

PROGRAM PROFILE 6.

UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE
PROGRAM DESCRIPTION,
OR, REDEFINING RHETCOMP
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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In light of current circumstances, can we reconceive of professional development? Conventional wisdom would hold that professional development in a countrywide shut down would be the old methods on new media. For a graduate student, say, a department could hold a “Writing for Publication” seminar in some virtual environment. Administrators could likewise transfer general writing instruction (e.g., bootcamps and workshops) or writing center training to synchronous Zoom sessions or asynchronous YouTube tutorials.

I find redefining professional development judicious because professional development does not always happen at the level of the grandiose, particularly in the domain of rhetoric and composition. In the case of an English department, the everyday expectations, responsibilities and allowances that the department places on its graduate students are the most important form of professional development. I would like to demonstrate how this is true by discussing my first-semester experiences in the University of Delaware’s Ph.D. program in English, focusing particularly on how the program encourages the development of group and individual identities; I will then turn to how the department holistically asks its graduate students to conceive of their respective identities as scholars.

The University of Delaware (UD) has alleviated the segregation of TA identities both centripetally by encouraging us to conceptualize of ourselves as a unified group and centrifugally by stretching each of our imaginations separately. The most obvious way that UD has encouraged our group identity is by attaching all of the first-year TAs to one super-section of the department’s introductory writing course. Instead of trading pedagogical strategies in the abstract or exchanging tips about students that only one of us has met, the TAs of our cohort are in the same Zoom room for lectures and in-virtual-class writing activities. We see when students are struggling and can ping each other (using

Zoom's private chat function) to confirm observations, organize who will lend assistance, and impart lessons learned from interactions.

While these processes happen many times per class, and sometimes beyond the Zoom session, the instructor, who also directs the writing program, has enabled us to find our identity as individual instructors as well.¹ Each of us manages a single group of 3-4 students for the duration of the course. At first, we were asked to provide holistic commentary on drafts and complete essays. Then, our instructor asked us to use the tools and functions of the learning management system to provide more pointed feedback. As we get to mid-semester, we will now turn our attention to grading.

As someone who has taught English composition before at both Eastern University and La Salle University, both in the greater Philadelphia area, I considered these instructions remedial—but only at first. I quickly realized that taking a step back and returning to the basics, allowed me to work out some inefficiencies in the feedback I had been giving before. Addressing student work holistically forced me to stop and consider a piece's tenor instead of dwelling on some of the lower-order issues. Considering how and why particular phrases and clauses in a piece require precise feedback forced me to re-define the limits of prescriptivism and descriptivism for myself. As for grading, the Super Section uses specifications grading, which I am excited to incorporate into my personal teaching practice.

The centripetal forces of the program have helped our cohort form a caring, compassionate yet healthily opinionated identity, and the work done on my own time has asked me to conceive of my pedagogical identity as one always being constituted and reconstituted by the seemingly banal, everyday aspects of teaching—underlining a phrase, leaving a comment, towing the line between encouraging and discouraging in the assignment of a grade. Without our noticing, these very actions allow us to continually re-define ourselves; through them, we show our priorities, our preferences, and, perhaps, our own anxieties about composition. I've left unanswered, though, a pivotal question of the present publication: how does the professional development of TAs avoid conflicting and competing roles and responsibilities?

At UD, our professional development is incorporated with other ostensibly conflicting roles and responsibilities.² The healthy collegial relationships that

1 To give you the nitty-gritty details, the class meets Tuesdays and Thursdays for an hour and a half in the early afternoon. The class time is broken down into breakout sessions that the TAs lead, lectures by our instructor, writing exercises, and discussion that sometimes takes the form of small groups in breakout rooms and sometimes is done with the full class. Some Thursday courses are asynchronous, and, while the students are asked to view and reflect on a YouTube video, article, etc., the TAs and our instructor conference to make sure we're all on the same page and to keep each other accountable for rendering assistance to the students.

2 In my editing process, a colleague recommended I remove "ostensibly" from this sentence. I

have developed in our online space as TAs and in our constantly abuzz group text message chain have carried us through other seminars. Our group unity is, in fact, an important professional development tool. We keep each other accountable by reminding one another of due dates; we offer words of encouragement to those striving or thriving; we keep each other abreast of availability for socially-distant/quarantine-compliant socializing.

As scholars of English, in rhetoric and composition programs or in literature, we so often pay lip service to the idea that no one works alone right before we return to our lonely, contemplative cells. UD shows its commitment to actually overcoming the problem by sticking all of its first-year English TAs together in one course, and the payoffs are essentially self-evident: scholars with a better appreciation for togetherness during a time in history that actively discourages the same.

To go more practical, the use of breakout rooms in Zoom, combined with other responsibilities on the interface while the full class is together for lecture has taught us to navigate the myriad functions that such interfaces offer. In the seminars where I take the supposedly conflicting role of student, all of the TAs are adept at talking our grad school professors through the same functionalities when needed. Additionally, as mentioned, the instructor of the class that we TA for has slowly turned over learning management system responsibilities to us. Who can tell how valuable these skillsets will turn out to be moving further into the 21st century? Our leaders never got us all together for a “Using Canvas” seminar or a three-hour crash course on using Zoom; they have entrusted us to discover our own professional deficiencies and empowered us to work together as a cohort to propel one another to professional readiness.

At the intersection of these developments in group cohesion and individual imagination lies UD’s efforts to help us negotiate our layered identities as scholars. UD has tested our time management skills by assigning us responsibilities not only as TAs but also as writing center assistants. In addition to two or three seminars, first-semester students are expected to take another course titled “Introduction to Grad Studies.” Including the course we TA for, this means we attend between four and five classes a week and tutor at the writing center and meet the obligations of that job—meetings, research, tutor report writing and so on. It’s a lot. And it’s difficult. Most importantly, though, these combined experiences help us understand that a scholar is not the same as a researcher; a scholar is not the same as a teacher. We’re getting a taste now of the teaching load, of the relationships we will be expected to develop with students when we secure

do, however, really mean *ostensibly* here. The idea that administrative duties conflict with teaching, which conflicts with research, is a myth that no longer serves our purposes as scholars. Later in this piece, I will ask that we re-think of these responsibilities as part of a single, layered identity.

our first positions, of, yes, the bureaucratic know-how that a scholar needs to thrive these days—might be applicable to any so-called “alt ac” responsibilities we take up as well. These are not the kind of skills that a program can sit down and discuss at the captive audience of a new cohort. These are the skills that a 21st-century scholar must adjust to, slowly. UD has mastered giving TAs this exposure by allowing us to get comfortable and then re-adjust day-to-day as we settle into our new identities.

I posed the question at the beginning of this description-turned-essay: should we redefine professional development? We must. We must now more than ever. UD does provide the normative professional development—invites to job talks, a constant flow of available positions in the field, and one-off events covering any field-specific interests that an intellectual could want. (A quick Outlook search shows me I have been receiving such emails since before our first day in the program.) But, most importantly, UD gives us just enough freedom to professionally develop ourselves with. UD allows professional development to be a gradual process that will be felt day-by-day, year-by-year, and across whole lifetimes. Leadership in other Ph.D. programs should take note.