

Writing Center Consultant Bios: The What, The Why, and The How

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While writing centers frequently make consultant bios available for clients, there is not much significant literature on the subject, and among those who use bios, some do so without always considering all of the implications of them. In our own writing center, when clients go to WCOOnline (the online scheduling platform for The Writing Center at Michigan State University) to schedule a one-on-one appointment, they have the option of viewing individual consultant bios while scheduling an appointment. While we make our bios available through WCOOnline, other centers may make theirs available on their website, in their physical center, or another location. Bios can be used by clients in a variety of ways, including looking for someone with the same disciplinary expertise or trying to find someone who is the same academic rank. For example, if a client is working on a biology paper, they may want to find someone who is a biology major or has some knowledge of that field. Or, if a client is a graduate student, they may want to work with another graduate student. While these are obvious and anecdotal ways that we know clients use bios, there is much that we don't know about consultant bios and how they affect the ways in which clients either choose, or don't choose, to work with specific consultants as well as the influence bios have on a client's scheduling choices.

Writing center consultant bios, at first glance, appear innocuous. At least in part because of this view, writing centers can be reactionary when it comes to bios; rather than create policies for bios before deciding to use them, writing centers often handle issues ad hoc and create policy as needed. At our own institution, The Writing Center at Michigan State University has long used bios but has not implemented any standard policies or rules for creating them; instead, we encourage new consultants to look at the examples of experienced consultants or to write whatever they might want. This process leads to a broad variety of bios, although new consultants generally follow what other, more experienced consultants, have done. Recently, in an effort to understand more about bios, and their effects on clients and consultations, we began to research this topic with the help of an Undergraduate Research Initiative grant from MSU's College of Arts & Letters.

Bios for consultants do seem like a natural thing for writing centers to make available, and there are many reasons a center may utilize them, including:

- To introduce consultants to clients
- To help clients choose a consultant to work with
- To demystify the writing center
- To help align student needs with consultant abilities
- To highlight different strengths among consultants
- And more

Even though many writing centers use bios, it is important that bios are approached deliberately and thoughtfully, particularly because they intersect in significant ways with issues of identity, which can result in implicit and explicit bias. This is just one of many areas that writing centers must balance the consultant's needs with that of the clients.-

Some writing centers choose not to have consultant bios, often because of the viewpoint that consultants are interchangeable or to protect the privacy and safety of consultants. But for those that do, bios are a potentially fraught issue in writing centers because they can expose and disrupt what Jackie Grutsch McKinney calls the "cozy home" (McKinney 20). She writes that the idea of a cozy home is part of the writing center's grand narrative, in which "Writing Centers

are comfortable, iconoclastic places where all students go to get one-to-one tutoring on their writing” (McKinney 3). Bios can both reaffirm and disrupt this grand narrative, and challenge the boundaries of the center, because they involve identity, and are necessarily intersectional, which can both welcome people in or shut them out. And anything that involves identity has become increasingly important for writing centers. Harry Denny, in his work *Facing the Center*, highlights the importance of identity; for Denny, “To face the center isn’t just about knowing the who and appreciating the complexity of identities, both marginal and privileged; it’s also about the politics of our processes, how we face and to what impact” (6). Bios can help writing centers consider the identities of their consultants as well as the identity of the center itself.

In this work, we argue that writing centers must examine the implications of bios; furthermore, we argue that considering bios provides an opportunity to think about what writing centers value. In our next section, we discuss our qualitative and quantitative research methods. After the methods section, we make the case for why bios are important before exploring four different components that writing centers should consider when thinking about or using bios. The first enters the debate over whether bios should be more personal or professional in tone and content. The second is the choice of whether or not to include photos with bios. The third addresses whether to include identity markers in bios. The fourth, and last, examines the most common information included in bios (rank, major, and writing preferences). For each of these sections, we trace multiple sides to each issue without necessarily recommending one over the other but, rather, drawing attention to these components to prompt critical thinking and conversation about bios.

Methods

This IRB approved project uses qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a broader understanding of consultant bios from the perspectives of clients, consultants, and administrators. Questions were generated from research into how other writing centers use bios, our research into bios both inside and outside writing centers, and our own experiences with bios. We surveyed clients and consultants while interviewing consultants and an administrator. By interviewing an administrator, we hope to understand the role of consultant bios from an administrative perspective. Through surveys and interviews with consultants, we want to understand how they craft their bios and what type of information they may include. And, through surveys, we want to understand whether clients even look at bios, what type of information clients look for in bios, and how that might help them choose a consultant.

