

The Academic Projects Center and Student Success: An Evaluation of the First Two Years

Executive Summary

The Academic Projects Center, a service facility which offers one-to-one writing, research, and technology assistance, is a collaboration between the [University Library, Academic Technology and Computing Services](#), the [University Writing Center](#), and the [Writing Across the Curriculum](#) and [First Year Writing](#) Programs.

The APC offers point-of-need help with research, writing, and technology to students working on research papers and other academic projects. University Writing Center consultants, Halle Librarians, and technologists work together in the Center to provide project-oriented support. Since many of the projects or papers assigned to students contain a component for research, writing, and production or dissemination that involves information technology, and research and writing processes are significantly interrelated, providing holistic support for all the components of an assignment increases student learning.

The APC is one of the four primary sources of support for enhancing student writing at EMU. While the APC provides one-to-one writing consultations with students, the University Writing Center offers targeted workshops that can reach a larger number of students simultaneously. These units work together to provide experiences with writing that supplement the curriculum. Both units work in close consultation with the other two critical components, the First Year Writing Program and Writing Across the Curriculum, to ensure that the services provided are pedagogically sound and curriculum driven.

Assessment of APC's contribution to student success at EMU has been ongoing since the facility was opened in winter term, 2008. Despite limited hours (11-5 Monday-Thursday during the fall and winter terms only), there have been over 3900 consultations with students. Data on student usage has been tracked through a sign-in sheet since inception, and through an online feedback form since fall 2009. In addition, an outcomes-based assessment of the impact of the APC was completed in winter 2009.

The following report summarizes initial findings based on these three sources of information. Highlights from the sign-in and feedback form data follow.

- Usage of the APC in fall 2009 term increased 22 percent over fall of 2008, which indicates that despite the limited hours, the demand for service is significant.
- 65 percent of students identified a need for help with writing, with 24 percent requesting research help, and approximately 8 percent requesting help with technology.
- During the fall 2009 term, 24 percent of student visits were by graduate students, while an additional 44 percent of visitors identified themselves as juniors or seniors. This illustrates that the APC is not viewed as a place for remedial help, but instead as a support facility that can help students improve their abilities at any level.

- In response to the question, “If you could do one thing to improve the APC, what would it be?” the top student responses were more hours and more consultants.
- 95 percent of students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed with each of the following statements:
 - I feel more confident in my abilities after visiting the APC.
 - I am comfortable putting into practice what I worked on today.
 - The strategies I learned today will help me with other academic projects.
- 97 percent of students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed with each of the following statements:
 - I will return to the APC for assistance in the future.
 - The APC offers a valuable service to the EMU community.

Outcomes of the APC, according to an independent study conducted by a graduate student group from the University of Michigan, include the following:

- The APC encourages academic success.
- Students notice a marked development in academic abilities.
- Students take responsibility for their own learning.
- Students gain increased self-awareness and self-confidence.
- Students develop the ability to think through an assignment.
- Students value the role of the APC.

