Multimodal Composition in Writing Centers:
The Practical, the Problems, and the Potential

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Writing centers have long struggled with their relationship to multimodal, particularly digital, composition. As the "writing" in the name implies, writing centers most frequently focus on written alphabetic texts; historically, consultants not only work with traditional mediums, but are trained to work primarily on research papers, essays, shorts writings, cover letters, etc. However, when it comes to multimodal composition, writing centers are divided on how to approach it. Those who have fully made the move to multimodal composition are often named, or view themselves, as something other than strictly writing centers. This is the case of the Eastern Kentucky University Noel Studio for Academic Creativity and the Michigan Technological University Multiliteracies Center (to name two of many), both of which view themselves as explicitly moving beyond the bounds of writing while rebranding themselves. However, many centers adhere to a more traditional mission or might experience a sense of anxiety when confronted with these new forms of composition.

This work focuses on multimodal composition, a form of composing that does not rely only on writing but spans aural, visual and verbal modes (Sheridan 1). According to David Sheridan, in his introduction to *Multiliteracy Centers*, composition increasingly includes, "written words, spoken words, music, still images, moving images, charts, graphs, illustrations, animations, layout schemes, navigation schemes, colors, ambient noises, and so on" (Sheridan 1-2). The combination of different activities and literacies makes multimodal composition different from the alphabetic textual composing process. John Trimbur, in his work "Multiliteracies, Social Futures, and Writing Centers," writes that we should view "literacy as a multimodal activity in which oral, written, and visual communication intertwine and interact" (66). For

Trimbur, literacy is not just referencing written texts; rather, literacy includes a variety of different forms of communication that intersect and function in concert with each other. Multimodal composition, according to Claire Lutkewitte, "can be defined as communication using multiple modes that work purposely to create meaning" (2). And for Pamela Takayoshi and Cynthia Selfe, multimodal compositions are "texts that exceed the alphabetic and may include still and moving images, animations, color, words, music, and sound" (1). Drawing on the work of Sheridan, Trimbur, and Lutkewitte, my work focuses on multimodal composition, but pays particular attention to digital composition – the most common form of multimodal composition.

While scholars have published works on whether or not writing centers should focus, or not or to what extent, on multimodal and digital composition, not as much work has been done exploring the practical matter of completing consultations for multimodal compositions. There is an assumption that students are either already prepared to work on multimodal consultations because of their previous experience with it or that consultants need extensive training; however, there is not as much understanding about current consultant knowledge and the type of training they might actually need. Using a multi-institutional survey, my work seeks to explore how writing centers are confronting the issue of multimodal – particularly digital – composition in their own centers and provide a snapshot of where writing centers are currently at in regards to multimodal composition. I purposefully try to include multiple institutions because, like Sohui Lee and Russell Carpenter, I recognize that tutoring on multimodal compositions is context specific and depends on a writing center's size, staffing, and resources (xviii). By collecting responses from multiple institutions, I am able to more broadly consider what type of knowledge consultants have about multimodal and digital composition, training for individual centers, issues of space, and what kind of training consultants may need in the future; the results of the survey provide a picture of current writing centers in relation to multimodal consultations. By focusing on these issues, I hope to provide an understanding of the practical issues confronting writing centers when considering multimodal composition as well as add to the theoretical conversations surrounding multimodal composition.

Current State of Writing Centers and Multimodal Composition

There are many reasons why writing centers may not focus on multimodal – often digital – composition, including lack of institutional need, burdensome training requirements, or the concern that digital composition (a primary form of multimodal composition), in particular, moves the center too far away from its mission. Michael Pemberton's work, "Planning for Hypertexts in the Writing Center…Or Not," highlights many of the issues confronting centers and multimodal composition. As he notes, writing centers historically focused on alphabetic texts; he goes on to argue that writing centers may have avoided multimodal texts because they do not usually see many of them, it might be too hard to conduct training, or they are perceived as a threat to the core mission of the center (Pemberton 112-113). He also questions whether writing centers should even engage in broader forms of composition beyond the written alphabetic text:

> Ultimately, we have to ask ourselves whether it is really the writing center's responsibility to be all things to all people. There will always be more to learn. There will always be new groups making demands on our time and our resources in ways we haven't yet planned for. […] if we diversify too widely and spread ourselves too thinly in an attempt to encompass too many different literacies, we may not be able to address any set of literate practices particularly well. (Pemberton 114)

The concern he raises is that writing centers, by embracing new forms of composition, may move too far away from their original mission; in effect, he worries that even though writing centers may be able to do many things, they may not be able to do any one thing well.