Client Survey: We sent this survey to all clients from 2012-2017 and collected responses for two weeks. 244 respondents completed survey. The client survey had 17 questions and focused on if and how clients factor in consultant bios when they make an appointment, the accessibility of bios, and demographic questions such as year and major at MSU. In the survey, the majority of the questions were multiple choice or asked the participants to rank answers based on what they thought was the most or least important. Participants also had the option of explaining their answers with short text boxes.

Consultant Survey: This survey was sent to all current consultants in The Writing Center. 43 consultants completed the survey, which consisted of 17 questions and focused on how consultants write their bios, what information they choose to include, and what information they feel is important to include in a bio. We also asked about the

writing style of their bio, whether it is in first or third-person, and demographic questions such as academic year, major, and duration of employment at the center.

Consultant Interview: We interviewed six consultants to gain better insight about their own bios as well as how bios are used. Of these six consultants, three were female and three were male; three were graduate students and three were undergraduate students; three of these consultants also had been working in the writing center for over three semesters while three had been working for the writing center under three semesters. We felt that interviewing consultants that fit into different demographics was important to gain diverse perspectives. In these individual interviews, we asked questions, thirteen total, focused on the influence their bios have in their consultations as well as what information they choose to include in their bio and why. We also asked them if they thought there could be any revisions to how consultant bios are displayed in order to better aid the clients while making appointments.

Administrator Interview: We interviewed Trixie Smith, Director of The Writing Center at Michigan State University. There were nine open-ended questions about consultant bios in order to determine how an administrator views the bios, how they imagine bios are used, and the kinds of information they want included in the bios. Questions included: What is the main message consultant bios are supposed to provide for students?; What kind of information are consultants encouraged to include in their bios?; and, Is there any information they shouldn't include?

Making the Case for Bios

Many writing centers use consultant bios that are public-facing and available for clients. One part of our research was to determine the effectiveness of consultant bio for clients because, while we assume they are effective, we have not previously conducted a study into them. Likewise, during our research, we did not find any other center or researcher that systematically looked at consultant bios. Our client survey received 244 respondents, representing a wide spectrum of students:

- 51.23% reported to be undergraduates, 40.16% reported to be graduate students, and less than ten percent reported to be staff, faculty, or “other.”
- 63.52% of respondents noted English is their first language while 36.48% of respondents noted that English was not their first language.
- Respondents represented all the colleges and schools at the institution, with the most respondents from the College of Social Science, College of Education, College of Natural Science, College of Arts and Letters, and the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources.
- While 30.74% of respondents reported making one appointment at the center, 36.07% of respondents made 5 or more appointments.

Survey responses from clients were looked at in a variety of ways. First, they were combined into a general population. Second, graduate students were compared to undergraduate students. Third, ELL (English Language Learning) students were compared to native English speaking

students. Lastly, those who have had five or more appointments were compared to those who schedule two or fewer appointments.

Our research demonstrates that bios are wanted and appreciated by clients, especially by those who use the center frequently. A majority of clients indicated that they read consultant bios, found them to be influential, and highlighted the influence of bios on consultation choices. A large number of clients, 75.00%, responded that they read consultant bios and 71.31% of respondents indicated that they factor in consultant bios when scheduling a consultation. When asked about the importance of consultant bios, 43.03% of respondents indicated that they were “very important,” 31.97% chose “moderately important,” 18.85% chose “slightly important,” 2.46% chose “not important,” and 3.69% responded that they do not consider consultant bios. In terms of the influence that a consultant’s bio has on a client’s decision to schedule an appointment, over 71.00% reported that the consultant’s bio is either very influential or moderately influential. 18.03% of respondents reported that the consultant bios are slightly influential when scheduling an appointment, and less than 11.00% of clients reported that consultant bios are not influential or bios are not considered at all.

Responses by ELL students and native English speaking students, as well as between graduate and undergraduate students, were similar regarding the importance of consultant bios; the main difference is how each group valued the consultants indicated ability to work with ELL students. While native English speaking students were not looking for, nor ranked as important, a consultant’s indicated ability to work with ELL students, ELL students both valued and ranked highly this ability.

There were also key differences in responses from clients who use the center five or more times and those who use the center two or less times. The two questions that elicited the most different responses are “Do you factor in consultant bios when scheduling a consultation?” and “How important are consultations to you?”.