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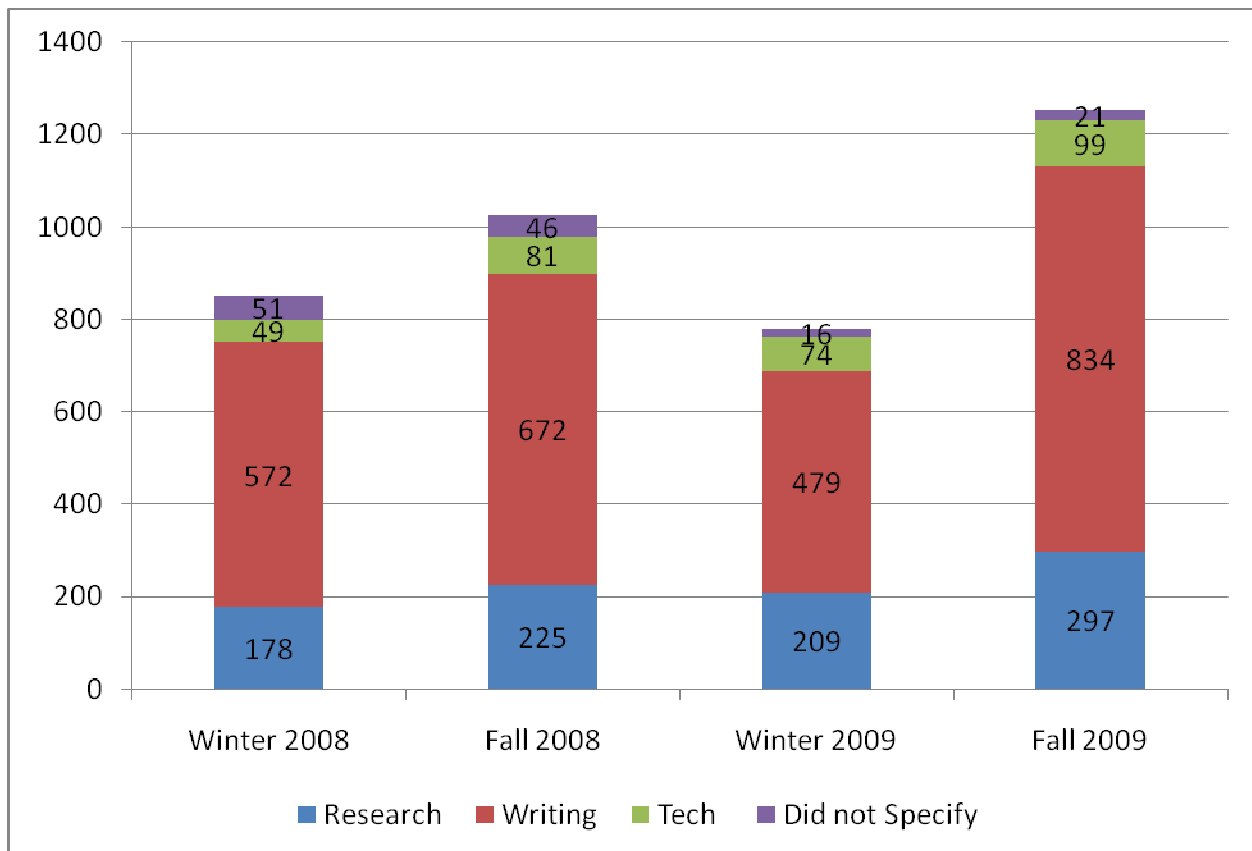
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Data on APC Usage from Sign-in Sheets, 2008-2009

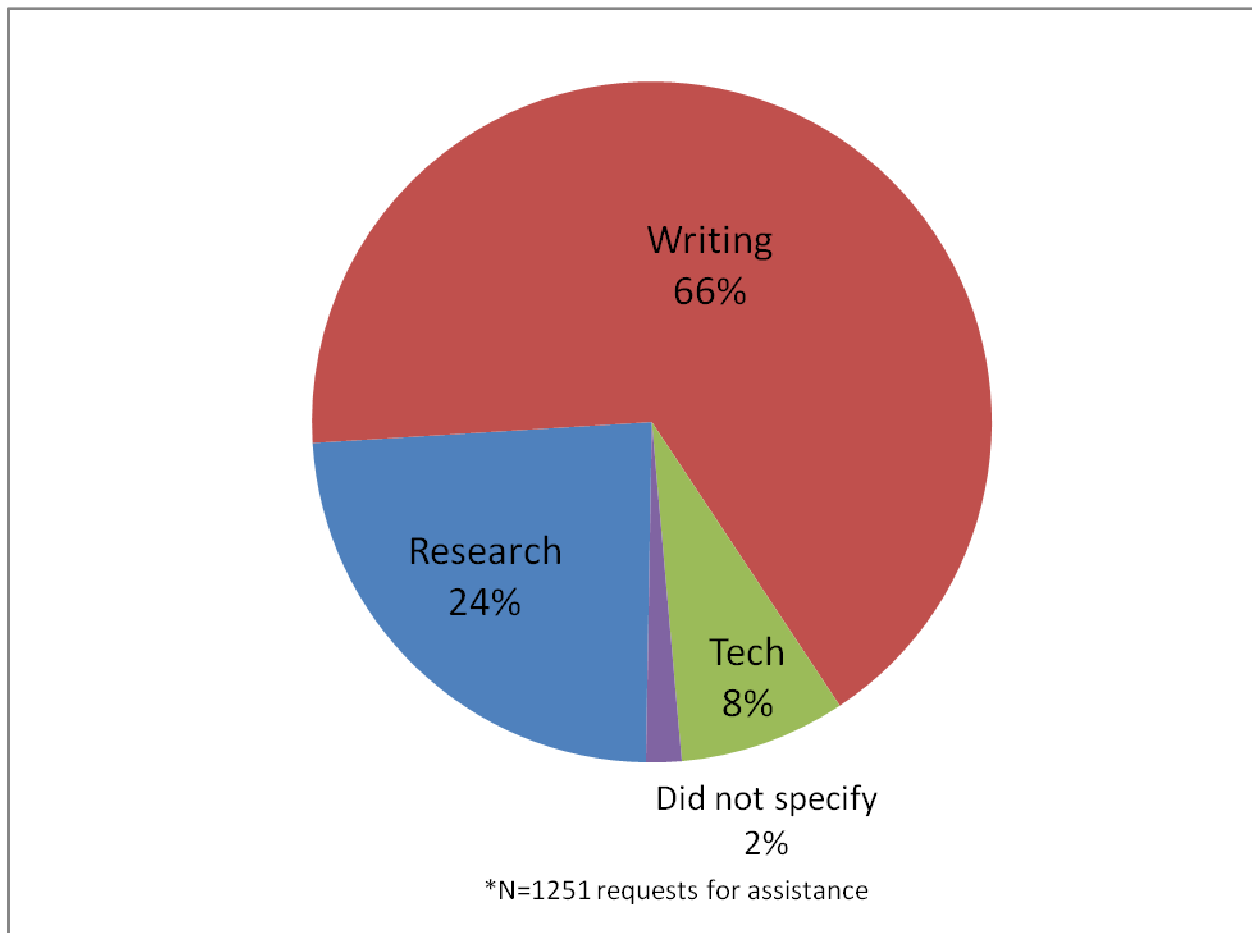
When entering the APC, students sign-in and indicate one or more of the three areas in which they are seeking help - research, writing, and/or technology. As seen in the graphs and charts below, usage in fall 2009 increased 22% over fall of 2008, which indicates that despite the limited hours, the demand for service is significant.