Multimodal composition may provoke anxiety for centers, and could constitute a challenge to their core mission. But multimodal compositions also presents opportunities to expand our understanding of what writing centers do and why they do it. Numerous scholars like Jackie Grutsch McKinney, Russell Carpenter, David Sheridan, and Sohui Lee, continue to shed light on the intersection of writing centers and multimodal composition, exploring the history of this relationship, what centers currently do, and the future of multimodal composition in writing centers. They believe multimodal composition represents an

opportunity for writing centers moving forward into the future; furthermore, as they note, there may be much at stake for writing centers in relation to multimodal and digital composition. For Grutsch McKinney, it is important for writing centers to claim new media (like digital composition) before other departments, units, or services lays claim to it (246); furthermore, she believes it is the job of writing centers to work with new media (243). Grutsch McKinney worries that if others lays claim to new media, then writing centers may be relegated to only working with alphabetic texts. This could limit the scope of the center while providing less flexibility for future writing centers to address new forms of composing.

Multimodal and digital composition has taken on increased importance, both inside and outside of the academy. Inside of the academy, students are being asked to create more digital compositions in first year writing and composition courses: first year writing courses increasingly have a multimodal "remixing project" or digital component (like eportfolios) to them while there is increased attention to digital composing in upper level classes that expect digital literacy. Composition as a field has been quicker than writing centers to embrace digital composition. Kathleen Blake Yancey, in her chair's address at the 2004 Conference on College Composition and Communication, argued for the importance of composition to change with the times (298). She writes that composition must move beyond first-year writing and gatekeeping (306). Yancey points out that "we *already* inhabit a model of communication practices incorporating multiple genres related to each other, those multiple genres remediated across contexts of time and space, linked one to the next, circulating across and around rhetorical situations both inside and outside of school" (307). Because composition is already print and digital, Yancey argues, this should be reflected more in the pedagogical practices and the focus of the field. Since Yancey's address, composition has made a concerted effort to include digital composition within curriculum, pedagogies, and training; writing centers must follow the field of composition's lead.

Another area where digital composition has taken on increased importance is in classes that are discipline specific or that offer professional development. Engineers, entrepreneurs, and computer scientists are asked to present their findings to a variety of audiences (other students, researchers, employers, investors) and in a variety of

ways (online, slide presentation, reports); students about to graduate are encouraged to think about their composition courses and the rhetorical implications of their social media on platforms like LinkedIn, Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, and websites. Outside of the classroom, many students consistently utilize social media and messaging via phones, tablets, and computers; social media has become ubiquitous for students and one of their primary methods of communication. Because of the increasing importance of digital composition for students inside and outside the classroom, if writing centers want to keep up with changing trends, then writing centers should position themselves to work with the type of composition students are utilizing now and will be composing with in the future.

In "Multiliteracies, Social Futures, and Writing Centers," originally published in 2000, John Trimbur argues that digital literacies represent the future of writing centers:

> To my mind, the new digital literacies will increasingly be incorporated into writing centers not just as sources of information or delivery systems for tutoring but as productive arts in their own right, and writing center work will, if anything, become more rhetorical in paying attention to the practices and effects of design in written and visual communication – more product oriented and perhaps less like the composing conferences of the process movement. (67)

Though Trimbur wrote this nearly twenty years ago, his ideas continues to resonate today because the tensions he raises are still unresolved. The writing centers where I have worked encouraged multimodal and digital literacies as sources of information and delivery systems through the use of computers and tablets during consultations. Consultants worked with students who brought in presentations and works of digital composition, viewing digital literacy as a product in its own right. But, there was not any extensive training in digital composition or significant advertising services for digital compositions. Writing centers are not any closer to a definitive understanding of the place of multimodal or digital texts, nor do they have any additional clarity in the move from the process movement to the product-oriented movement because we still focus primarily on print texts during our consultations, training, and workshops.

