and barriers that emerged was participant beliefs about their writing ability. During individual interviews and a writing center pre-reflection journal prompt, participants were asked to share how they would assess their writing skills and performance: weak, satisfactory, or strong. This has been discussed earlier in the chapter with participant demographics. All ten participants reached a consensus that they identified as weak writers. In addition to answering that they believed they were weak writers, the coding approach led to phrases of lack of confidence in expressing ideas in writing, lack of confidence in understanding writing prompts, and fear of judgment and evaluation. For example, Jada, in a journal prompt, shared her beliefs in her own writing ability. She stated: I do struggle with getting assignments like writing ones done because I start to overthink, and then I feel like the writing won't be good enough, and I have to rewrite it until I feel like it is good enough to turn in to the teacher. The essence of this subtheme was captured in a quote shared by Aidan when he wrote, “My level of confidence is between a 5 out of 10. It is really low because I’ve always pretty much sucked at writing essays.” Most of the participants had responses similar to Aidan’s and expressed low levels of confidence in their writing abilities that directly relate to their beliefs about their overall academic performance and success, which are associated with academic challenges and barriers that impede success at a 4-year university. Likewise, when asked if he had any challenges when trying to complete an academic writing assignment for a college class, Dominic responded:

> Oh, I got plenty. So, my biggest challenge when writing for a college class is trying to figure out how my instructors want me to write in college because the way I wrote before

> was different. So, the processes are slightly different, and the formats are different. So, it's definitely been a difficult transition into that writing style that I am not good at.

To illustrate further, Ryan shared, “I can usually piece together a well-thought-out essay with the sources and materials I need, but I do usually struggle in a couple of areas.”

Socioeconomic and Personal Challenges

The second theme that emerged from the individual participant interviews, journal prompt responses, and survey data was the socioeconomic and personal challenges that at-risk students face. This theme, along with the previous theme of academic challenges and barriers, provided the study with a better understanding of at-risk students attending a 4-year university experience who had yet to visit their institution’s writing center. Codes that led to this theme included first-generation college students, high school academic struggles, community college struggles, the cost of tuition, navigating personal events, and stress and anxiety. When asked to describe how participants felt about attending a 4-year university and if these perceptions influenced their academic experiences during the individual interviews, journal prompt responses, and surveys, participants expressed many socioeconomic and personal challenges. As introduced earlier in the chapter with participant demographics, most participants identified as first-generation college students. Many participants shared feelings of anxiety and stress when having to interact with university resources in higher education. In Olivia’s interview, when asked how she felt about having to visit the writing center, she shared, “I feel nervous because it's something new.” Similarly, Jada shared, “I was nervous 'cause I have a lot of anxiety around talking to people and sitting with people I don't know. So, I was like, I don't know how even supposed to start this.” In another individual interview, Ryan shared the same feelings of stress and anxiety. He stated:

> It's just like I have really bad social anxiety. I've had it really bad for a long time, and it sucks. It's like I really should go to the writing center, but I'm really scared to. I have a hard time planning things, so I'm like, I don't want to set this date and time, like just in case I'm really stressed, or I'm really tired, and I can't come in. I'm scared of coming in and talking to somebody. I have no clue why.

Furthermore, many participants' responses show they had difficult times in their previous schooling that impacted their academic futures greatly. For example, Daniel said:

> I graduated high school with a 2.7. And believe it or not, that put me smack in the middle of my class. I was like at the 50th percentile for all my graduates which put me square in the center. And so, I said, I don't really know if I can make it to a four-year university, so I joined the military.

Similarly, Elijah shared his specific struggles in English composition and writing performance during his prior enrollment at a local community college. He said:

> It's almost like you can’t develop your English skills better at the community college I went to. I took part of their English scale, English 97, 98, and 99, before they changed it. After I left, I took English 99 like four times, and I never passed it.

Navigating Student-Centered Resources

Navigating Student-Centered Resources became the third common theme found throughout the individual participant interviews, journal prompt entries, and survey response data. Codes that led to this theme included exposure to the resource, unawareness of writing center services, being disconnected from campus resources, and never using a writing center. Participants expressed that they either had never heard of a writing center before or that they had heard of it but had never attended one. None of the ten participants had previously utilized the

writing center at the four-year university or any other institution prior to their participation in this study. Furthermore, they would not have attended the writing center if it had not been a requirement of their English Composition corequisite course. In her individual interview, Sofia said, “I probably wouldn't have come here [writing center]. But since it's a requirement, it gave me that extra little push of like, no, you need to come.” Correspondingly, Aidan expressed, “My first thought was, I don't know, I'm already here. I'm already in this class. Why do I have to go to another one [writing center] for the same thing?” Daniel encapsulated the shared sentiment expressed by all ten participants. He shared:

> I would not have come here 'cause I'm stubborn and I'm one of those like, I don't need help. Turns out I did and I'm glad that I came here. Because I didn't even know that writing centers existed, you know? So this is a whole different thing for me.

Different reasons revealed themselves throughout the data collection and analysis as to why the writing center had yet to be utilized. In Emma’s individual interview, she shared “when I first heard about it, I was like, oh, I don't want to go to that because it's just like a waste of time.” Similarly, Olivia said, “At first, I was confused, and I didn't know what the writing center was. I was just like, why?” During Daniel’s pre-writing center reflection prompt, he contemplated a challenge he faced which involved the concern of going to the writing center and feeling inadequate for its services. He wrote, “I don't want to feel as though I am wasting the writing center’s time.” All remaining participants arrived at a unanimous disapproval regarding the necessity of attending the writing center to succeed in English Composition. For example, Jennifer remarked, “At first, I hated the idea of having to go to the writing center just to pass a class.” The essence of this theme was captured in Aidan’s reflective journal response. He asserted:

> I had believed I was placed in the English class for special needs students. I didn't want to go to the writing center at first. I originally made the meeting begrudgingly to appease the overlords who demanded visits to the writing center.

Building a Supportive Writing Community

The fourth prevailing theme across participants' individual interviews, journal prompts, and survey responses was building a supportive writing community. Previous themes and subthemes expressed in this chapter were to gather at-risk students' experiences prior to using the writing center. It is only after we understand their beliefs and attitudes about themselves and the writing center that we can explore the essence of the phenomenon of them actually using the student-centered resource at their 4-year university and what effects it may or may not have had. In varying degrees, all ten participants mentioned they felt supported by the writing center and identified it as a helpful student-centered resource. In Elijah’s individual interview he shared his experience. He stated:

> I think it's just a great resource that if you think you need help, they'll help you understand and maybe even just solidify that you do understand what it is that you're writing about and really make sure that you feel comfortable in knowing what you're supposed to be doing.

During her interview, Olivia also discussed how she felt supported through her writing center visits. Oliva conveyed:

> I think it's amazing. I think it's helpful. I get a lot of help and constructive criticism on my work. And they don't just put words in my mouth. They make me work for it. The people here are sweet, and they understand what I'm trying to work on, and they guide me through it step by step. And they're patient, too. Very patient.