APC Requests by Need, 2008-2009



APC Requests by Need, Fall 2009

Of the 1251 requests for assistance in the fall term, the majority identified the help that they were seeking as associated with writing. However, since writing, research and technology are heavily entwined when working on a project, the distinctions are not always that clear to students. Often staff in the APC refer to the specialists in the other areas during a single visit, and these direct referrals are not always captured on the sign-in sheet.



Initial Results from APC Session Feedback Form, Fall 2009

After each visit to the APC, users are asked to complete a brief online form to capture data about the purpose and nature of their visit. Access to the form is available at: <http://www.merlyn.emich.edu/apc/>. Although a full analysis of this data has not yet been completed, this report provides a basic snapshot of the types of help that students were seeking this fall.

618 forms were submitted during the fall term 2009. This response rate is roughly 53% of the total number of unique visits to the APC for the term. The staff continues to strive to increase the response rate to this survey.

Top three strategies most frequently addressed in APC sessions in each area of help, Fall 2009

These options were selected from a list of possibilities generated by the coordinators in each of the three support areas. Students were able to make multiple selections in each of the areas for a single visit.

Writing

- *Using formal, syntactical, and mechanical conventions*
- *Revising*
- *Organizing ideas*

Research

- *Getting started with research*
- *Using library tools - catalog, database, Find Text+, RefWorks*
- *Developing search strategies*

Technology

- *Using Microsoft Word*
- *Using Microsoft Excel*
- *Using Microsoft PowerPoint*