For those who make 2 appointments or less:

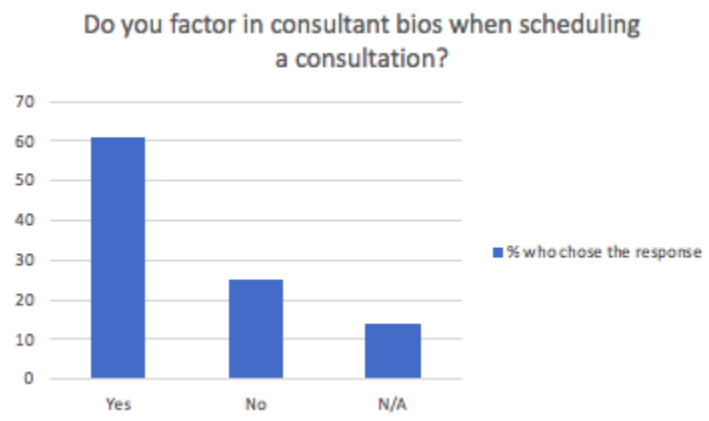


Figure 1

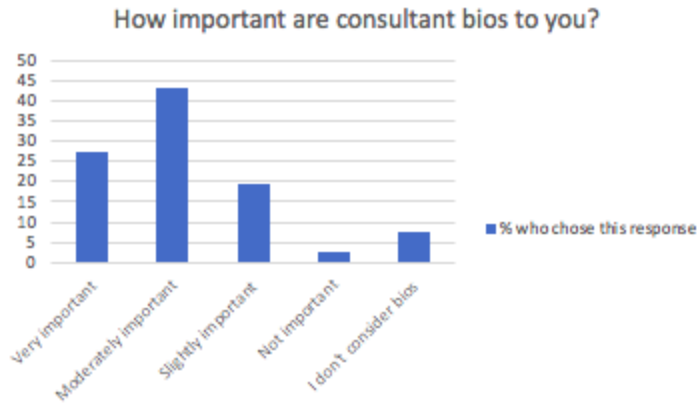


Figure 2

For those who make 5 or more appointments:

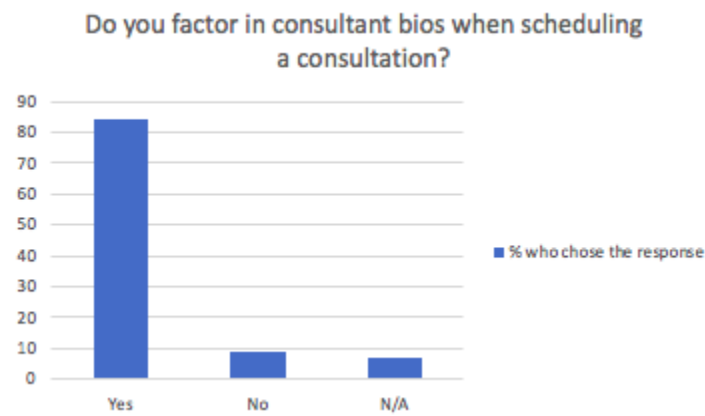


Figure 3

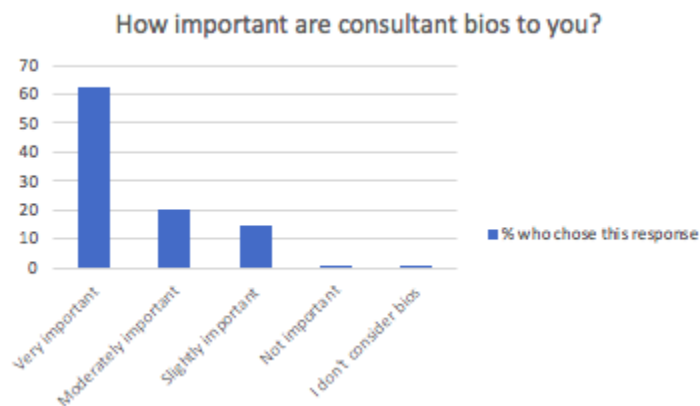


Figure 4

There are significant differences between those who scheduled two or fewer consultations and those who scheduled five or more consultations. Clients who scheduled five or more consultations were more likely to factor in consultant bios when scheduling a consultation (at 84.90% compared to 60.75%); additionally, those who scheduled five or more consultations

indicated that consultants bios were very important (62.50%) compared to clients who scheduled two or less consultations (27.10%). Those who use schedule two or fewer consultations were more likely to find consultant bio moderately important (42.99%) to them. The data indicates that those who use the writing center the most (5 or more times) factor in, and find important, consultant bios at a higher rate than those who use the center two or fewer times. While this section makes the case for why bios are important for clients, the next four sections examine key components of bios that writing centers should consider.

