

Graduate Student Perspectives: Career Development Through Serving as Writing-Intensive GTAs

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Abstract: One potentially significant but little-examined opportunity for graduate students to acquire experience with discipline-based writing is to serve as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) for Writing-Intensive (WI) courses at universities that sponsor writing-across-the-curriculum and writing-in-the-disciplines programs. This chapter reports on one such well-established program in which over 100 GTAs each semester serve in a variety of capacities for WI courses in their own disciplines. The chapter features both qualitative and quantitative data demonstrating the success of the program. Voices of representative GTAs, combined with independently obtained survey data, show that multiple outcomes are achieved: Graduate students are engaged with discipline-based writing, graduate students are prepared for their future careers, graduate students' discipline-based teaching ability is improved, and mentorships between graduate students and their supervising faculty develop—all of which add up to being much more than just a “grader” for a professor in a WI class.

Keywords: Graduate Education, Graduate Writing, Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC), Writing in the Disciplines (WID), Career Development, Career Preparation, Teaching Assistant (TA), Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA), Qualitative Research on Writing, Quantitative Research on Writing, Survey Research, Survey Protocol, Graduate Satisfaction with Career Preparation, Mentoring, Professional Acculturation, Writing-Intensive Courses, Tutoring, Writing Program Administration, Writing Program Development, Public University, Discipline-Based Writing, Graduate Student Professionalization, Undergraduate Education, General Education

We are struck by the similarities between Cornell University's John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines, which Elliot Shapiro writes about in Chapter 5, and ours at the University of Missouri, which we write about here. Indeed, we

1 The authors acknowledge with gratitude the work of Dr. Joe Green, former CWP Graduate Research Assistant and chief liaison between CWP and the RJI Center for the project. He is now Associate Dean for Undergraduate Studies at the University of Dubuque. Townsend served as CWP director from 1991 to 2006. Lannin became CWP director in 2011.

find our chapters remarkably complementary. Like Shapiro, we argue that teaching writing can help graduate students become better writers. The two programs are alike in that they are stand-alone writing programs situated within large, land grant research universities; they are responsible for training graduate students from diverse disciplines who in turn contribute significantly to the education of undergraduate students; and they hold similar principles about how writing is learned and should be taught. The Cornell and Missouri programs are similar in scale and complexity, both programs exist in an educational milieu that values research over teaching, thus creating specific challenges we must address, and both programs play significant roles in the careers of the graduate students who are affiliated with them. In the comments of the graduate students quoted from each program, readers will hear similar refrains, both positive and problematic. Although similar in many respects, the two universities (as is to be expected) have developed very different systems for delivering their undergraduate writing curricula as well as for involving and training the graduate students they employ. We begin our chapter with thoughts expressed by a former graduate student who has worked with Missouri's program for a number of semesters.

A Poster Graduate Student for Interdisciplinarity

I started my professional life as an independent, private (and relatively untrained) writing tutor for students age six to fifty-six, where I operated from a practical standpoint of knowing what worked and didn't work. In grad school, becoming a WI [Writing Intensive] TA helped me plug into the university system. My life's goal is to spread knowledge in an atmosphere of comfort and trust; tutoring and TAing have given me the opportunity to do that. It is safe to say that I would not be where I am today without having been a WI TA and tutor. (personal interview)

With a B.S. in Business Administration and Marketing, an M.S. in Political Science, and a Ph.D. in Literacy Education, Jonathan Cisco is a poster student for interdisciplinarity. (All names are real and used with permission.) Jonathan was one of two full-time professional coordinators and then assistant director for the University of Missouri's Campus Writing Program, working with faculty across the disciplines to plan and review Writing Intensive (WI) courses. His path included seven semesters as a tutor in the university's Writing Center and three semesters as a Writing Intensive (WI) graduate teaching assistant. In the Writing Center, he consulted with faculty and students for up to thirty different WI courses each semester. His own account of this work provides insight into the connection between his WI TA work, WI tutoring, and the writing he did as a doctoral student:

The effect of those experiences on my learning to think critically is phenomenal. To give you an example, as a WI tutor many of my repeat clients were political science students taking the Intro to Research Methods course. When we were talking about how to write a methods section we had to go into the statistics. I was teaching statistics through writing almost every day. Now, when I'm talking with faculty about statistics or reading quantitative papers, I feel far better prepared when it comes to understanding quantitative analysis, simply because of the hundreds of times I taught statistics as a tutor. (personal interview)