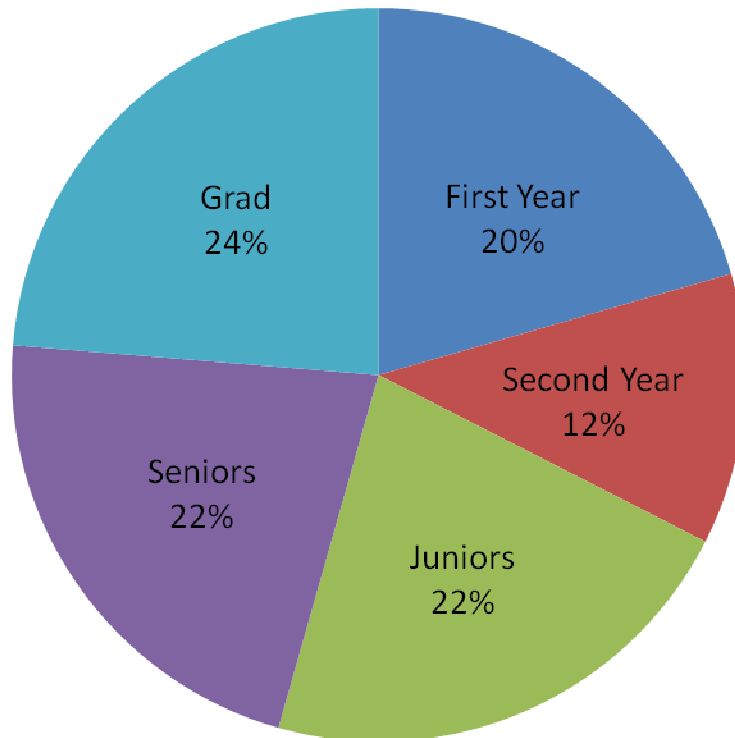
Examples of student assignments/projects, Fall 2009

Students seek help with a wide variety of projects in the APC. Although many are working on traditional research papers, students also seek help with other types of projects, as well as some that are not directly related to their coursework. Listed below are a few student descriptions of some representative projects.

- *I am getting help with my thesis and my human subject consent letter. I am conducting a user study and will write a thesis using that.*

- *I had to construct a graph for my lab report. The graph consisted of mean absorption vs. time. I didn't know how to construct the graph correctly.*
- *I am required to make a real life, non-fiction, book jacket that reflects my research conducted throughout the semester.*
- *The assignment is a mini-literature review on children and narrative. It is a part of a larger whole on how children learn about truth telling and lying from socialized narrative experiences.*
- *a outline for my speech*
- *I wanted another person to read over my College of Education Application Autobiography before I turned it in. I needed help with mostly my grammar and punctuation, but found that I need some more help in the content area as well.*
- *Find a research article on communication, then analyze the article.*
- *Spreadsheet on property foreclosure rehab and projected profit*
- *Listening research assignment- Annotated bibliography. 10 scholarly sources; 5 journals and 5 books/articles.*
- *Personal statement for graduate application*

Class Standing of APC Users, Fall 2009



* N=443, this question only. N=618 total number of feedback forms submitted.