Methods

The primary method of collection for this project was a survey which was sent directly to writing center administrators of institutions to take as well as to distribute to consultants. Collection of responses took place during the Spring 2017 semester. The IRB-approved survey consisted of 29 questions about multimodal consultations and training. These questions are grouped into three broad sets of questions, in addition to demographic questions. Respondents were first asked about their history with multimodal composition (including training and previous consultations), technology and software expertise, and the physical space of their center. They were then asked about their confidence in commenting on works of multimodal and digital composition, visuals, and slide presentations that utilize technology, as well as their understanding of the intersections of technology with race, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic class, and national identity. Issues of identity were a focus of this study because they are often overlooked in multimodal composition and they affect how people interact with technology. Lastly, respondents were asked about their multimodal consultation needs in the future, including space, technology training, and rhetorical training.

A total of 134 respondents from 18 institutions completed some or all of the survey. Institutions included large and medium sized public institutions as well as private institutions representing Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and California. Among those who responded were 18 administrators, 10 professional consultants, 46 graduate student consultants/peer tutors, and 60 undergraduate student consultants/peer tutors. Among those respondents, 132 indicated they were actively working in their writing center when they took the survey while two were not currently working in the center but had done so previously. Respondents came from a wide variety of disciplines, including English, education, philosophy, economics, and biology, among others.

Results

This section provides results from the survey as well as an analysis of those results. Rather than to go through all of the survey results, my focus in this section are the results that help explain the history of writing center staff, administrators, and consultants with multimodal and digital

composition, their confidence in working with multimodal and digital composition, questions of space, and training needs. Respondents were initially asked how many multimodal consultations they had conducted. The categories included 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 or more. If a respondent had not conducted any multimodal consultations, they could skip the question.

Count of 1	Count of 2	Count of 3	Count of 4	Count of 5 or more
25	18	13	12	44

Fig.1. Number of consultations

Among the 112 respondents, 44 (39.29%) indicated that they had conducted 5 or more multimodal consultations (Figure 1). Over half, 69 (or 62.62%), indicated they had 3 or more multimodal consultations. The high number of multimodal consultations indicate that they are occurring at writing centers in significant enough numbers to warrant our attention as a field. While these types of consultations are much lower in number than more traditional forms of alphabetical texts, they do occur in writing centers. These results point to the idea that writing centers and multiliteracy centers are not doing completely separate and distinct work (wherein one works on writing and one works on multimodal communication), but that there is a lot of overlap between the two.
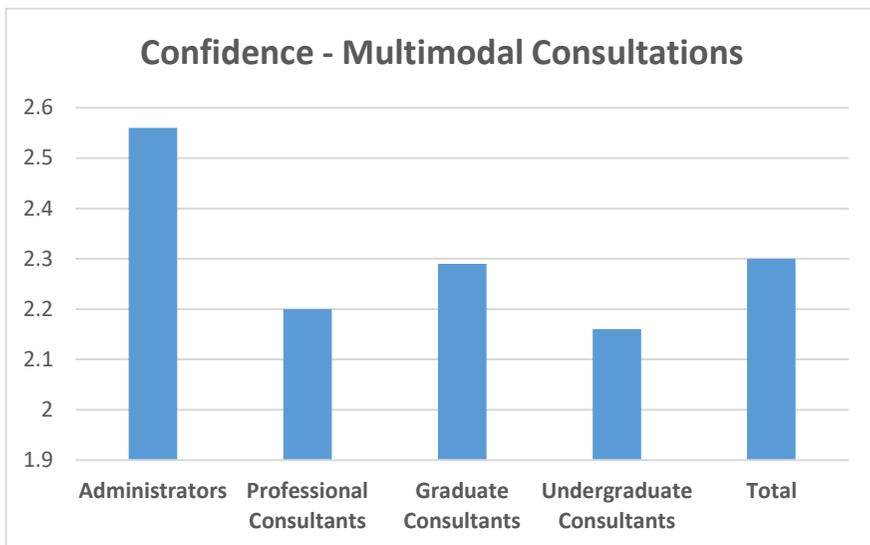
The types of multimodal consultations conducted were similar across institutions. When provided types of multimodal consultations, respondents were able to check as many as applied (Figure 2). The list included slide presentations, movies, websites, blogs, podcasts, oral presentations, posters, infographic, flyers, emails, social media, other digital based projects, other non-digital based project, or other. The top six are included in the figure on the next page.
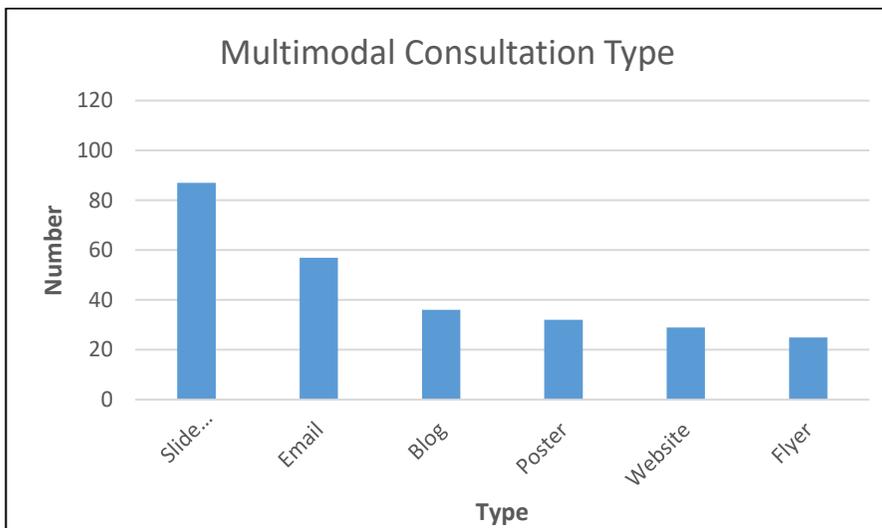
Fig. 2. Consultation Type

