

## Building More Purposeful Partnerships among Writing Centers, Graduate Writers, and Faculty

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Objects and experiences are always surrounded by and situated in a context that is both present and absent, which necessarily affects the meaning of what we see (Zahavi). When we perceive an object, for example the screen you are likely looking at right now, we always experience more than what is visually present. You know that what your sense of sight is experiencing is not all that is available to be perceived, such as the back panel or inner workings of the device. Writing centers' experiences with graduate students are much the same. We actually see the graduate students — the struggles and concerns they bring into our centers. If the writer is positioned in a particular way, the writing center can see their recurring or repeated concerns. However, what the writing center often is aware of, but in many ways might not be addressing, is what is absent from the scene, i.e., the faculty member on the other side of that writing project. By creating close collaboration with faculty and graduate students, writing centers can further advance their current practices in order to provide targeted and meaningful support for graduate writers.

While it is undeniable that most writing center scholarship and many practices across the decades have been focused on undergraduate writers and their needs, there is a growing conversation regarding the unique needs of graduate writers and writing center approaches to meeting those needs. The problem is that the literature on graduate students and writing centers has been focused almost exclusively on the writing center space as a separate entity providing writing-center-centric writing support. When, in fact, we know that graduate students receive writing support from multiple entities. Thus, it makes sense for writing center conversations and practices to continue to grow toward providing writer-centered, team-based writing support, where writing centers and faculty work in tandem.



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The argument for increased collaboration between writing centers and other campus entities is not new. Judith Powers introduced the concept of the “trialogue approach” in 1993. Other practitioner-scholars have discussed collaborations with campus librarians (Ferer; Phillips; Herb and Sabatino). Writing center scholars have also written about their own forays into aligning their writing centers with their campus WAC/WID programs (Brady and Singh-Corcoran; Brady, et al.). Truthfully, many writing center practitioners are likely already engaged in joint collaborations with graduate students and faculty. We are just not having that conversation often enough in our scholarship.

Through this article, we discuss the mutual benefits of centers collaborating with faculty and graduate students collectively and making these benefits more visible. Our goal is not only to provide an argument for the need for writing center-faculty collaboration at the graduate level, but to provide a concrete example of how one author accomplished this at a prior institution. To this end, we briefly provide the scholarly conversation regarding writing centers, graduate writers, and graduate faculty. We share a concrete example of Lindsay creating a partnership with a public health education department in order to demonstrate how these types of collaborations can aid graduate student writers, and we offer our thoughts on how such a collaboration can be beneficial for all involved.

### **SCHOLARLY CONVERSATION**

Writing centers have a rich history of working with graduate writers and developing pedagogical practices that are unique to their needs and experiences. Such practices include offering extended tutoring sessions (Phillips; Cross and Catchings), being more accepting of what would traditionally be considered directive approaches (Phillips; Denny et al.), and hosting targeted writing events such as dissertation bootcamps (Reardon et al.). One area where graduate-focused support can continue to develop is in writing center interactions and collaborations with faculty. By folding faculty into the conversation, we embrace the robust and dynamic nature of the graduate writer’s experience.

One suggestion present in the literature is for writing center practitioners to “explore the structures of graduate programs at their university, and read samples of graduate writing [that] have the potential to promote relationships between the writing center and academic departments” (Mannon 64). We want to take that suggestion one step further and argue that writing centers can do more than just become peripherally familiar with the genres of all the disciplines across their campuses. A more efficient approach

would be to tap into the source of that field’s scholarship: i.e., the faculty who work within it every day and who also support the graduate writers learning to navigate it. These collaborations can be a winning situation for all involved. Brady and Singh-Corcoran write, “[F]aculty know what counts as evidence in their own fields, how research is conducted, who receives credit, and so forth; but they sometimes have a difficult time conveying this knowledge to students. The Writing Studio can help graduate writers navigate as they learn these disciplinary conventions” (3). With more tightly bound relationships between faculty and writing centers, graduate writers benefit the most because they receive discipline-specific and generalized writing assistance. The faculty win because they know and trust the support the writer receives from the writing center. Writing centers win because they are better able to meet their mission of helping any writer at any stage of the writing process.