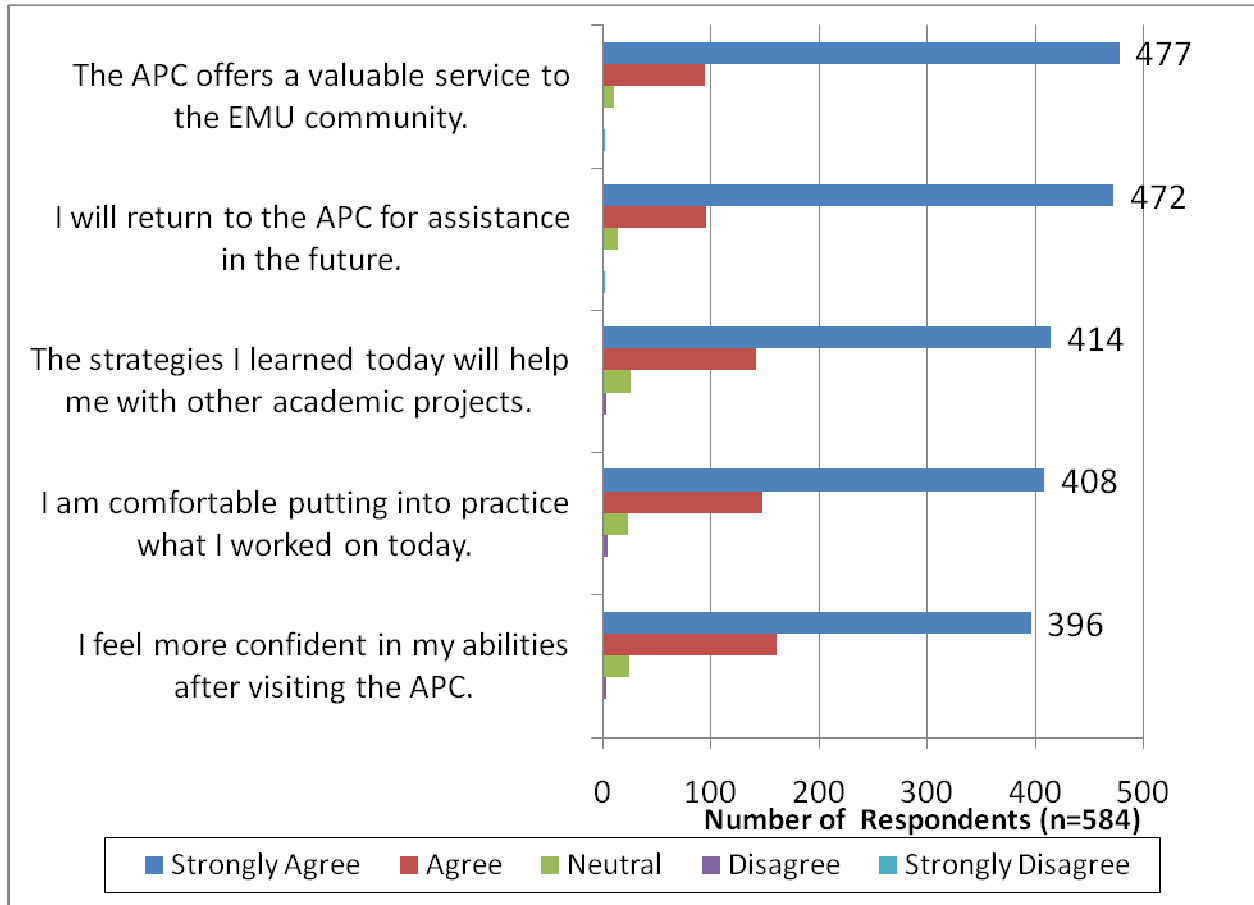
Users were well-distributed across the ranks, and the percentage of graduate students using the services was notable. This distribution demonstrates that the APC is not perceived as a place for students to obtain remedial help, but is instead a place where students can receive help in advancing their abilities to the next level.

The response rate for this question was particularly low, 443 out of 618 total responses. For the non-responders, the courses that they were seeking assistance with appear to be largely at the 200 level or above, with a significant representation of graduate level courses. Perhaps the distinction in language between the terms sophomore and second year caused confusion in answering this item, or the distinction between second year and junior is somewhat fuzzy on our campus due to the prevalence of part-time students.

Usage by Department, Fall 2009

The projects students were working with were from courses well-distributed across the schools and colleges as well. The heaviest usage for undergraduate coursework was from English Language and Literature: English (ENGL), Communications and Theatre Arts: Communication (CTAC), and History (HIST). At the graduate level, Leadership and Counseling: Educational Leadership: EDLD generated the most visits by unique users.

APC Session Evaluation Summary, Fall 2009



On the APC Session Feedback Form, students are asked to rate 5 statements on a 5-point Likert scale, from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