While slide presentations are the most prevalent, at least five other types of multimodal consultations are frequent, including emails, blogs, posters, websites, and flyers. While there are numerous ways to view these results, I provide two. The first is that the types of consultations are representative of the works of composition students might complete in classes (like slide presentations and websites) as well as the types of composition that students may complete outside of the classroom (including emails, blogs, posters, and flyers). A second is that, viewed a different way, these are also types of composition that could occur across a wide spectrum of majors and disciplines. Both views point out that students are composing a wide variety of multimodal texts, and are bringing those texts to writing centers for consultations.

Respondents were then asked a series of questions about their confidence commenting on works of multimodal composition. Answers included *Very Confident* – with a value of 3, *Somewhat Confident* – with a value of 2, and *Not Confident* – with a value of 1. Below is the confidence of each group of respondents and the overall confidence of the survey-takers in consulting with works of multimodal composition (Figure 3).

Fig. 3. Confidence in Multmodal Consultations

Administrators, those who are likely to have the most experience, were the most confident (2.56) in commenting on works of multimodal composition. Graduate students were also confident (2.29) in their multimodal composition skills while professional consultants (2.20) and undergraduate consultants (2.16) were the least confident. Overall, the average for all respondents was about 2.30, placing it above "somewhat confident" but well below "very confident."

Respondents were then asked about their history with multimodal composition as well as any type of writing center training they may have had. They were able to check as many boxes as applicable (Table 1). Undergraduates and graduate students were viewed separately. 39 graduate students responded to questions about previous multimodal composition training (writing center training is asked in a different question). The overall confidence of graduate students commenting on multimodal composition is 2.29 (writing center-specific training for multimodal composition was asked as a separate question).

Table 1. Graduate Student Consultant Confidence 1

Previous Communication Class	Previous English Class	Previous Class	Workshop
2.556	2.409	2.333	2.370

Among graduate student consultants, those who had multimodal composition training in a previous communication class, previous English class, or workshop had higher confidence than average. The most effective way of improving confidence in multimodal composition, however, was writing center training (Table 2).