Writing centers can be active and strategic when creating connections between graduate writers, their professors, and the center. As Steve Simpson states, “Graduate-level writing programs must be strategic, balancing students’ short-term needs while building infrastructure within campus departments for sustainable graduate support” (1). These cross-campus collaborations allow graduate writers to receive more focused support. Directors can purposefully reach out to departments to gain an understanding of their graduate students’ needs. In some cases, this level of support can manifest itself organically. In the next section, we offer Lindsay’s first-hand experience facilitating a collaboration between a center she previously directed and faculty in the graduate Public Health (MPH) education department.<sup>1</sup>

### **COLLABORATION IN PRACTICE**

Purposeful collaborations can help writing centers develop more intentional support for graduate students. After a professor from the MPH program attended a faculty development workshop on creating and assessing digital projects conducted by Lindsay and a graduate student, the chair of the program reached out to Lindsay to discuss a possible collaboration. The MPH department was in the beginning stages of developing an eportfolio requirement for their master’s students as a part of their program assessment. While the main purpose of the eportfolios was curriculum assessment, students had the added advantage of using them to market themselves when applying for jobs and internships. To offer the necessary support, the MPH department partnered with Lindsay and the Center to offer a series of workshops for their faculty, staff, and students. Faculty and staff participated in two

department workshops that focused on incorporating digital composing in their curriculum and assessing multimodal assignments.<sup>2</sup> The student workshops focused on the new assessment, where students would be required to upload artifacts and written reflections that represented their progress and covered five competencies in Community Health Education. Students were required to compose artifacts to demonstrate these competencies, which ranged from written reflections, quantitative data, and research to videos, images, slide presentations, and posters. The goal was for students to demonstrate their mastery and ability to synthesize knowledge and learning experiences through written reflections and evidence. To provide effective assistance for graduate students, sustained support over the two-year project was needed for students and faculty.

Through meetings and discussions, Lindsay actively collaborated with the department as they made decisions about what the eportfolios would entail; she provided feedback for how faculty would introduce this new assessment to students and offered guidance on what assessments would address both content and aesthetic design. Discussions also focused on addressing concerns of time management and effectively scaffolding this project into the already existing curriculum. As a result, the eportfolio was a project that students worked on through their whole two years in the program where multiple classes addressed different components of the eportfolio.

Due to Lindsay's support of faculty development and the creation of the eportfolio project, the natural next step was to have the Center provide assistance to graduate students. As part of this collaboration, all the Center's undergraduate and graduate tutors had access to the materials given to MPH students so that they were well-informed about this eportfolio project. Lindsay held practicum workshops with the tutors to dissect the components of eportfolios and provide a refresher on aesthetic and rhetorical design. Tutors created handouts for the graduate students on design elements, which helped the tutors better understand the project as they examined the main components of the eportfolio. Through staff training, they also addressed the different needs these students may have had when completing the project— for example, longer sessions, moments of direct instruction, and instruction on how to address both an academic and professional audience; as Bethany Mannon advises, "Preparing tutors for appointments with graduate students, therefore, means addressing differences between graduate and undergraduate education, and differences in writers' goals" (63). Additionally,

workshops designed for graduate student writers can also be conducted for tutors as a way for tutors to become more familiar with key assignments in other departments. Through this process, the tutors gained the experience of preparing and conducting workshops on their own. Therefore, the tutors received training to support the MPH students and develop their own marketable skills.

In the fall semester, all graduate students in the new cohort participated in a joint workshop with the Center and faculty to discuss the requirements of the eportfolio. During this workshop, Lindsay and the tutors discussed the portfolios as a whole, the organization and layout of eportfolios, and designing and using media, taking into consideration audience, purpose, context, and visual elements (font, color, images, etc.). Students learned the importance of choosing artifacts that best represented their progress in the program and showcased their goals while also ensuring the eportfolios were aesthetically appealing and rhetorically compelling.