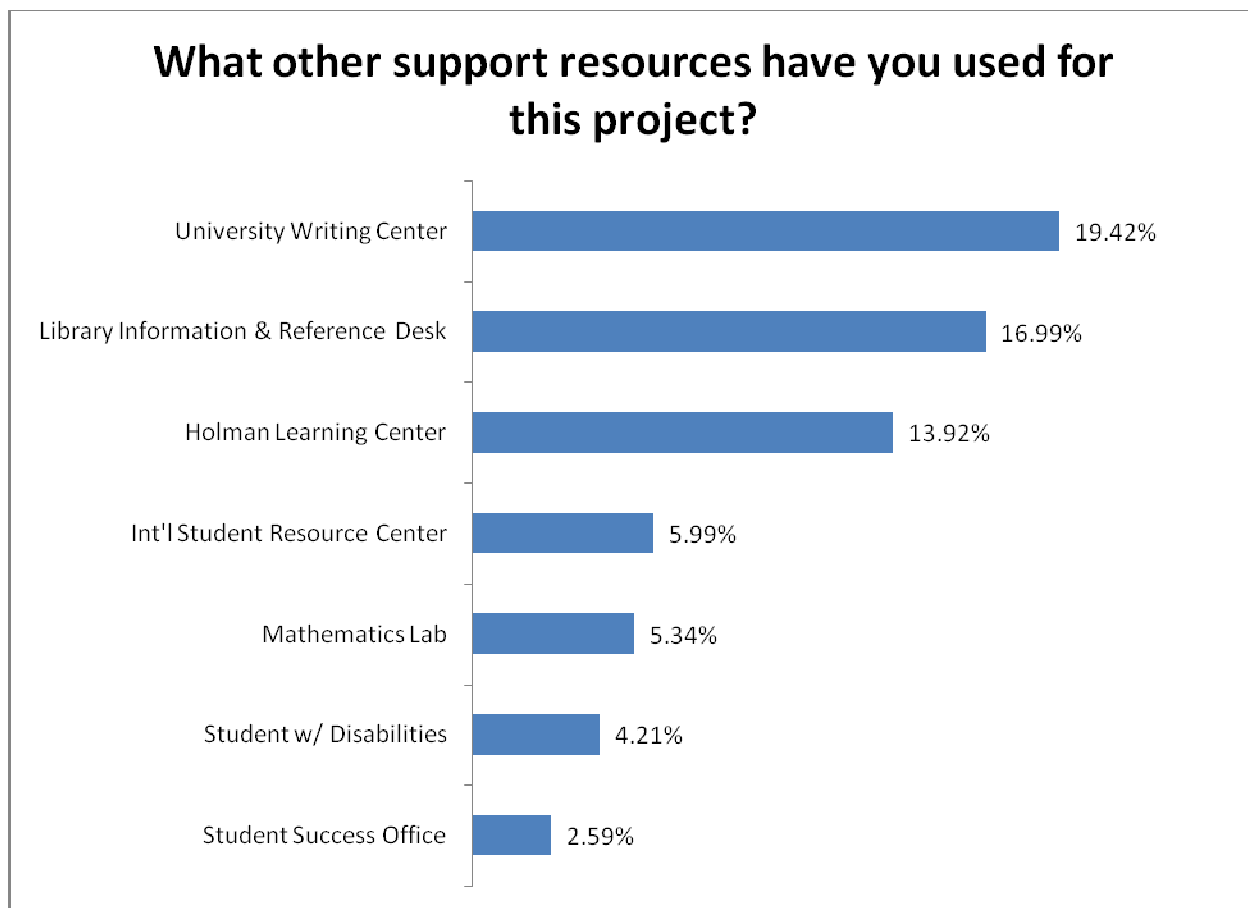
95% of students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed with each of the following statements:

- *I feel more confident in my abilities after visiting the APC.*
- *I am comfortable putting into practice what I worked on today.*
- *The strategies I learned today will help me with other academic projects.*

97% of students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed with each of the following statements:

- *I will return to the APC for assistance in the future.*
- *The APC offers a valuable service to the EMU community.*

Other Resources Used to Support this Project, Fall 2009



The University Writing Center, Library Information & Reference Desk, and the Holman Learning Center were the top ranked resources that students used in addition to the APC to help with the project on which they were working. Because of the collaborative nature of the Academic Projects Center, it is not surprising that both the University Writing Center and the Library Information & Reference Desk would be at the top of the list, due to the fact that cross referrals are made frequently to users of these services. The lower usage of Holman is likely due to the fact that they do not provide support for courses beyond the 200 level, which as indicated by the class standing figures above, would not be of help to the majority of APC users.

Top three responses to the question “If you could do one thing to improve the APC, what would it be?” Fall 2009

- *more hours (evenings, weekends, Fridays)*
- *more consultants*
- *snacks*

Other comments from APC Users, Fall 2009

- *The person who helped me gave me her full attention and I really appreciated that and she was just as excited about my project as I am...*
- *I had an awesome experience at the APC. The employees were very congenial and very, very helpful!*
- *It was wonderful to sit down and discuss certain items with knowledgeable people. It really inspired me to dig deep when writing this paper.*
- *Your tutoring have a great positive attitude and a readiness to help and encourage. Therefore, my confidence in my writing skills has improved and I am improving.*
- *...I was taught different tools to help me in my writing that I could apply again to other papers.*

Results of Outcomes-based Evaluation, Winter 2008

In addition to the regular collection of usage data from both the APC Session Feedback Form and the sign-in sheets, an outcomes-based evaluation of the APC was conducted during the 2008 winter term by a group of graduate students, Jenica Baty, Emily Gierada Cogswell, and Jill Zawacki, as part of their work in SI 623, Outcome-Based Evaluations of Programs and Services, at the University of Michigan School of Information. Observation sessions were performed to establish the context of the evaluation and to gain an understanding of the actual day-to-day functioning of the APC. Multiple interviews were conducted with APC staff members and students who utilized the Center's services. From these inquiries, the following outcomes were identified at both the level of individual students and the broader university community. Excerpts from their report are included below, and have been edited for length and clarity.