Many participants discussed how the writing center was a supportive resource where they were helped and encouraged. In a survey response, Elijah revealed, “There is relief knowing there is useful help, that I don’t have to take on every assignment by myself. Also, to read aloud my essays, it helps a ton.” Oliva shared a similar experience in her journal prompt response. She said, “One of the most helpful parts about the writing center is getting feedback on my writing from experienced writers who know how to make my writing flow better while keeping it my own writing.” The supportive writing community extends face-to-face sessions as one participant mentioned writing centers online resources. In a journal prompt response, Emma stated:

> Even if none of the staff are available, going to their website to find solutions to the problem can be extremely helpful. Gaining this resource [writing center] has dramatically changed how I view my writing and my confidence in my work.

Collaboration

The first subtheme was collaboration, as participants in this study unanimously expressed the importance of the interactive process between the student and a writing center staff member who was providing the support. The essence of this subtheme was captured in Dominic’s reflective journal response. Dominic noted, “My sessions were undoubtedly helpful because I was able to talk through what I wanted to write and bounce those ideas off of someone.” Similarly, in Sofia’s journal response, she stated:

> They made me realize that it's okay to ask for help or for them to read your essay. It feels good to get feedback on what you need to work on or what your essays need. My writing process changed to learning more about my topic.

Olivia emphasized collaboration as well. She expressed, “I have learned that the writing center is a space to engage with other writers at the center, exposing me to different perspectives.”

Correspondingly, Elijah shared in his individual interview some benefits he encountered in a collaborative session. He mentioned, “They give you more suggestions, and it's up to you if you want to take those suggestions or even take the suggestions but change them just a little bit.” When asked what was her biggest takeaway was, Jennifer responded by highlighting collaborative elements of her experience with the writing center. She wrote:

> When you are with a writing center staff member, they ask you what you would like to work on, and in that moment, you know that there is an actual human being there for you, to help you and not make you ashamed of your writing. They will not say your writing is bad or that your writing needs work. They will just ask what your goal is for your session, and they help you reach it.

Furthermore, Jada said, “I kind of love being able to talk about like what I'm writing and how I can make it better.” All participants conveyed that there were significant insights from the collaborative interactions with the writing center staff. As Sofia put it:

> I like how at the writing center they keep asking questions which makes me think further into my topic and get out more details I didn't know were in my brain. It has guided me into asking myself more questions and figuring it out on myself. It made me realize that asking or having someone look at the ideas you have isn't bad. It is more helpful, especially in college.

Lastly, in her individual interview, Emma shared how she felt about the writing center. She said,

> I feel like if I didn't have the writer center as an option to go to, I would be so frustrated with my English. But since I know I have something that I can like lean on and go for help, I feel safer, I guess, in my academic English class.

In a separate response, Emma asserted, “I felt very seen and understood through my ideas.”

Writing Center Limitations

Within this theme of building a writing community, another subtheme emerged of writing center limitations that impacted at-risk students' use of the resource at their higher education institution. When the participants were asked during individual interviews, reflective journal prompts, and survey responses about any possible obstacles that may impede their use of the writing center now that they have used it many times, their responses highlighted the student-centered resources lack of availability. Daniel asserted:

> One bad thing about the writing center is how little space there seems to be if you aren't able to make an appointment and have to reschedule. Because of the writers' center requirements, everybody needs to sign up for 4-time slots, which is a lot since everybody in multiple English classes, so if you have a conflict come up, then you either have to go on a waiting list, or you need to go with a friend.

In a reflective journal response, Dominic wrote about his experiences. He explained, “The biggest problem I’ve seen with the writers’ center is scheduling conflicts. It is hard to commit to rescheduling an appointment due to the fact that they are required, and alternative appointments are not readily available. Many participants expressed that a frequent obstacle is the lack of availability and the limited staff. For instance, Aidan shared his concerns in his individual interview:

> I don't think they have enough openings. Even though they have a lot, I don't think they have enough. They don't have a very big staff. I do wish there were more spaces to have appointments, so I don't have to schedule so far out.

Congruently, Sofia mentioned, “The only con is limited time and gets full fast. When asked to reflect on any possible obstacles that may impede their use of the writing center, Olivia stated,

“just mainly that there's a lot of bookings.” Moreover, Ryan reflected that “If you like have to miss one or two for like personal reasons, it's hard to get in again. While recognizing that going to the writing center is advantageous, in an interview response, Emma revealed, “I think that it's a good goal to have for the students, but if it's like all booked out, then it's hard to get an appointment.”

Self-confidence and Academic Development

An increase in self-confidence and personally recognized academic development among at-risk students who used their 4-year university’s writing center emerged as the fifth common theme in the individual participant interviews, journal prompts, and survey response data. Codes that led to this theme included developing critical thinking and analysis, developing effective writing habits, developing a positive writing identity, and developing a positive academic identity. Participants unanimously agreed that they experienced an increase in self-confidence and belief in their abilities. In a reflective journal response, Emma expressed her experience, saying:

> I feel I am now able to sit for extended periods of time and not feel burdened by my writing; with my new grasp of the writing process, I'm able to actually enjoy myself because I have full confidence and understanding of my topics. The writing center has helped me grow my confidence; it taught me how to fully enjoy the research portion and the preparation part of writing an essay.

Similarly, in a survey response, Daniel declared, “It made me more confident as well as a writer. I need confidence in the methods on how to write and the writing center gave me that.” Ryan expressed, “The biggest one is to just be more confident in what I write. I have never liked writing, but I found that when I portrayed more confidence in what I wrote, it turned out better

than it had previously." Elijah, in a journal response, stated, "My level of confidence has significantly increased since visiting the writing center. Before, I was a bit unsure of my ability to write a sufficient essay for English classes, but now, my confidence is heightened."
In a separate response, Sofia wrote, "Going to the writing center made me feel a lot more confident and it has made me proud of how far my writing has gotten thanks to the writing center." As at-risk students continuously identified as weak writers who had limited beliefs in their current writing performance and growth, it is significant that every participant recounted from their experience an increase in self-confidence, renewed beliefs in their writing, and academic performance.

Writing Performance Development

The subtheme of writing performance development emerged when participants were asked in their individual interviews, journal prompts, and survey responses to reflect on their writing center visits and noteworthy takeaways. Most participants agreed that their writing performance had improved. For example, Elijah stated:

> It helps me look through my essay more on my own and make sure, you know, if this is what I really meant to say, and being able to see that this is kind of worded weirdly, so maybe I should change it. The writing center has helped me convey what I was trying to say and maybe even make it more of a solid point than what I was trying to make the first time by looking over it myself.