Bio Consideration One: Personal vs. Professional

Bios can be personal, professional, or, most commonly, some combination of the two. A personal bio may be more often used on a website, twitter feed, or blog. Meanwhile, a professional bio may appear in a LinkedIn profile, professional space, or resume. More often than not, a professional bio is written in the third person and explains the strengths of the consultant based on what type of writing they may be best at working with, their own writing style, or how he or she may view the writing center. An example of a third person writing center bio may read: “Sarah is a second-year PhD student studying sociology at Michigan State University and focusing on cultural rhetoric. She is excited to assist you with your writing, and especially enjoys helping students with analytical papers, resumes, and cover letters.” Consultants that were interviewed voiced that writing their bios in third person was important for establishing a professional and civil work environment at the writing center as opposed to a more personal and relatable bio.

A more personal bio can be written in the first person and states the type of writing the consultant may be best at working with or like to work with the most, but also talk about their lives outside the center including their area of study, hobbies, or interests as well. A personal bio written in first person may read: “Hi, I’m Jane and I’m a junior majoring in Arts and Humanities at MSU, with a concentration in English. I like helping students with outlining, literary analysis, and first year writing papers. If I’m not at the writing center, you catch me snuggled up reading a book with my cat, Nelly!” Consultants that were interviewed stated that writing their bios in first person makes their bio feel more personal, and the chance to write about the importance of writing in their own voice.

Both consultants and client indicated the importance of personality and professionalism to bios (Figure 5).

Table 1: Importance of Criteria to Include in Consultant Bios via Rankings; a comparison between the consultant and client point of view

Ranking	From the Consultant’s Point of View	From the Client’s Point of View
1	Type of writing they like to work with/are best at	Type of writing they like to work with/are best at
2	Their major	Their level of education/class standing (undergraduate/graduate)
3	Their level of education/class standing (undergraduate/graduate)	Professionality
4	Indicated ability to work with those who do not speak English as a first language	Their major
5	Professionality	Indicated ability to work with those who do not speak English as a first language
6	Personality	Personality

Figure 5

While both clients and consultants ranked personality as the sixth most important category for bios, there were differences in their ranking of professionalism. While consultants saw the professionalism conveyed in bios as the fifth most important criteria, clients indicated that professionalism was the third most important criteria - ranking more important than major and indicate ability to work with those who do not speak English as a first language.

We also looked at the type of personality that consultants try to convey in their bios (Figure 6).