As Jonathan's example shows, tutoring and serving as a teaching assistant for an undergraduate writing-intensive (WI) class provides a deeper experience with discipline-based writing. At our university, graduate students have been serving as WI TAs for nearly three decades. Presently, as many as one hundred or more TAs each semester work with faculty members who teach WI courses. In this chapter, we report on a study in which we researched the question: "What are the perspectives of graduate students as teaching assistants in Writing Intensive courses?" We present their voices, stories, and experiences to understand how their work transcends being merely "graders" for WI faculty but instead provides valuable career preparation, especially when it comes to writing. We include data that spans more than 10 years of the program's history, including interviews, surveys, and previous program research. This compilation includes excerpts from interviews conducted with WI TAs who worked in our program. We cite former WI TAs (now full-time academicians) who studied professor/WI TA teams. We also report on an independent survey of 467 former WI TAs, alumnae of this program who served in this capacity during their graduate studies, who reflect on how their WI TA work helped prepare them for their careers and professional writing demands. Overall, we believe the findings offer compelling evidence for the efficacy of the WI TA model in achieving multiple aims: engaging graduate students with discipline-based writing, preparing graduate students for their future careers, improving graduate students' discipline-based teaching ability, creating mentorships between graduate students and their supervising faculty—and, of course, becoming better writers.

The Missouri Model

We are fortunate that University of Missouri administrators recognize that an important symbiosis exists between graduate education (an essential component of which is graduate student professionalization), undergraduate education (which, at our university, requires two WI courses for graduation), and faculty's need for

support if WI courses are to be delivered at the 20:1 student-to-teacher ratio our WI guidelines call for. One of the motives for the initial survey we report on was to document for our administration, the value of the university's investment in this model. We believe the findings are convincing, and we hope other similar universities might consider such a model, in light of the professional benefits our former graduate students report. Though this survey was conducted for internal uses of program assessment, as we later reflected on this data, we found this to be useful information even now, and thus sought to study the TA landscape and build on this initial survey.

Program History

The University of Missouri's Campus Writing Program (CWP) came into being in 1984, to support delivery of the undergraduate WI course requirement that faculty had voted to enact. (See Townsend, Patton, & Vogt, 2012, for a program history.) Like many writing-across-the-curriculum/writing-in-the-disciplines programs, CWP designates approved courses as "writing intensive," which undergraduate students are required to complete in order to graduate. A long-standing set of guidelines, developed by a faculty-driven Campus Writing Board, helps faculty interpret how to design and teach WI courses. Key among the requirement's underlying principles is the idea that writing is a vehicle for learning and that WI classes will require students to "express, reformulate, or apply the concepts of an academic discipline" (University of Missouri Campus Writing Board). Annually, some 400 WI courses are taught by faculty in 86 undergraduate degree-granting programs across the university. Thus, student writing is based on the specific conventions, expectations, and vocabularies of the disciplines in which those courses are taught. Additionally, the writing must be "complex enough to require substantive revision for most students" (University of Missouri Campus Writing Board). Such writing and revision, of course, require feedback from knowledgeable experts in each field.

The 20:1 student-to-faculty ratio for WI courses was established at the program's outset to ensure that students would receive constructive feedback on their writing. At the same time, program framers recognized the need to be sensitive to the research and publication demands on the professoriate at an Association of American Universities (AAU) institution. The provision for graduate teaching assistance is both an incentive for faculty to teach WI courses as well as a concession to the enrollment pressures of a large, public university. Early WI classes enrolled just 20 students with one professor so that faculty could experiment and become confident with the new pedagogies. It was clear from the beginning, though, that course enrollments would have to increase to accommodate the now 14,000 students who take WI courses each year in order to graduate on time. The adoption

of new general education requirements increased the requirement from one to two WI courses per student, which also added increased enrollment pressure. Hiring graduate students to assist faculty offering the WI courses has been the practice, then, virtually since the program's origin. The involvement of TAs is vital to the sustained success of the CWP, and because of this, we need to understand and build on the research of the TA experience.

Involvement of Teaching Assistants: Some Background

Funds to help staff WI classes with GTAs are based on the total number of WI students enrolled. Departments are reimbursed \$110 per student *beyond* the first 20 students in a WI class (for whom the professor is responsible). WI faculty, in consultation with their departmental Directors of Graduate Study, select the GTAs they want to work with from their department's pool of available graduate students. Faculty members and departments determine their own criteria for selecting GTAs, based on varying circumstances and needs, with CWP stepping in to consult on request. Occasionally, graduate students may cross over to another department if the pool is small; a doctoral student in Art History, for example, might TA for a course in the Art Department or vice versa.

Before the start of each semester, the Campus Writing Program offers a TA/Faculty workshop at which the TA and often the supervising faculty member practice reading and responding to student papers, consider assignment design, explore issues of plagiarism, and discuss other trouble-shooting topics for working as a TA in a WI course. CWP also works with faculty to hold department-specific "norming" sessions and TA workshops to look at papers and issues that arise in a particular course. These TA-focused development opportunities are one part of a fuller scope of workshops, seminars, and retreats offered by the Program to support the teaching of WI courses at MU. By far the biggest part of our budget funds the academic work these graduate students perform.