In a separate response, Dominic asserted, "I know now how to write it [essay assignments] to the collegiate level, start an outline, and at least begin on my thesis". Furthermore, Olivia shared in her journal prompt, "I have learned so many resources and techniques to improve my writing which I will keep with me while I do many more essays." Many participants shared various tools

that they will use on their own when they are tasked to write academically. Jennifer conveyed this theme of writing performance development succinctly in her journal prompt. She stated:

> I think my writing process is getting better because I now take the time to do a rough draft on paper and make sure I have all the components I need. Then, I'll put it into paragraphs and have an organized outline. After I'm done with that, I will go through and double-check my spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

Cross-curricular

During the study, participants were asked to describe their thoughts on using the writing center all four years of college without being required for course credit. This led to the emergence of the second subtheme of writing centers having cross-curricular benefits. In an individual interview, Jennifer offered her perspective on how to use the writing center. She stated:

> I think it's [writing center] something people should definitely utilize. Especially if they're having a lot of trouble with papers in any class or any assignments because it is really helpful they're going to think it's stupid, but once you come, you feel very good about yourself.

In another individual interview, Dominic explained, “Personally, I plan on using the writer center for the rest of my college career. Like I said, it's a very valuable resource”. Similarly, Olivia wrote in her reflective journal, “I will for sure be using this resource in the future for other essays or projects in all my classes I may have coming up.” In another response, Daniel described how he would use the writing center across disciplines. He stated:

> It has been extraordinarily helpful, and I would like to keep taking advantage of that for help in all my classes. It’s going to be very useful once I start using APA for research papers. Forensic chemistry as my major means I’m going to have a lot to look forward to

> in regards to learning and developing myself in that subject. The writing center is crucial across the majority of my subjects.

Additionally, several participants across data collection methods emphasized using the writing center for support in classes or assignments outside of their English Composition courses. Jennifer commented, “I can see using it [writing center] for writing assignments I may have in the future, especially as Senior Capstone.” Elijah stated he would like to use the writing center as well. He explained, “I can use the writing center for a second set of eyes to look over my work; it will especially help with writing papers for science classes.” In his survey response, Aidan suggested, “The writing center can help out beyond English Composition with analyzing skills because all classes and beyond college need skills with analyzing something and breaking them down more.” In her individual interview, Sofia described how she recommends scheduling time for the writing center when thinking about registering for classes. Sofia stated:

> I'm for sure going to use it. Like there's no question about it. I think coming up where I'm going to schedule my winter classes, I'm going to make sure that I can allow myself some time in there between my classes to be able to fit things like this in, like the writing center and other things that they offer here at the college. To help with all my classes.

Self-Efficacy Beliefs

Within this theme of self-confidence and academic development, another subtheme was presented that impacted at-risk students as a result of their use of the writing center at their higher education institution. When the participants were asked to describe their experience after visiting the writing center multiple times, perceived self-efficacy belief systems started to emerge. During individual interviews, reflective journal prompts, and survey responses, many participants described experiences of confidence in the ability to exert control over their own

capacity to fulfill the performance necessary to produce specific outcomes. Jada explained the budding of her own self-efficacy belief system. She stated:

> It helped me with the way I think and how I go about writing something. I struggle with English, I have my whole life and in my couple of visits, they've given me skills to think more critically. I've gotten better at just organizing my ideas on my own.

Furthermore, Ryan, in his journal prompt, expressed:

> The biggest one is to just be more confident in what I write. I have never liked writing but I found that when I portrayed more confidence in what I wrote that it just turned out better than it had previously.

In another journal prompt, Aidan reflected on his experience. He stated, "I don't feel so good about my writing capabilities, but I know that if I keep going to the writing center, my writing will get better."

Similarly, the concept of an emerging self-efficacy belief system was noted in Emma's journal response. She said,

> I feel I am now able to sit for extended periods of time and not feel burdened by my writing, with my new grasp of the writing process, I'm able to actually enjoy myself because I have full confidence and understanding of my topics. The writing center has helped me grow my confidence; it taught me how to fully enjoy the research portion and the preparation part of writing an essay.

Sofia shared one of her biggest takeaways from her multiple visits to the writing center. She shared, "What made the biggest impact on me was the way I felt like she [writing center staff] believed in me and made me feel comfortable in my writing. Now, I believe in myself, too." In his individual interview, Ryan conveyed, "I feel more confident in my first draft and more

confident that I'm able to make it better on my own because I had guidance in the beginning. It's helped me feel more confident in my writing abilities overall." Elijah conveyed in a survey response his emerging self-efficacy belief system. He mentioned:

> I received quite a bit of positive feedback, and it felt good to have someone else tell me that my ideas were worth talking about and that I sounded smart. I think about this when I am working on my own.

Olivia, in a journal prompt, stated, "The biggest takeaway I got was that I don't suck at writing." Daniel, in his individual interview, expressed, "My level of confidence has significantly increased since visiting the writing center. Before, I was a bit unsure of my ability to write a sufficient essay for English classes, but now, I know I can."

Outlier Data and Findings

During this data collection and analysis, one outlier theme emerged in the participant interviews, reflective journals, and survey responses. The outlier theme of intrinsic motivation emerged when participants described their various beliefs on their writing performance that were influenced by their experiences at the writing center and their ability to complete writing assignments successfully. For example, participants described feelings of an internal drive to work on their writing performance, enjoyment obtained from writing tasks themselves, and the desire to work on their writing performance not just to pass the course but to deepen their ability to share their ideas effectively.

Research Question Responses

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the beliefs and attitudes regarding higher education at-risk students' experiences with using their institution's writing center services in a public state university in the Northwestern United States. Individual

interviews, reflective journal prompts, and survey responses were used to understand the academic experiences of at-risk students' experiences with using their institution's writing center services. Data from all three collection methods has been used to answer the following research questions.

Central Research Question

How can at-risk students be supported cross-curricular by using their institution's writing center services? The participants' perspective is that their institution's writing center offers personalized, collaborative feedback and encourages the development of writing skills essential for success across diverse subjects, thereby contributing to improved writing performance across various disciplines. This targeted support builds confidence and enhanced academic performance cross-curricular. Dominic said, "I would like to use the writing center in the future for all my classes, even when it is not required." Similarly, Aidan shared:

> I am confident that one day, I will have the ability to write a strong paper without the help of a writing center and be able to spot mistakes in my writing on my own. Until then, I will continue to use the writing center to help me with any writing assignments and anything else I might need help with when it comes to writing.

In a survey response, Jennifer shared:

> Personally, I felt more confident and got some good explanations about various components of the assignment that I understood and could see in practice. Academically, I felt supported by the college and now see this as a great resource to use in the future.

Sub-Question One

What are the experiences of higher education at-risk students using their institution's writing center services? Participants unanimously identified experiences of feeling emotionally

and academically supported through their multiple visits to the writing center. Participants expressed that their confidence in their writing abilities was also strengthened. Collaboration through one-on-one feedback emphasizing revision and overcoming writing challenges was a significant factor that determined this experience. Olivia explained how the collaborative process of the writing center helped her in her writing process:

> The feedback I have received on my work has encouraged me to work harder because I know the writing center is only trying to help me succeed. The experienced writers have guided me through brainstorming techniques and helped me organize my thoughts in a more precise way by just asking questions to help me think. I am now less stressed when it comes to tackling writing assignments.