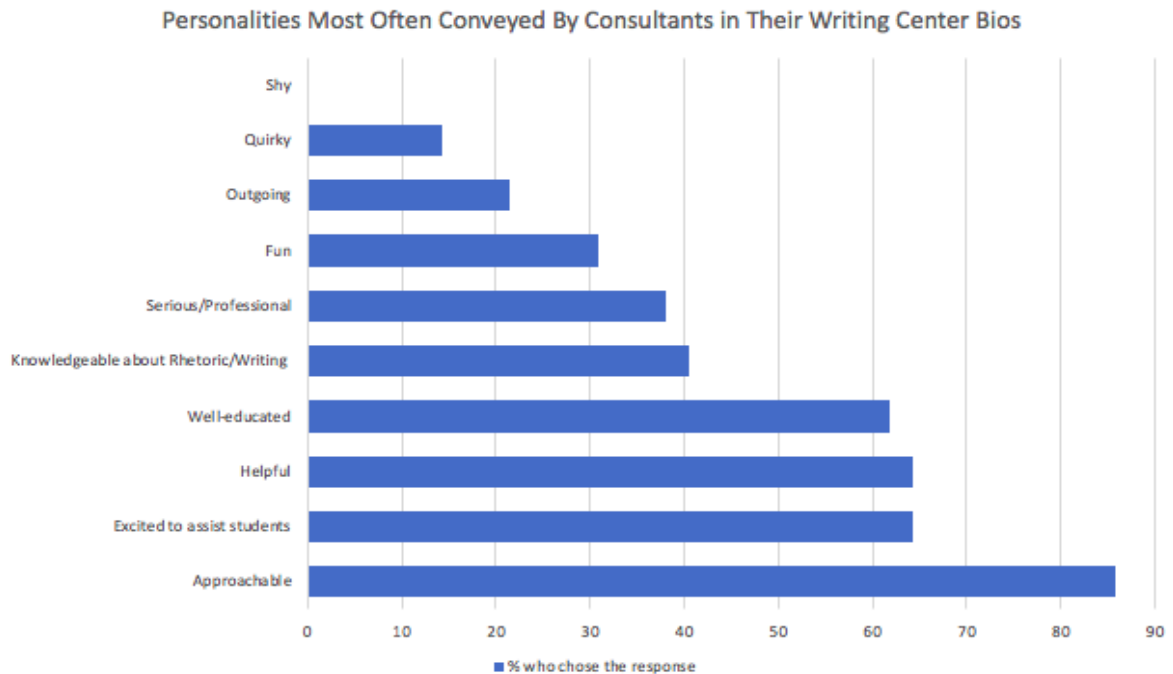


Figure 6

From the 42 consultants who responded, there was a clear divide between the four most popular and the remaining answers. Those that were selected with more than 50% included approachable, excited to assist students, helpful, and well educated. Knowledgeable about rhetoric and writing was selected by 40.48% and trying to convey a serious/professional personality in their bio was selected by 38.10%. These responses indicate the importance of personality over professionalism for consultants, but that is not necessarily valued the most by clients.

When looking at the difference between a more professional bio versus a personal bio, the professional bio may come across as more serious, but the personal bio may come across with a more inviting feel that the client may be able to relate to because of the personality characteristics that the consultant demonstrated in their bio. In bios, especially for the atmosphere in writing centers, both professional and personal characteristics could be included in the bio. Criteria, such as type of writing the consultant likes to work with the most and is best at, their major, and their level of education, are more professionally based and show strengths academically, while criteria such as personality, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation shows more about the client themselves and their values within the center.

Bio Consideration Two: Photos, or Not

Many writing centers who use bios have the ability to connect consultants to client through photos (either in the scheduling system or in another location). Having a consultant

photo can help increase familiarity between consultant and client, can welcome people who want to work with consultants who look like them, and can help demystify the center. However, consultant photos can lead to more opportunities for bias based on perceptions of the consultant's appearance. Some writing centers, such as the Writing Center at Oakland University, post their consultant bios along with consultant photos on their writing center website. In this format, the first name of the consultant is displayed with each photo underneath, along with their "writing specialties" and "bio." Other writing centers, such as The Ohio State University Writing Center, do not have photos associated with all of their consultants, but instead have "consultant spotlights." In these spotlights, which are posted to The Ohio State Writing Center website, there is a photo included with the bio and a list of questions that highlight the consultant. While many writing centers use the WOnline scheduling system because of its ability to make scheduling simple and effective, it does not allow the consultant to associate a picture with their name on the WOnline program. Therefore, for those who are using this system, they would have to take it upon themselves to include photos with the bios in other ways: either on their website, or creating "spotlights" like OSU, to name a few options.

The idea of including photos with consultant bios is viewed differently by consultants and clients while also raising important issues about bias and safety. At the Michigan State University Writing Center, consultants were wary of including photos with bios. An undergraduate consultant, when asked about her preferences, said, "No. I do not think photos alongside bios is helpful for many reasons. The Writing Center is public access, and I don't want students picking people for what they look like as this could end in problematic situations." Other consultants voiced similar positions to these, stating how they did not feel comfortable having their photos connected to their bios, as this introduced the chance for bias, and possible implicit (and explicit) sexism, racism, and other forms of discrimination into the selection of writing consultants. When consultants were asked about photos, 50.00% indicated that they don't love the idea but would submit a photo if required by the center; however, only 38.10% liked the idea and 11.90% did not want a picture associated with their bio.