To provide continuity and ongoing support, Lindsay also conducted a workshop on designing eportfolios for all second year MPH students as a refresher and opportunity for students to ask questions. All workshops were interactive and focused on planning and designing eportfolios. Because tutors were actively involved in each part of the process, MPH students became familiar with them. As a result of this multilayered approach to supporting the MPH program, the graduate students regularly visited the Center as they prepared their eportfolios. Given the complexity of the two-year project, tutors provided ongoing support to graduate students as they continued working on their extended eportfolio project and moved on to have other professors.

During this collaboration, graduate students requested assistance as they composed their eportfolios throughout their program and as they created effectively designed artifacts communicating their goals and experiences. Graduate students requested assistance on a range of eportfolio aspects, from the layout and design to composing a consistent narrative. Others wanted support with clearly communicating their experiences and representing their research in a concise manner to colleagues in their fields. Toward the end of their programs, students asked for assistance with crafting their reflective statements and finding images to complement their expressed journey.

Throughout this process, faculty shared with Lindsay that as a result of working with the Center, they noticed students could

more effectively communicate research findings and more clearly articulate their experiences while identifying appropriate design elements for their professional audience. They also noticed a change in the students' design creativity after participating in the workshops.

## **CONCLUSION**

To grow the fairly new center and offer support for students, Lindsay regularly collaborated with departments, such as the MPH department discussed here, and conducted faculty development workshops. She also created strong cross-campus connections supporting graduate and undergraduate students. As this example hopefully shows, a willingness to purposefully perceive what is absent from the writing center space—i.e., faculty—and, as Michael Pemberton argues, see writing centers as “co-sponsors of graduate students’ disciplinary enculturation” (43) opens up a space of development for tutors, graduate students, and faculty alike. Because graduate level writing support must find a balance between helping graduate writers with their immediate writing goals and building a structure to support long-term, sustainable writing support, a solid working relationship between writing centers and graduate faculty members, particularly across time, is a necessity.

Some highlights that can be taken away from this brief example are the origins of the collaboration and the sustained support of graduate students throughout a two-year project. What is noticeable is that Lindsay’s collaboration began not with an approach that tried to target any specific MPH need, but with a general move to assist with faculty development campus-wide. During this generalized faculty outreach program, a member of the MPH department received a practical demonstration of Lindsay’s expertise and recognized an overlap with the work the MPH department was beginning.

Another aspect worth highlighting is that the MPH administrator approached Lindsay to request her assistance. The collaboration formed organically as the MPH program saw a natural partnership and benefit of working with the center. While this particular partnership formed through the MPH’s initiative, another approach may be for center directors to reach out to departments to see how they could better support their graduate students with a focus on sharing expertise.

Furthermore, all workshops offered across the two-year time span focused on the same project but from multiple perspectives—faculty, student, and tutor. Both Lindsay and the MPH department

recognized a need for continued collaboration because the project itself was multi-year. Such a department-focused approach could be a win for everyone. The building and sustaining of relationships within a target department can help students more effectively communicate their ideas and can contribute to supporting a more general overall vision for graduate students. Faculty no longer have to undertake the burden of being the sole writing support providers, and they may learn some new strategies for providing feedback and assessment skills. For writing centers, these relationships could help to alleviate what seems to currently be the ever-present sense that “faculty just don’t understand what we do.” Writing centers also do not have to assume that they need to be familiar with all of the genres of all of the disciplines for which graduate writers come for help. They can continue to support graduate writers with generalist writing feedback while also including disciplinary-informed strategies.

## NOTES

1. In order to maintain institutional research integrity and because this was a previous employer, specific data cannot be shared in this article. However, we believe that benefit can be gained from learning the general hows and whys of this long-term collaboration to support graduate students.

2. For more information about these faculty development workshops, see Lindsay Sabatino and Brenta Blevins’s chapter “Initiating Multimodal Training: Faculty Development for Creating & Assessing Assignments.”



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