Moreover, Elijah described his experiences visiting the writing center. He voiced, "The writing center has given me lots of opportunities and ideas to become a better and consistent writer and be more creative as a writer."

Sub-Question Two

What attitudes do higher education at-risk students have toward using their institution's writing center services? All ten participants had not visited a writing center at their university or any prior institution before this study, with many not even knowing of a writing center's existence. Additionally, participants shared varying degrees of apprehension about using the student-centered resource before visiting the writing center; however, each participant conveyed that they found it to be a valuable resource, and they expressed their intention to continue utilizing it now that they have used the writing center. Jennifer commented on her attitudes toward the writing center visits. She explained:

> At first, I hated the idea of having to go to the writing center. I thought it would be a waste of my time. Looking back on my initial reaction, I misjudged the importance of getting such feedback on my writing as a college student.

Daniel described his attitude toward the writing center. He shared, “At first, I thought it was unnecessary for there to be 4 required visits for the quarter, but I severely underestimated how much the writing center would be useful to me.” Furthermore, Aidan shared in his reflective journal prompt:

> I never had anything against the writing center but didn't realize how much it would improve my writing personally. All in all, I can say that my earlier arrogance in not visiting the writing center sooner was misplaced. I was wrong. I had felt as if I was too busy to take an hour. Not anymore!

Sub-Question Three

What beliefs do higher education at-risk students have about using their institution’s writing center services? At-risk students in higher education have many challenges and barriers when it comes to academic success. All participants expressed that they believe the writing center improves their writing skills, enhances academic performance, provides valuable support in terms of feedback and guidance, and drastically strengthens participants’ confidence in their own abilities to accomplish any writing task. In a reflective journal prompt, Olivia noted:

> I would say my confidence has very much increased with going to the writing center now, and I don't think I could not use the writing center in the future for guidance and, overall, just reassurance in my writing. I am far more confident in my writing ability because I know that they can help me with anything, even just getting my ideas together, and help me start a paper without any judgment.

Jada agreed and acknowledged:

> The writing center helped me with my fear of English classes. It doesn't seem as daunting now trying to write an essay or gather information. Especially for a college class, that is way different than high school. I have way more self-confidence after every visit.

Similarly, Aidan revealed, "The biggest impact was academically because it helped my writing improve, and I learned how to analyze questions and break them down." Additionally, Ryan shared his beliefs about the writing center. He expressed:

> I believe that the writing center can help me become a better writer and help me achieve my goals academically. I also believe that they will give me a source of confidence when I'm feeling stressed or overwhelmed during the writing process.

Lastly, Dominic shared, "I believe the writing center seems pivotal to a higher chance of success on my new path."

Summary

Through individual interviews, reflective journal prompts, and survey responses, ten participants described their beliefs and attitudes regarding their experiences as at-risk students using their institution's writing center services in a public state university. The main themes from this data were *academic challenges and barriers, socioeconomic and personal challenges, navigating student-support services, building a supportive writing community, and self-confidence and academic development*. There was an outlier theme of intrinsic motivation that emerged when participants described their assorted beliefs in their writing performance that were influenced by their experiences at the writing center and their ability to complete writing assignments.

The central research question and sub-questions were answered, describing that at-risk students had many barriers to using this student-centered resource despite showing great need. Additionally, after using their institution's writing center, their beliefs and attitudes shifted toward the resource itself and inwardly about themselves. The data confirmed that at-risk students improve their writing performance and build self-efficacy beliefs through their multiple visits to their university’s writing center, thus contributing to enhanced academic performance cross-curricular.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The prevailing problem is that the at-risk student population consistently struggles in their first-year writing college courses in higher education institutions. While higher education institutions have free student-centered support resources, like writing centers, at-risk student population cohorts often need more confidence and motivation to seek out such resources independently (Nallaya et al., 2022). The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study is to explore the beliefs and attitudes regarding higher education at-risk students' experiences with using their institution's writing center services in a public state university in the Northwestern United States. Data was collected from ten participants identified by their university as at-risk and placed into first-year English Composition courses with a corequisite. The data was collected through individual interviews, reflective journal prompts, and survey responses. The data analysis procedures for this study employed Moustakas's (1994) Modified Van Kaam approach, including epoché, horizontalization, clustering themes, extracting essences, and structural description.

Discussion

Through data analysis, it was consistently evident from all ten participants that academic challenges and barriers, socioeconomic and personal challenges, navigating student-support services, building a supportive writing community, and self-confidence and academic development all influenced the beliefs and attitudes regarding higher education at-risk students' experiences with using their institution's writing center services. This chapter presents my insights into the study by providing a summary of each thematic finding. Furthermore, the chapter explores implications for policy and practice, as well as theoretical and methodological

implications, addresses limitations and delimitations, and concludes with recommendations for future research.

Summary of Thematic Findings

This transcendental phenomenological qualitative study aimed to discover at-risk students' beliefs and attitudes toward their institution's writing center. The data analysis collected from 10 participants throughout three data collection methods revealed five thematic findings: academic challenges and barriers, socioeconomic and personal challenges, navigating student-support services, building a supportive writing community, and self-confidence and academic development. These themes were crucial when understanding the utilization and underutilization of writing centers by at-risk students in higher education. Moreover, these themes offered essential insights into the self-acknowledged competencies and the concurrent cultivation of self-efficacy among at-risk students in higher education following their engagement with the student-centered resource. Additionally, it sheds light on the cross-curricular benefits, particularly in response to strengthening their writing performance. These thematic findings contribute to furthering the academic success of at-risk students in higher education through the use of writing centers.

Critical Discussion on At-risk Student Populations and Self-Efficacy

For at-risk students, facing academic challenges and barriers along with socioeconomic and personal challenges often erodes their confidence in their ability to navigate and succeed in higher education. This results in at-risk students in higher education experiencing lower levels of self-efficacy. This population of students continually encounters hurdles that directly affect their academic performance. On top of the factors that led them to be classified as at-risk, including but not limited to low socioeconomic status, first-generation college students, non-traditional

students, underrepresented minorities, or English language learners (ELL), they are tasked to traverse unfamiliar educational systems and their support services effectively. Inversely, at-risk students frequently avoid situations where they anticipate judgment or evaluation of themselves and their abilities, harming their ability to grow and develop academic competencies through student-centered resources. In self-efficacy theory, self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish particular tasks (Bandura, 1986). The study conducted among at-risk students enrolled in a first-year writing course at a public state university in the Northwestern United States revealed a convincing correlation between at-risk students understanding the benefits of the utilization of a writing center yet having a strong aversion to independently seeking out the resource themselves.