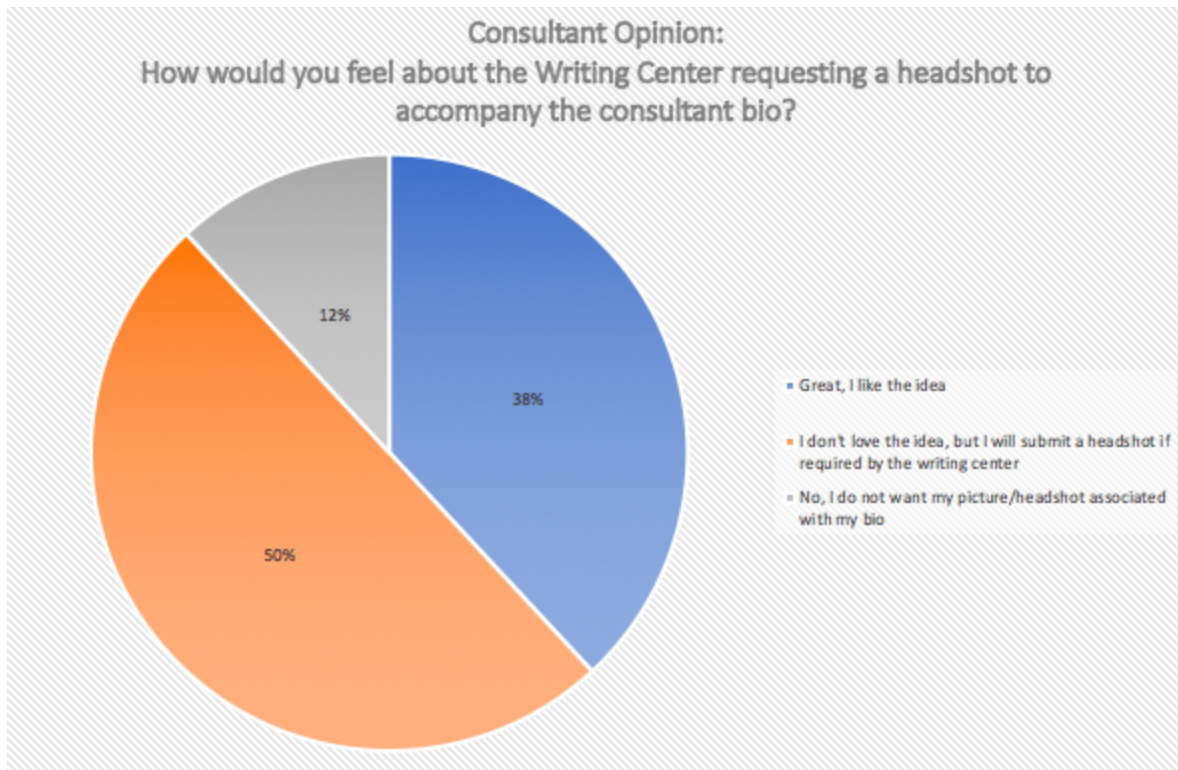


Figure 7
Clients, meanwhile, want headshots for consultants. They overwhelmingly, at 66.29%, indicated that it would be helpful to have a headshot for consultants while only 33.71% did not think it would be helpful to have headshots.

CLIENT OPINION: WOULD IT BE HELPFUL TO HAVE A HEADSHOT OF THE CONSULTANT WITH THE BIO?

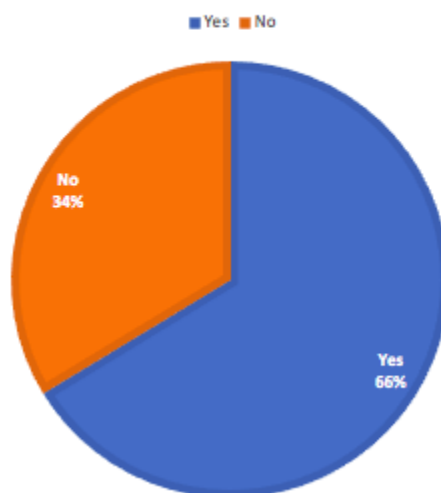


Figure 8

The staff of writing centers, like any other group of people, may not be alike in every way which could result in a perceived bias from clients when scheduling appointments with consultants. Whether it's different majors, interests, hobbies, appearance, or cultural background,

many different things make up the overall staff of a writing center. By including photos to accompany the bios, concerns of discrimination could arise. A photo may encourage more people to avoid the bio and choose a consultant solely on the photo, which is not necessarily encouraged in the writing center because the goal is to use bios to match clients with consultants who can help them with their writing and work to their full potential with the client. Writing centers can elect to use, or not use, photos; if they elect to use them, then photos can supplement the information included in the bios. If photos are not used, then the bios carry a heavier weight as the description of the client, along with their name, will stand alone without the external support from a photo.

Identity Markers

When consultants write their bios, they must decide what aspects of themselves they want to publicly share with their clients. At the most basic level, and included in the vast majority of bios, are the consultant's field of study, rank, and writing strengths/interests. However, some also choose to include personal markers of identity, such as race, ethnicity, abilities, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender pronouns. These type of identity markers are an important consideration for writing centers because they can be both welcoming and potentially used for discrimination.