The APC Encourages Academic Success

Many students who have utilized the APC often visit after exhibiting a noticeable need for help to their professors or other campus support staff. Putting in extra work that results in a higher grade gives students an immediate sense of accomplishment that they can reflect upon as they continue to work their way through school. As a result, students continue to work harder, are less afraid of asking for help, and generally have a more positive college experience than those who suffer through schoolwork and academic issues alone. Students were generally forthcoming with their observations:

"They help me mostly revise my papers and yes, I do get a better grade in the class thanks to them." (Student)

"[When asked if they received a higher grade after going to the APC] Yes, all A's." (Student)

Based on student responses, an outcome with the most direct and measureable impact was the increased student ability to succeed in a particular class in which they had previously experienced difficulty. Both in direct questions and survey answers, students mentioned improved performance as one of the more observable reasons they continue to frequent the APC:

“Because I don’t have other people to help me, I don’t think I can even pass the classes I am taking without your help.” (Student)

“[When asked if the APC helped them pass a class] 4.0!!” (Student)

The importance of this outcome as an academic building block is crucial to understanding the larger impact of the APC, as so much stems from succeeding in a college-level course: increased interest in learning, increased level of self-confidence, and the eventual completion of their degree. For the university, eventual long-term outcomes may include increased student retention and a higher rate of employment for graduates.

Students Notice a Marked Development in Academic Abilities

Both students and staff questioned noticed a marked improvement in many of the most critical academic abilities required of students at the collegiate level. The APC supports the diverse student population at EMU, which includes students that have had insufficient collegiate preparation in high school, international students struggling with English, or returning students that may need to refresh their approaches to writing and research. Students often mentioned that time spent at the APC resulted in improved ability to address whatever area was giving them the most trouble:

“I am not good with grammar, so that is the main reason why I go so often. Thanks to them, I am improving, too.” (Student)

“I have been back. And each time I have less and less mistakes on my papers.” (Student)

“The teachers were great and patient. I feel my English is improved after being helped by you.” (Student)

Additionally, the APC staff reinforced this point through their experiences. Staff expressed that they sought to guide students in addressing their academic challenges by helping students apply strategies that they could use to work through the problem at hand.

“He seemed to be able to do the data management pretty autonomously by the end of our session.” (Staff)

“I had the basics [of research] but did learn lots of handy shortcuts on searching from working with the librarian at the APC.” (Student)

By teaching and guiding, the APC helps students to develop the academic strategies needed to succeed – both in future coursework, and in the workforce. Much of what is learned and reinforced in the APC can be directly applicable to any career an EMU student enters upon graduating from college.

Students Take Responsibility for Their Own Learning

The APC puts students in a position to take direct control of their own learning and aids in their realizing the value of their learning experiences. Instead of simply completing academic assignments, students are encouraged to invest more in the learning process, thereby making more out of the opportunities offered in the assignment. Both students and staff noted this distinction:

“I have always gone voluntarily.” (Student)

“I think they began to absorb the idea that they would have to take responsibility for their research project, but that we could help...” (Staff)

“She had brought a draft essay for a freshman-level class because last time the teacher had marked all over her essay. The student said, ‘but I don’t know what I’m doing wrong.’” (Staff)

“I think it teaches them that research is a time-consuming process, and it isn’t just something that you can walk up to a desk and get answers to, in most cases.” (Staff)

In many cases, students feel that the need for academic help is stigmatized, which then causes them to feel uncomfortable asking for assistance. The APC provides an environment for the students of EMU that is open and comfortable. Students who have the opportunity to utilize the APC become more than effective students; they also develop skills that they carry into their adult lives. Students who learn to take responsibility for their own learning will be more likely to take responsibility in their personal and professional lives.