The research indicates that introducing the student-centered resource of a writing center to at-risk students is not enough for them to utilize it; rather, they need to be externally incentivized to seek out the support. In this study, participants unanimously were unaware of the student support resources of writing centers before their first-year writing course orientations. Moreover, all participants reported that they were hesitant to use the writing center or, before attending a session, were frustrated that their English professor was making it a requirement to attend. Although participants shared an initial interest in the student-centered resource upon learning of it, the awareness was not enough to overcome the additional challenges and barriers that existed to them in their individual lives: time spent away from other obligations, associated anxiety or stress, fear of judgment and evaluation, waste of time, and extra work. Participants faced challenges juggling school and work, struggling with inadequate time management and engagement. Frequently, they encountered time constraints that hindered their ability to study and complete homework, making the utilization of a writing center feel unobtainable.

Writing Center's Collaborative Pedagogy is Effective

To aid a student's writing process, the collaborative writing center experience can improve students' rhetorical development and audience awareness and strengthen individual agency over their own voices (Maffetone & McCabe, 2020, p. 53). The writing center environment incorporates numerous practices that provide diverse levels of support to students, depending on their needs, to empower the potential of their unique writing process. This support aims to enrich the experience through collaborative feedback, combined with multiple visits, to enable writers to adopt a more sophisticated understanding of writing and view themselves as capable writers (Maffetone & McCabe, 2020; Pfrenger et al., 2017). In the context of this study, emphasis on Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory on the role of an individual's belief in their own capabilities to organize and execute courses of action necessary to achieve specific goals, collaboration proved to be a significant factor to influence at-risk students' beliefs in themselves and their writing abilities. In my research, all participants confirmed that they felt supported and uplifted academically and personally during their writing center sessions and were likely to attend another session and, as a result, often achieved better academic outcomes on their essay assignments. Therefore, effective collaborative experiences, as demonstrated by the writing center pedagogy, are crucial in promoting at-risk student writing performance and building their confidence.

It is imperative for at-risk students to establish strong connections with writing centers at their higher education institution that create a supportive writing community and academic development environment. Furthermore, I found that participants associated the writing center with a friendly, inclusive environment where their voices were being heard and having their ideas validated propelled their desire to succeed academically. During this study, participants

noted the writing center's impact on their personal and academic development. They recognized the writing center as being a collaborative and welcoming resource that put them at ease and motivated them to utilize it more. After completing a minimum of four writing center sessions, most participants felt that they had connected with at least one staff member at the writing center and valued their guidance and mentorship.

Writing Centers Build Self-efficacy

During my study, I found that at-risk student participants affirmed that confidence in themselves and their abilities to complete academic writing tasks had been a significant factor in their writing center experience. Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory's interconnected and diverse structure includes self-efficacy beliefs that depend on personal factors (motivation, goal setting, attribution, and learning strategies) and social factors (verbal persuasion, external encouragement, positive feedback, and support) (Teng & Wang, 2023). Participants expressed how they experienced personal and social factors during the writing center experience that contributed to their overall beliefs and attitudes. All study participants expressed that in their writing center sessions, they felt supported academically through the writing center staff modeling goal setting, the one-on-one attention that helped them develop their writing proficiency by incorporating feedback into revisions, and the motivation to seek feedback at various stages.

In addition, and at a more profound stratum, participants expressed self-efficacy beliefs rooted in social factors significantly impacting their experience with their writing center. All ten participants expressed they felt highly encouraged and supported by the writing center staff, with two participants feeling so positively impacted they were overcome with emotion in their interviews. Study participants expressed difficulties understanding the writing prompts and essay

guidelines their professors assigned, which resulted in low self-efficacy to accomplish the task successfully and, thus, low motivation to complete the task. After visiting the writing center, students had a better understanding of the writing prompts and essay guidelines, and their beliefs and attitudes toward their abilities were strengthened; moreover, they were more inclined to continue working on their writing assignments that day with two participants motivated by their writing center visits to complete work for early course submissions. Furthermore, all ten participants expressed that their original fears of time spent away from other obligations, associated anxiety or stress, fear of judgment and evaluation, waste of time, or extra work were eliminated after their lived experience with the writing center. Regardless of how limited or nonexistent participants' self-efficacy was at the onset of this study, all ten students experienced degrees of strong self-efficacy after four sessions at their institution's writing center. Therefore, these findings demonstrate that writing centers strengthen personal and social factors of self-efficacy beliefs that ultimately build at-risk students' overall self-efficacy, positively influencing their personal and academic performance.

Writing Centers Provide Cross-curricular Support

The experiences of at-risk students using their institution's writing center are directly related to personal, social, and academic support that develops their writing aptitude and builds self-efficacy, which transfers to positive cross-curricular academic performance. Throughout this study, participants highlighted that they were gaining skills that were previously undeveloped, thereby strengthening their writing proficiency in higher education. Many participants reported that their writing center experiences significantly enhanced their approach to academic writing by being able to learn and practice research and writing skills in a supportive writing environment. All ten participants in this study commonly discussed how their strengthened self-

efficacy aided not only in their first-year writing composition course assignments but in other courses as well. Participants shared that they felt prepared to interpret assignment prompts; furthermore, if faced with a barrier in comprehension, they felt comfortable seeking out the writing center for assistance long after their first-year composition course ended.

Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory credits individuals with strong self-efficacy to show resilience when faced with challenges. Being resilient and seeking guidance to overcome those challenges leads to a deeper understanding and is part of the accepted continuous improvement process. This confidence and adaptability extend to recognizing when students may benefit from additional support, making them more willing to seek help from the writing center when faced with challenging material from any course (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997). I found that at-risk students, who at first struggled to find the value in visiting their institution's writing center per the requirement to pass their first-year composition course, were unanimously motivated to use the writing center for all other courses throughout their college career. Throughout the study, participants expressed their intention to utilize the writing center's resources for any of their classes during their college career. They conveyed that additional support is a reassurance, especially in courses where they are tasked to research and write. Many participants mentioned that they would use the writing center for personal writing tasks like resumes and applications. Thus, at-risk students' use of their writing center can influence their academic experiences cross-curricularly by directly developing their academic writing skills as well as building self-efficacy, which influences their motivation to seek out support when faced with challenges.

Implications for Policy or Practice

This study explores policy and practice implications for addressing the underutilization of

writing centers by at-risk student populations within higher education, leading to recommendations for higher education stakeholders about the specific ways to fortify writing centers' services that so diversly support this population of students. This section also illustrates how stakeholders in higher education can incorporate policies and practices that support the increasing population of at-risk students enrolled in public state university settings.