In the consultant survey, nearly every consultant noted that they did not include identity markers in their bios. One concern regarding personal identity markers, as noted by Writing Center Director Trixie Smith, is that including personal components of identity in a bio can result in prejudice and discrimination by clients. In talking to her, Smith stated, "I don't see any reason for putting things about race or gender, nationality even...If it's just about somebody being prejudiced that's not something I want to encourage or work with" (Smith, 2018). Smith's point is understandable - why encourage things that could lead to discrimination in the workplace? In this scenario, a client who is racist can choose not to work with a consultant who is black, a homophobic client can choose not to work with a gay consultant, and a sexist client can choose not to work with a female consultant. Figure 9 and 10 show from both the consultant and client perspective that personal identity markers rate low in what clients are looking for in bios and in what information consultants included in their bios. When asked what they were looking for in bios or what made them choose a particular consultant, clients all indicated other categories were more important than identity markers. And consultants, when they were asked to rank the most important information to be included in their bios, ranked identity markers lower than level of education, type of writing they like to work with, and their major.

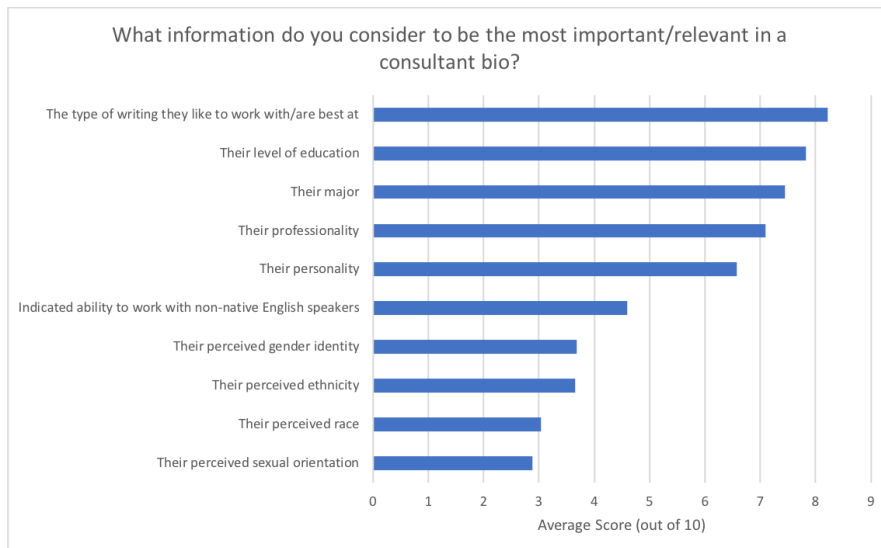


Figure 9

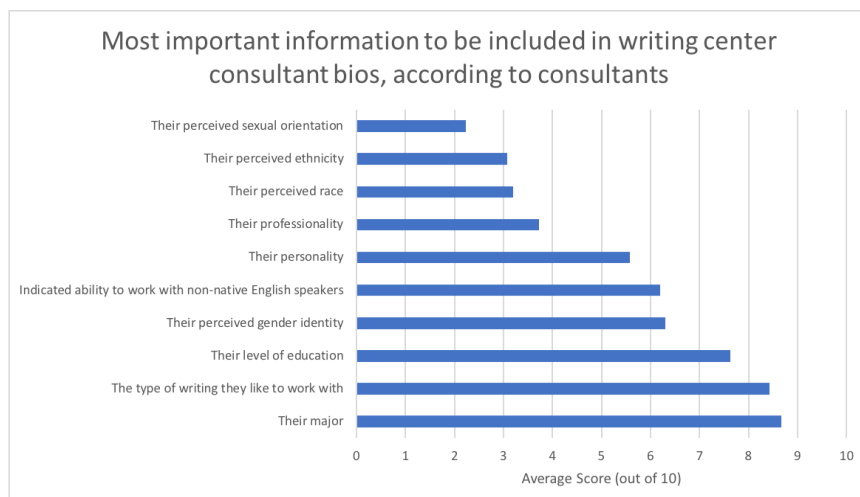


Figure 10

While there are arguments against using personal identity markers in bios, there are also benefits to using them. Clients may feel more comfortable working with consultants who share similar identity markers; this may be even more important for people who feel marginalized or underrepresented in writing centers. According to one consultant, “Sometimes it’s better for people to get help from someone who looks like them, especially if they’re writing a personal narrative or something.” Clients may want help from people who look like them because they are more relatable, they may experience similar issues, and they may have common experiences. It is also important that writing centers reflect all students on campus, according to another consultant, “If it provides comfort to those other students of color, to probably include my ethnicity or racial affiliation - just background because I would hope that students of color that want to come to the writing center feel that they’re also being represented.” Since writing centers are viewed predominantly as white and female, though not always, including additional identity markers may show that writing centers are diverse and welcoming of diverse constituents. Another benefit to including identity markers is the chance to bypass awkward conversations for