Table 2. Graduate Student Consultant Confidence 2

No Writing Center Training	Writing Center Training
2.136	2.588

Those who had no writing center training – 24 students – had a confidence in multimodal composition of 2.136, well below average for graduate students, while those who had writing center training – 19 students – had a confidence of 2.588, well above average for graduate students.

There were fifty undergraduate consultants who responded to questions about previous training (Table 3). The overall average confidence of undergraduate consultants with multimodal composition was 2.16.

Table 3. Undergraduate Student Consultant Confidence

Previous Communication Class	Previous English Class	Previous Class	Workshop
2.191	2.187	2.175	2.368

Among the undergraduate consultants who had previous training, all indicated that they had a higher confidence in multimodal composition than the average. The most beneficial training was a workshop while other forms of training were less beneficial. Of the 50 undergraduates who responded to the question about writing center training in multimodal consultations, 20 had writing center training while 30 did not have writing center training (Table 4).

Table 4. Undergraduate Student Consultant Confidence

No Writing Center Training	Writing Center Training
2.000	2.368

Undergraduate tutors who had writing center training had a confidence of 2.368, above average for undergraduate students; meanwhile, those

who did not have writing center training had an average confidence of 2.000, below the overall average of confidence for undergraduate students. As with graduate consultants, undergraduate consultants highly benefitted from writing center training.

Overall, of the 45 respondents (37.82%) who indicated that they had writing center training for multimodal composition, 21 said they received it from a training workshop, 15 from a peer tutor training course, and nine from a writing center orientation. A majority of respondents – 70 – indicated that they were not trained to respond differently to multimodal composition while most – 105 – were not trained to use specific equipment or software. These responses highlight a few key insights into the background of writing center administrators, staff, and consultants. The first is that many students have at least some training in multimodal composition, while the second is that this training often does not occur in writing centers. The lack of training in writing centers may point to a diminished importance for multimodal composition, an assumption that students are already proficient in these forms of composition, or a lack of funding to support training.

The survey also included a series of questions about confidence on the intersection of technology with different rhetorical considerations, including gender, race, sexual orientation, class, national identity, visuals, and presentations that use digital technology (Table 5). These categories were chosen because of their importance to the field of composition as well as their importance in mediating the use of technology. The results are presented in two different ways: by overall averages and by training.

Table 5. Overall Average – Rhetorical Considerations

Category	Average
Gender	1.965
Race	1.687
Sexual Orientation	1.722
Class	2.061
National Identity	1.687
Visuals	2.304
Presentation Technology	2.579

The highest confidence, above "somewhat confident," are visuals and presentations that use digital technology; however, the lowest amount of confidence are the intersections of technology with gender, race, sexual orientation, class, and national identity – which are all at "somewhat confident" or below. Results indicate that, overall, there are many areas where administrators, staff, and consultants lack confidence and could use additional training.

Data was also analyzed by comparing those who reported a specific category of training (like a previous English class or writing center training) versus those who indicated they did not receive previous training in that category (see Table 4, above, for categories). Respondents who have taken a previous English class that featured multimodal composition were more confident in their abilities across all categories, but the increases were modest (less than a 0.2 point increase) except for gender (a 0.24 increase) and visuals (a 0.22 increase). Those who reported taking a previous workshop on multimodal composition reported higher confidence in all categories except for sexual orientation. But the most significant training is that which occurs in writing centers. Respondents who indicated that they received this form of training experienced across the board higher confidence in their ability to consult with a wide range of rhetorical considerations.

In every category, respondents were more confident if they had writing center training in multimodal composition compared to those who had no writing center training. Results show that writing center training is the best way to improve the confidence of administrators and students working with multimodal composition.

Respondents were also asked a series of questions about what they may need in order to complete multimodal consultations, including:

- What areas of technical training <u>do you need</u> to feel prepared for multimodal consultations?
- What types of multimodal rhetoric <u>do you need</u> to feel prepared for multimodal consultations?
- What kind of space do you need for multimodal consultations?
- What kind of technology do you need to complete multiliteracy/multimodal consultations?