Students Gain Increased Self-Awareness and Self-Confidence

The growing self-confidence and self-awareness of EMU students who utilize the APC is evident in both student and staff responses. The Center provides students with an environment in which it is safe to be wrong, as well as ask questions. As they learn and grow, they become stronger and more confident to face the challenges that lie ahead. In interviews, students mentioned gaining a stronger awareness of themselves and their academic abilities:

“Also, I have improved...I have seen it in myself, along with them telling me.” (Student)

Staff members in particular recognized several students who, might have become seriously discouraged, had they not been given the chance to work with their challenges at the APC. The APC provided them with a safe environment in which to discover themselves and their talents.

“I think this student had never quite articulated to herself that she spoke a kind of English that was not the same as Standard English. By suggesting that it was just fine to speak the way she did but at the same time that she would need to master the formal style, I helped her gain perspective on her struggles with writing while keeping her dignity.” (Staff)

“The student seemed confused and discouraged. I asked the student to verbally explain what was in the article without looking at the article. As the student spoke, I jotted down notes. After the student finished explaining the article to me, I showed the student my notes and explained that this verbal explanation was his summary. The student seemed greatly relieved and said that he thought he could now complete his assignment.” (Staff)

Students Develop the Ability to Think Through an Assignment

Many staff mentioned that after helping students through consultations, the students demonstrated a marked improvement in their abilities to analyze and interpret their academic assignments. At a large university where many students often do not receive one-on-one support, this outcome is paramount. While, due to email and electronic classroom resources, professors often seem more available to students than they may have in the past, professors often still leave the interpretation of an assignment in the hands of the individual student. Staff members have observed that students often need the services the APC offers to make sense of their assignments:

“Student taking humanities course... appeared self-conscious... Waited two weeks to come in, described assignment (write a parody), mapped out approach to assignment (genre, etc.) What did she need to do?, had her define parody, she began to describe “parity”” (Staff)

“I started the session by asking each of them to interpret for me what they thought the assignment meant and what they thought their first steps might be. They talked with each other, looked in their notes and agreed they needed to ask their prof. some questions.” (Staff)

During data collection, many comments were gathered on how helpful the APC has been to students in organizing their thoughts and focusing their assignments:

“Some of the people who helped me get to know the assignment and all the instructions and consider that when they review my writing and give me suggestions and correct my grammatical mistakes.” (Student)

“Throughout the activity, the student was able to organize her ideas and her paper. The student left saying that she felt like she was capable of placing her “like” ideas together, therefore creating a more coherent essay.” (Staff)

Students Gain a Sense of Reliable Support

The APC offers a safety net to many students who attend EMU. Many have already incorporated the APC into their extended network, returning several times to receive additional help on projects or papers. Several students expressed the idea that without the APC, they would be essentially alone in their academic endeavors. One student in particular made this comment:

“[Why did you come to the APC?] Because I don’t have other people to help me.” (Student)

Other students mentioned that the APC offered them the chance to collaborate on their assignments and generate more worthwhile material than if they were to work alone:

“They were a great help. In fact, I came back two more times before I had all of my research completed. The first time we were both sure I had everything that I would need to write the paper. However, many of the articles did not work out. I returned and we tackled the question from different angles with different databases.” (Student)

“[I]f accidentally I find the same person I think that is more helpful because they already know what it is about and what I need help with.” (Student)

Having a support network is very important to many students and is a key factor in success during college. The role the APC plays in this regard is an important one, and should be considered very seriously when making any decisions regarding its future.

Students Value the Role of the APC

Student attitudes and opinions regarding the APC are very strong. Both students and staff agree that many students would simply be lost if the APC were not an available resource. Independent of their views of the library as a useful resource, many students have definitely identified the value in what the APC offers them in terms of help and openness. The staff seemed most acutely aware of the impact of the APC:

“I’m not sure of the benefits, as no one has come back to me and said “Hey, I got an A”, but it seems they would be quite stuck if they did not have the service based on where they are when I see them”. (Staff)

“Education is about not knowing, what do you do in those instances where you don't know? - APC seen as a place where not knowing is okay.” (Staff)

However, several students made a point to mention how important the APC has been to them:

“Please keep the APC program open. It is so helpful and the tutors are so nice. I am very happy with your program and appreciate it a lot.” (Student)

“[T]hanks for all that they do, if I could change anything it would be the hours.” (Student)

“I think you guys are doing a great job.” (Student)

By providing this space for students, the APC is giving them a chance to take control of their lives and make the most of their college experience.