the consultant. According to one consultant, “If a student does have a question about gender identity, I do not know if they [the consultant] would be comfortable about it. I’m not opposed to it being in the bios. Maybe if it’s in a bio you can bypass the uncomfortability of asking.” Providing key identity markers, like gender identity, can help both the client and consultant feel comfortable during the session, as a variety of potentially problematic situations can be avoided.

Including key identity markers (like race, ethnicity, abilities, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender pronouns) has both advantages and disadvantages. On one hand, including identity markers in consultant bios can make consultants more relatable and welcoming; furthermore, they can also more accurately reflect the diversity of the center that is both visible and invisible. On the other hand, including identity markers in consultant bios opens up consultants to being discriminated against; clients can choose not to work with consultants who may be different from them; furthermore, these identity markers are not the most important consideration for clients. While identity markers may present problems for bios, each center must determine whether the benefits outweigh the negative issues.

BIAS IN COMMON INFORMATION

While centers might debate what identity markers, if any, to include in consultant bios, most feature three common pieces of information: academic rank, major, and writing preferences. This information allows clients, like graduate students or those in a specialized field, to pick a consultant that can best work with them; graduate students may prefer to work with graduate consultants and a science major may prefer to work with a consultant who has a background in science. At first glance, these appear to be innocuous pieces of information that help clients choose which consultant to work with. However, as our study shows, there is the potential for bias that can occur, particularly as it relates to academic rank and major, which goes against the flattening of hierarchies inherent in writing centers.

The survey administered to clients shows that, for graduate students, the academic rank of the consultant is the most important factor when scheduling a session - graduate student clients may want to work primarily with graduate consultants and not with undergraduate consultants. This leads to a situation where undergraduate consultants can be marginalized in favor of graduate consultants.

What were you looking for in the bio or what made you choose that consultant?

Category	Undergraduate Clients	Graduate Clients
Their education level / class standing	40.80%	65.31%
Their major	59.20%	70.41%

Figure 11

The differences are significant between what undergraduate and graduate clients are looking for in choosing a consultant in the categories of education level/class standing and major. Undergraduate clients are not as concerned about education level and major as graduate clients. Graduate consultants, meanwhile, are purposely going to consultants that have a specific class standing (most likely other graduate students) and major (most likely a similar major). The result is that, for graduate clients, they are less likely to see undergraduate consultants or those in different majors.

This information, particularly rank and major, do not necessarily need to be included in bios, but are a choice by the individual consultant. According to Trixie, The Writing Center director, “I ask people to say what they are interested in. Some consultants choose to say what their year is and if they’re undergrad or grad. I don’t actually necessarily encourage that.” As writing centers think about how to create an inclusive environment through bios, they must consider even the seemingly innocuous components of bios like academic rank, major, and type of writing that consultants like to work with.

CONCLUSION

While consultant bios are an important way to help clients schedule consultations, there is little research on their effect and function. Our work demonstrates the importance of bios for consultants as well as four different components of bios that should be considered by those writing centers that are creating and using bios. The first component that should be considered is whether to be more professional or personal. Both are effective ways for engaging and appealing to clients but will differ in tone and content. The second component that should be considered is whether to include photos with bios. Photos can help clients see themselves in the center but they can also allow clients to discriminate against certain consultants based on perceived race, gender, or ethnicity. The third component is whether to include identity markers (like race, sexual orientation, gender, etc) in bios. These identity markers may help clients find consultants with whom they share identity markers, resulting in feeling more comfortable scheduling an appointment with that consultant. However, the use of identity markers can also result in some clients not scheduling sessions with certain consultants or even the potential for discrimination based on those identity markers. The fourth, and last, component that should be considered is whether to include information like academic year, major, and writing interests in the bio. Despite the appearance of innocence, these can be used to discriminate based on academic year and can create specialization in majors that goes against the spirit of writing centers. Throughout our work we have argued that writing centers should use consultant bios and, while we have not provided specific recommendations, we have laid out four key issues about bios for writing centers to consider. Our goal throughout this work has been to bring attention to consultant bios in order for writing centers to approach them deliberately, with intentionality and thoughtfulness.

Works Cited

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