Despite the high number of multimodal consultations that respondents participated in, they did indicate a number of areas of technical training that they need (Figure 4).
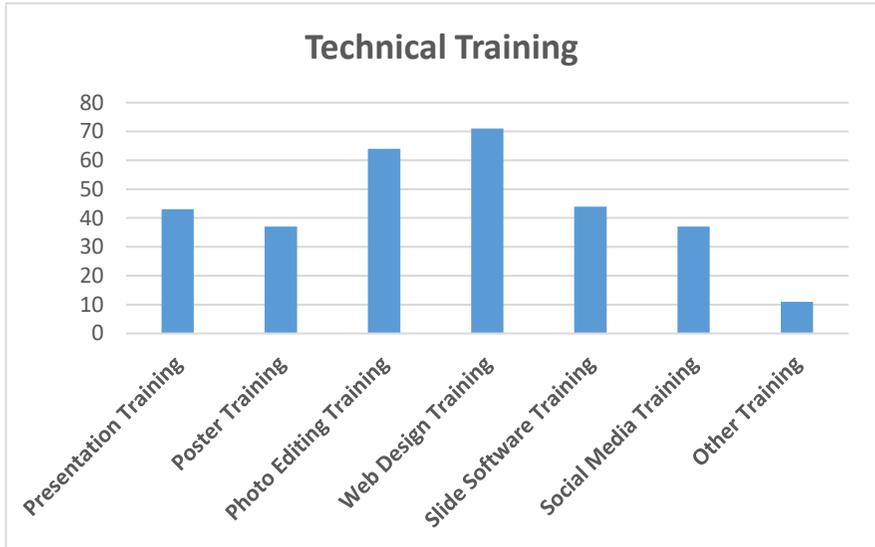
Fig. 4. Technical Training Needs

While most felt that they needed the least amount of training for posters and social media, they felt the most need for training in photo editing and web design software. These areas align with the types of composition that are most and least prevalent and used today.

Respondents were also asked what type of multimodal rhetoric they needed in order to feel prepared to conduct consultations (Figure 10). Possible categories included visual rhetoric; oral rhetoric; intended audience; strategies of persuasion; ethics of representation; space, typography, and color; visual style; cultural and historical context; gender, race, class, sexuality, and national identity evoked; and other.

Rhetorical Training Needs

[Bar chart titled "Rhetorical Training Needs" with vertical axis marked from 0 to 80 in increments of 10. Categories and approximate values: Visual Rhetoric ≈ 70, Oral Rhetoric ≈ 45, Intended Audience ≈ 46, Strategies of Persuasion ≈ 46, Ethics of Representation ≈ 60, Space, typography, and color ≈ 62, Visual Style ≈ 58, Cultural and Historical Context ≈ 60, Gender, Race, Class, Sexuality,… ≈ 67, Other ≈ 3]

Fig. 5. Rhetorical Training Needs

Respondents felt most comfortable in their ability to work with students on oral rhetoric, intended audience, and strategies of persuasion – all components of introductory composition classes and most prevalent in the humanities (from which many writing center administrators, staff, and students are from). However, the types of rhetoric students are least likely to know and need the most knowledge in – including visual rhetoric and space, typography, and color, as well as gender, race, class, sexuality, and national identity evoked – are areas that consultants are least likely to encounter in their studies.

Respondents were asked about their location, space, and technology needs in order to complete multimodal consultations. Among those responding about location, there were a few trends. One is that for a large portion of respondents, multimodal consulting can occur in their normal location. A second is that for some who indicated that their normal location (as in the physical location of the center) would function sufficiently, there was also a need for more private space within it to conduct multimodal consultations. A third is that many indicated a desire for a space (within the physical location of the center) specifically dedicated for multimodal consultations. Among 109 responses, the technology needs for this dedicated space were primarily a computer (99

respondents), software (62 respondents), projector (36 respondent), and a tablet (31 respondents). The minimum needs, as indicated here, are just a computer and software. Overall, it appears that multimodal consultations don't necessarily require a special location (it can be done in the regular location) because most writing center spaces are already equipped to handle multimodal consultations, that within the regular location consultants indicated a desire for a dedicated space for multimodal consultations, and that the needs are primarily technology and software related.