Implications for Policy

In exploring the lived experiences of at-risk students' using their institution's writing center, the research findings suggest that universities can enhance the integration of writing center services to provide targeted support for at-risk students and promote their success in cross-curricular coursework. Due to at-risk students' aversion and inexperience in utilizing their institution's writing center, implementing a policy requiring at-risk students enrolled in co-requisite courses to attend a mandatory number of writing center sessions may bridge the gap and help emphasize the importance of utilizing writing center services. Co-requisite courses can be used as a strategy for improving at-risk students' academic success rates in higher education who struggle with foundational courses (Heaser & Thoune, 2020; Petillo & Anuszkiewicz, 2023). Developing integrated curriculum designs that encourage integrating writing center support directly into co-requisite course curricula may help position writing centers into a more centralized role in higher education to reach this cohort of students.

Additionally, research confirmed that public state universities have student-centered resources like writing centers that are navigating shrinking budgets (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2018). Revising current higher education policies to allocate additional funding to support writing center initiatives may contribute to a robust resource that empowers this cohort of students without limit. Participants confirmed that their writing center experiences were only

limited due to the understaffing, full bookings, and prolonged waitlist of the student-centered resource. Within this study, participants found it challenging to reschedule writing center sessions due to the lack of resource availability. Likewise, all participants felt pressure and anxiety when faced with having to miss and reschedule a writing center session they had previously reserved. Therefore, a policy that increases the institution's financial support of the writing center may help alleviate this concern from at-risk students and further aid in the continued utilization of the resource. This policy would also improve the collaborative approach already in place in writing center pedagogy by providing their unique academic resource to more students in this cohort, potentially preventing students from failing gateway classes or dropping out altogether.

Implications for Practice

Across the scope of this research, it was clear that visiting their institution's writing center had a positive impact on at-risk students' writing performance and perceived self-efficacy. While all participants expressed similar barriers to initial visits to the writing center, once participants had experienced the resource, it was considered to add value to their academic and personal success. This emphasizes the need for additional support from stakeholders in higher education, specifically curriculum and instructional designers. Curriculum and instructional designers play a central role in shaping students' educational experience by developing curriculum and instructional materials and influencing decision-making processes with other stakeholders in higher education through their expertise. Recommendations for practice, then, include integrating writing center details throughout the course materials, requiring writing center visits for first-year composition courses, and training faculty on utilizing writing center resources.

Integrating writing center details throughout the course materials that reinforce the value of the student-centered resource both personally and academically may result in increased utilization via at-risk students, leading to more substantial cross-curricular achievement. Likewise, requiring writing center visits for first-year composition courses could have the potential to support at-risk students in these gateway college courses, which would help foster a collaborative and supportive relationship early on in their college careers. This collaborative and supportive relationship could empower students to develop academic writing skills, build self-efficacy, and forge valuable on-campus connections. Finally, it may also be effective to train faculty on utilizing writing center resources effectively to strengthen at-risk students' writing performance and build self-efficacy through the additional support outside of the course.

Empirical and Theoretical Implications

The essence of at-risk higher education students' experiences with using their institution's writing center services in a public state university revealed themes that support Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory framework and prompted empirical and theoretical implications. By investigating these empirical and theoretical implications, researchers can gain a better understanding of how writing center services can support at-risk students in higher education by developing their writing skills and enhancing their self-efficacy beliefs, thus aiding in their academic success and retention. Empirical implications include increased confidence in writing abilities, persistence and motivation, and improved academic performance. Theoretical implications include self-efficacy development and transfer of learning influence at-risk students' lived experience through using their institution's writing center. This study contributed to the literature by providing valuable information about the barriers at-risk students encounter in higher education when it comes to utilizing student-centered resources like writing centers and

how writing centers, through collaborative pedagogy, can improve a student's beliefs and attitudes toward the center and themselves to strengthen cross-curricular academic success among a population of students who face a higher probability of academic failure or dropout.

Empirical Implications

During this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study, participants emphasized increased confidence in their writing abilities after visiting their institution's writing center, along with attitudes of persistence and motivation and improved academic performance. The findings of this study align with the existing empirical literature and broaden the understanding of at-risk students' utilization of higher education writing centers. For example, studies demonstrated self-efficacy as a vehicle for academic success within higher education, yet at-risk students consistently have lower levels of self-efficacy (Nallaya et al., 2022; Perez et al., 2021). At-risk student populations in higher education being supported by writing centers has been studied (Heaser & Thoune, 2020; Wilder & Yagelski, 2018); writing centers' effectiveness at supporting at-risk student populations in higher education through building self-efficacy has also been observed (Wei et al., 2022). This study was situated in the lived essence of at-risk students who confirmed they had minimal to no self-efficacy before visiting their institution's writing center. After multiple visits, all participants declared strong positions of self-efficacy. The collaborative pedagogy of the student-centered resource was highlighted. Thus, by utilizing writing center services, at-risk students experienced improvements in their writing skills that led to a boost in their self-efficacy beliefs. Persistence and retention remain a concern among higher education at-risk students, especially concerning writing performance (Devet, 2016; Dix et al., 2020). The empirical implications of this study are that students who felt more confident in their writing abilities through writing center collaboration exhibited higher levels of persistence and

motivation in their academic assignments. Concurrently, motivation to complete and submit writing assignments, at first deemed challenging, was exhibited. Therefore, the need for further examination of whether at-risk students who utilize writing center services display greater persistence in completing writing assignments or show higher levels of engagement in writing tasks compared to at-risk students who do not use such services is necessary.

This study confirms the findings of previous research that suggests at-risk students have improved academic performance after visiting their institution's writing center. In several studies, students participating in developing their writing techniques and composition strategies at writing centers improve their academic performance (Farrell & Tighe-Mooney, 2015; Haen, 2021; Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2022). Positive correlations between at-risk students' usage of writing centers and improved academic performance support the notion that increased self-efficacy in writing leads to improved cross-curricular transference.

Theoretical Implications

The theoretical framework that guided this study was Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory. This theoretical framework posits that an individual's beliefs and attitudes toward their own capabilities to execute tasks or achieve specific goals significantly influence their behavior, motivation, and perseverance (Bandura, 1977). Moreover, this theory focused on four basic sources: mastery experiences, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and the emotional and psychological state of the individual (Bandura, 1997). Mastery experiences occur when a new challenge is practiced and then accomplished, resulting in the learner's acquisition of new skills. Vicarious experiences occur when a learner observes another individual performing a task successfully. Verbal persuasions refer to the beneficial impact that words have on someone's belief in themselves. Lastly, the emotional and physiological state of the individual highlights the

importance of a learner's well-being in the development and persistence of self-efficacy (Ooi et al., 2021).