Discussion

While the sample size of the survey was not enough to conduct standard deviations, the results still offer an opportunity to provide insights into multimodal and digital consultations in writing centers. Because members from 18 writing centers participated, representing a diverse group of institutions, the survey results can be used to discuss larger implications to the field of writing center studies. Drawing on the results above, I provide a few conclusions that might help other writing center staff, administrators, and consultants as they consider multimodal and digital consultations:

- Writing centers are conducting more multimodal consultations than would be expected given the traditional focus of writing centers on essays and other written texts. The number, and breadth, of multimodal consultations challenges Pemberton's idea that writing centers can ignore non-traditional essay-based composition because they don't see much of it (111); in fact, it appears that writing centers do see varied forms of composition for which they should be prepared. As Melissa Ianetta and Lauren Fitzgerald contend, even institutions that don't have a multiliteracy center increasingly work with multimodal composition (177). Therefore, we should not ignore it but turn a critical lens on that work.
- Slide presentations that utilize digital technology are the most prevalent type of multimodal consultations; therefore, any sort of training should start there. However, it is unclear if slide presentations are the most common because that is what students need or if consultants are most proficient in that area and students, therefore, only come for help in that area.

- There is no substitute for writing center training for multimodal composition. While other forms of training are beneficial, including workshops and English classes, they are not as effective at preparing those who work in writing centers for working with multimodal composition. Writing centers should consider how they can incorporate multimodal training into orientations, continued training, writing center classes, and more.

- Location and space needs identified by respondents do not appear to be a major burden for writing centers. Most (105) indicated that the multimodal consultation they participated in occurred in their regular location. Only 4 indicated that it occurred in a special multimodal consultation location. At minimum, consultants would just need access to a computer and perhaps even a quiet space; at maximum, consultants want a quiet space dedicated to multimodal consultations that features a computer, projector, and updated software.

- The most significant area of training is in understanding the implications of technology on different rhetorical considerations. While respondents may feel comfortable commenting on things like visuals and presentation technology, they are much less confident in thinking about the intersections of technology with gender, race, sexual orientation, class, and national identity. Danielle DeVoss, Ellen Cushman, and Jeffrey Grabill argue that composing does not occur in isolation but in a "matrix of local and more global policies, standards, and practices" (150). Additionally, they state we must attend to issues of race, gender, sexuality, and more. While this is the case for all forms of composition, it is especially important for multimodal and digital composition because of the traditional focus of writing centers on essay-based forms of composing. If writing centers embrace, or even befriend, multimodal and digital composition, then it is imperative that additional rhetorical training and understanding takes place for consultants, staff, and administrators. Jackie Grutsch McKinney, David Sheridan, and others argue that digital composition requires a deliberately critical approach. Grutsch McKinney highlights this more critical, and broader, scope that consultants must have when dealing with multimodal texts: "Tutors need to be able to talk about new media texts, which requires both a broader understanding of rhetoric (of how new media texts are rhetorical) and a new set of

terms about the interactivity between modes and the effects of that interactivity" (250). Sheridan also states that "Different materials require different literacies and different competencies" (276). Multimodal composition, as Grutsch McKinney and Sheridan point out, requires a different understanding than traditional mediums of composition and this survey demonstrates that we may not have the most holistic or clear understanding of multimodal and digital composition.

This project provides a starting point for future discussions about the practical applications and implications of multimodal and digital consultations in writing centers. It is obvious that traditional writing centers already provide a range of multimodal, particularly digital, composition consultations. And as Jennifer Grouling and Jackie Grutsch McKinney point out in their article "Taking Stock: Multimodality in Writing Center Users' Texts," there is work that must be done to prepare consultants and those working in writing centers for these types of consultations. In another work, Grutsch McKinney provides a challenge to writing centers: "Writing has evolved with new composing technologies and media, and we must evolve, too, because we are in the writing business. A radical shift in the way that writers communicate both academically and publicly necessitates a radical re-imagining and re-understanding of our practices, purposes, and goals" (255). Writing centers are confronting radical shifts in communication that should prompt reflection and a re-visioning of writing centers moving into the future. The decision for both individual writing centers, and for the entire field, is to determine what future stance we should take in regards to multimodal and digital composition.
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