In addition to literature underlining the importance of a student's overall belief and attitudes toward their capabilities to perform a task or reach a goal successfully, many participants spoke about mastery experiences they encountered through their writing center sessions and how they were able to practice a writing task connected to their first-year writing course and perform it successfully within their writing. Vicarious experiences were continually present in students' experiences as participants often reflected on writing center staff modeling a writing task as it applies to the participants' needs. Verbal persuasion was the most emphasized of the four basic theories continually recognized within participants' experiences. The empathetic writing center pedagogy translated into the staff validating students' hard work and effort and celebrating participants' various strengths. These aspects of Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory confirmed participants' reported experiences that utilizing writing center services provided at-risk students with opportunities to develop and enhance their self-efficacy. This was achieved through personalized, empathetic feedback from writing center staff, where students gradually built confidence in their writing abilities, leading to increased motivation and engagement in their academic writing. Moreover, participants reported a strong emphasis on the collaboration between writing center staff and themselves, influencing the perceptions of their own writing abilities through observing and practicing effective writing techniques in a supportive environment. These positive self-efficacy beliefs were internalized, and participants acknowledged their application to future writing tasks. This confirmation recognizes the role of transfer in applying learned skills and strategies to new situations that exist in Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory. For example, by internalizing effective writing processes and confidence in

their abilities developed through writing center support, at-risk students can apply their skills beyond the writing center, contributing to long-term academic success.

This study's findings consistently aligned with another existing theory, Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory. The crucial claim of social constructivism is that the development of one's own knowledge takes place primarily in social and cultural settings rather than solely within the individual (Vygotsky, 1978). For example, students learn effectively through interactions with their peers and knowledgeable experts, and that learning is heavily dependent on those interpersonal interactions and discussions (Newman & Latifi, 2021). Social constructivism regards learning as an active process where the learner must engage with the content and be actively involved in the development, which will help them apply and retain their knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). Motivation is a significant component of constructivism; learners must be motivated to engage in the learning process and be motivated to make necessary connections from past experiences to new learning to have a significant influence (Vygotsky, 1978). Social constructivism learning theory, by nature, is student-centered and built on students' preexisting knowledge, which is similar to the goals of writing centers in higher education. Both foci are on active collaborative learning, and through dialogue, educators help students construct their own personal knowledge (Van Bergen & Parsell, 2018). Additionally, the capability to learn and reason is largely grounded upon social experiences such as culture and language (Vygotsky, 1978), which can be found in writing center pedagogy and, thus, practice. In context to this study, participants expressed great benefit from working in collaborative sessions, receiving feedback, and engaging in reflective writing practices with an individual guiding them. Participants also identified that supportive and collaborative learning exchanges between themselves and the writing center staff directly influenced their overall motivation and academic

writing success.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations and delimitations are present in this research. Limitations are beyond the researcher's control. The delimitations were intentionally decided upon to define the boundaries and build the framework of the study. Limitations and delimitations must be considered and shared when generalizing the findings of this study of at-risk students' utilization of their institution's writing center. The following sections include a description of the limitations and delimitations.

Limitations

Three limitations of this study were sample size, limited participant population, and time constraints. The sample size of 10 participants was one of the study's limitations. If more students had served as participants in the study, the findings would have been different. Using this sample size to represent the beliefs and attitudes of at-risk students' experiences using a writing center at a public state university in the Northwestern United States may present a challenge in generalizing the findings because it is not an accurate representation of all at-risk students enrolled in a public state university in the United States. The sample size of 10 participants also presents a limitation in the variation of participant demographics. Considering that at-risk student populations encompass diverse identifiers that influence individuals' perceptions and experiences, the narrow range in diversity could affect how applicable the findings are to all at-risk students across the United States who attended sessions at their institution's writing center. Therefore, the limitation is that this may be only a partial interpretation of the findings. The time constraints of the study could also be a limitation. The journal prompts took place in class with an allocated time limit, which could have restricted

students' reflective writing. Another limitation of this study was that I am employed at a writing center in higher education and an English composition instructor with experience serving at-risk students. Therefore, I am accustomed to some participants' experiences, which could have impacted the findings. Following Moustakas's (1994) process of epoché, I bracketed my experiences in this research study using a reflexive journal in which I adequately approached each participant in a bias-free manner.

Delimitations

The three delimitations of the study include intentional decisions I made to constrain the study. Participants were required to be over the age of 18. The age range of participants was between 18 and 48, with most participants in the range of 18 to 21. Next, participants also needed to have been placed into a first-year writing course with an accompanying co-requisite course via their academic advisor. Lastly, I recruited at-risk students from a public state university whose writing center was professionally staffed. By selecting a professionally staffed writing center, the staff had advanced degrees in rhetoric, composition, or related fields. The professional staff had undergone training in tutoring and research methods, enabling them to provide more comprehensive and specialized support.

Recommendations for Future Research

While the participants in this study showed increased self-efficacy after visiting the writing center, there remains a significant need for higher education institutions in the United States to develop long-lasting support that intervenes early in their academic careers to establish transferable writing success across curricula. The findings of this qualitative study suggest further exploration of at-risk students' utilization of writing centers. Recommendations for future research include investigating barriers and challenges that affect at-risk student populations'

beliefs and attitudes toward their institutions' writing centers in other regions of the United States. Another recommendation for further study is at-risk students' experiences at their higher education institution's writing center, which is peer-staffed. A study with this scope would be beneficial for comparing the experiences of at-risk student populations with the differing writing center staff. A longevity study is recommended for future research to explore the enduring impact onset writing center utilization has on at-risk students throughout their 4-year college experience. A study of this nature could show cross-curricular transferability as well as the impact of integrating co-requisite courses that are embedded in student-centered resources.

Conclusion

This transcendental phenomenological study described at-risk students' experiences using their institution's writing center at a four-year public state university. Bandura's (1977) Self-efficacy theory was the theoretical framework that structured this study. This study sought to address the underutilization of writing centers by at-risk student populations by exploring this cohort's beliefs and attitudes toward the student-centered resource. The 10 participants' lived experiences were collected and explored through interviews, journal prompts, and surveys. Using Moustakas's (1994) Modified Van Kaam approach, data was analyzed to reveal the essence of participants' experiences. Aligning with the literature, at-risk student participants reported low levels of self-efficacy prior to visiting the writing center. Additionally, at-risk students had never heard of a writing center before their first-year writing course requirement and would not have sought out the resource unless externally incentivized. Findings from the research suggest that at-risk students utilizing their institution's wiring center a minimum of four times aids in developing self-efficacy that has cross-curricular transferability.

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Appendix A: IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

September 11, 2023

Lacey Sipos
Constance Pearson

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY23-24-119 EXPLORING THE WRITING CENTER'S ROLE ON AT-RISK STUDENTS' SELF-EFFICACY AND WRITING PERFORMANCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Dear Lacey Sipos, Constance Pearson,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

For a PDF of your exemption letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study details page. Finally, click Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page. Your information sheet and final versions of your study documents can also be found on the same page under the Attachments tab.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP
Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B: Site Permission Request

July 19th, 2023

Heidi Hillman
IRB Chair
[redacted] University

Dear Dr. Hillman,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Ph.D. degree. The title of my research project is EXPLORING THE WRITING CENTER'S ROLE ON AT-RISK STUDENTS' SELF-EFFICACY AND WRITING PERFORMANCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY and the purpose of my research is to explore the beliefs and attitudes regarding higher education at-risk students' experiences with using their institution's writing center services in a public state university in the Northwestern United States.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research at [redacted] University.

Participants will be asked to complete an in-person, audio-recorded interview, complete the attached survey, and complete 4 journal prompts. Participants will be presented with study information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on official letterhead indicating your approval. A permission letter document is attached for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Lacey Sipos

Appendix C: Site Permission Approval

From: [redacted]
Subject: IRB Application Approved (Sipos, Lacey)
Date: September 5, 2023 at 12:58 PM
To: [redacted]

EU

[redacted] **University Institutional Review Board**

Dear Lacey,

Your IRB application is approved. This email serves as your acceptance letter. Your approved application is below.

TO: Lacey Sipos – Principal Investigator

FROM: Heidi Hillman, Chair – [redacted] Institutional Review Board

SUBJECT: Final Approval of HS-6256: EXPLORING THE WRITING CENTER'S ROLE ON AT-RISK STUDENTS' SELF-EFFICACY AND WRITING PERFORMANCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

APPROVAL DATE: 09/05/2023
EXPIRATION DATE: 09/04/2024

Human subjects protocol HS-6256 entitled "EXPLORING THE WRITING CENTER'S ROLE ON AT-RISK STUDENTS' SELF-EFFICACY AND WRITING PERFORMANCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY" is approved as Non-Exempt - Eligible for Expedited Review research. A copy of your full application is below.

Please note the expiration date of your protocol approval above. The IRB makes an effort to remind you prior to expiration, but ultimately it is your responsibility to track this date.

If after initial approval, the research protocol requires minor modifications, the Institutional Review Board should be notified of those changes at IRB@[redacted] Any significant departure from the original proposal must be reviewed through a Change of Protocol application submitted to and approved by the IRB before the protocol may be altered.

Please refer to HS-6256 on future correspondence as appropriate as we file everything under this number.

Heidi Hillman PhD., BCBA-D, LMHC
Chair, Institutional Review Board
[redacted] *University*

Appendix D: Recruitment Verbal

Hello Students,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Ph.D. degree. The purpose of my research is to explore the beliefs and attitudes regarding higher education at-risk students' experiences with using their institution's writing center services, and if you meet my participant criteria and are interested, I would like to invite you to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older and enrolled in English Composition by an academic advisor. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in an in-person, audio-recorded interview (no more than 1 hour); review their interview transcripts, the developed themes, etc., to check for accuracy or confirm agreement (no more than 30 minutes); participate in an in-person, journal prompt response (x4) during class time (no more than 50 minutes); and participate in an in-person survey response during class time (no more than 50 minutes). Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

If you would you like to participate?

Please complete this consent form given to you momentarily and return it by placing it in the provided envelope. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me by the end of the class period.

Thank you for your time. Do you have any questions?

Appendix E: Participant Consent

Information Sheet

Title of the Project: EXPLORING THE WRITING CENTER'S ROLE ON AT-RISK STUDENTS' SELF-EFFICACY AND WRITING PERFORMANCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Principal Investigator: Lacey Sipos, Student/Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older and a college student who has been placed into English Composition via an academic advisor. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to explore the beliefs and attitudes regarding higher education at-risk students' experiences with using their institution's writing center services in a public state university in the Northwestern United States.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Participate in an in-person, audio-recorded interview that will take no more than 1 hour.
2. Participants will be asked to review their interview transcripts, the developed themes, etc., to check for accuracy or confirm agreement. Participants' reviews will take no more than 30 minutes.
3. Participate in an in-person, journal prompt response during class time that will take no more than 50 minutes.
4. Participate in an in-person, journal prompt response during class time that will take no more than 50 minutes.
5. Participate in an in-person, journal prompt response during class time that will take no more than 50 minutes.
6. Participate in an in-person, journal prompt response during class time that will take no more than 50 minutes.
7. Participate in an in-person survey response during class time that will take no more than 50 minutes.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

The expected benefits to society are improved educational outcomes for at-risk students and reduced educational gaps by providing extra assistance and promoting inclusivity. The expected benefits to the discipline of writing are an enriched understanding of the effectiveness of writing centers for at-risk students and advancing the pedagogy. The expected benefits to the literature are the possible identification of best practices that can be further explored and applied in future research when addressing the needs of diverse student populations.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

I am a mandatory reporter. During this study, if I receive information about child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others, I will be required to report it to the appropriate authorities.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and hard copy will be stored in a locked drawer. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then deleted. The researcher will have access to these recordings.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or Eastern Washington University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Lacey Sipos. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [redacted]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Constance Pearson, at [redacted].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, [redacted] Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is [redacted] and our email address is [redacted].

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Appendix F: Research Questions

Central Research Question

How can at-risk students be supported cross-curricularly by using their institution's writing center services?

Sub-Question One

What are the experiences of higher education at-risk students using their institution's writing center services?

Sub-Question Two

What attitudes do higher education at-risk students have toward using their institution's writing center services?

Sub-Question Three

What beliefs do higher education at-risk students have about using their institution's writing center services?

Appendix G: Interview Questions

1. Please describe your educational background and current proposed major. CRQ
2. Describe how you feel about attending a 4-year-university. SQ1
3. How would you assess your writing skills and performance: weak, satisfactory, or strong? Why? SQ1
4. Describe how you feel when tasked to research, read, and write at the collegiate level. SQ1
5. Describe practices you use when completing academic writing assignments prior to visiting the writing center. SQ1
6. Describe your challenges when trying to complete an academic writing assignment for a college class. SQ2
7. Explain any circumstances in which you have been to a different institution writing center. SQ1
8. Describe your thoughts on the writing center. SQ2
9. Describe how you feel after visiting the writing center. SQ2
10. What experiences have you had at the writing center that prepared you to complete an academic writing assignment? CQR
11. Describe practices you learned at the writing center that you can use in your academic writing process. SQ2
12. What obstacles or barriers do you have that hinder visiting the writing center? SQ2
13. Describe your thoughts on being required to visit the writing center for course credit. SQ2

14. Describe your thoughts on using the writing center all four years of college without being required for course credit. SQ2
15. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences with writing centers? SQ2

Appendix H: Journal Prompt Questions

Journal Prompt 1

Describe the level of confidence you have in yourself to successfully complete academic writing assignments without the use of your institution's writing center.

Journal Prompt 2

Describe the level of confidence you have in yourself to successfully complete academic writing assignments with the use of your institution's writing center**.**

Journal Prompt 3

Describe how visiting the Writers' Center changed the way you view writing or the writing process. Why or why not?

Journal Prompt 4

Describe your biggest takeaway from your writing center visit.

Appendix I: Survey Questions

1. Describe your writing center visit. SQ1
2. How do you feel differently about yourself or your writing capabilities since visiting the writing center? SQ2
3. What about the writing center visit made the biggest impact on you academically or personally? SQ3
4. How could the writing center's services help your academic or personal needs beyond your English Composition course? CRQ