The Gap We Hope to Help Fill

As the editors of this collection note, the literature on the writing-related aspects of graduate education needs expansion. Among the resources we found are four we mention here. In "The Effects of Writing Pedagogy Education on Graduate Teaching Assistants' Approaches to Teaching Composition" (2012), Reid, Estrem, and Belcheir report on a three-year, two-site, multimodal study of the relationship between formal pedagogy education and teaching practice. Their analysis shows "uneven integration of key composition pedagogy principles into TAs' views of teaching writing" (p. 32). But their study focuses on TAs in first-year composition

and does not address cross-disciplinary TAs in WAC settings. In “The GTA Mentoring Program: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Developing Future Faculty as Teacher-Scholars” (2003), Gaia, Corts, Tatum, and Allen describe a lack of professional development for graduate students and outline an interdisciplinary mentoring program for graduate teaching assistants. As their title suggests, however, their focus is on mentoring the future professoriate, and they do not address graduate student writing nor include reference to graduate students who go on to professional careers outside academe.

Rodrigue’s “The (In)Visible World of Teaching Assistants in the Disciplines: Preparing TAs to Teach Writing” (2012) comes closest to addressing the cross-disciplinary graduate students we write about in this chapter. She notes that even though WAC *faculty* development has a strong presence in the literature, surprisingly little attention has been devoted to the training, teaching roles, and participation of TAs in WAC efforts. Her essay examines the history of TAs in WAC programs, shows why TAs have been excluded from the literature, and argues for more attention to the role and training of TAs in WAC settings. Although Rodrigue’s conclusion briefly mentions the benefits to graduate students of receiving WAC TA training, the essay does not offer in-depth commentary on the benefits to their own writing experience. None of these sources, though, address the ways that GTAs’ own writing practices benefit from involvement in WAC programs.

One recent source does begin to get at the matter of developing graduate student writing, albeit somewhat indirectly. Although Geller and Eodice’s *Working with Faculty Writers* (2013) focuses primarily on the benefits of institutions’ emphasizing faculty development activities related to writing, the authors also invoke benefits for “graduate writers—[those who are] on the cusp of becoming faculty writers” throughout the book (p. 16). We believe our chapter, and this collection, begin to address some of the missing links needed for writing programs that rely so heavily on graduate students by asking: What do graduate students find important and useful from their experiences as WI TAs?

A Study of TA Writing-Intensive Experiences: Genesis and Methodology

This study began when Marty Townsend, CWP director from 1991-2006, and Amy Lannin, current CWP director, met to discuss data from a previous study of TAs who had worked over a 10-year span. Though this survey was dated (completed in 2005), the findings were useful in understanding (and making visible) the perspectives of these hundreds of graduate students. It was a bit of a holy grail moment when we both realized the value of this data, and that due to the program’s minimal changes over the years, the data provided a richer view of what constitutes

a significant part of the CWP work. However, we still questioned what current TAs would say, and we wondered how other types of data could inform the survey data.

To help us answer the question, “What are the perspectives of graduate students as teaching assistants in Writing Intensive courses?,” we planned a mixed methods exploratory study (Creswell & Clark, 2007). Data started with the collection of survey responses that included both Likert scale and open-ended responses. Quantitative data analysis was completed by an outside entity, the RJI (Reynolds Journalism Institute). With IRB approval and consent from interviewees, we then collected and analyzed interview transcripts and the surveys’ open-ended responses. Qualitative analysis included exploring the data (reading and re-reading), coding the data, grouping codes into categories, forming categories into larger themes, comparing themes, and naming the over-arching findings.

In the sections below, we describe the survey and initial findings. We then present the mixed collection of data that led to our findings and discussion of those findings.

The RJI/CWP Survey

The survey we undertook was designed to inform us about WI TAs’ perspectives as related to their career development, an essential component of which is discipline-based writing. Survey design was a joint endeavor between CWP and the University of Missouri’s RJI Insight and Survey Center (formerly the Center for Advanced Social Research) housed in the Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute. Data collection was done by RJI. Operating under the guidelines of the American Association of Public Opinion Research in Ann Arbor, the RJI Insight and Survey Center was at the time one of the country’s leading providers of survey research for the news media, government agencies, academic institutes, and private foundations. CWP had engaged the Center to help us with an earlier study, and we trusted them to help us with this one. Given the substantial monetary investment made by the university in WI TAs, we wanted to ensure objective data obtained by an independent organization of the highest reputation. And, frankly, we knew the research we had in mind was beyond our scope and ability.

In consultation with RJI Center experts, we arrived at a 25-question telephone survey that examines the usefulness of WI TAs’ experiences for their career development. (See Appendix A for the survey protocol.) CWP provided the names of former WI TAs, some of whom had finished their graduate work as much as 12 years earlier; the university’s alumni association provided telephone numbers. The Center’s trained interviewers and supervisory staff conducted 228 interviews over a 35-day period in the spring of 2005, with a response rate of 82.3 percent. Cost per survey was \$18.

Quantitative Findings

The survey findings, which were used internally but never published, offer strong support for the WI TA model as we practice it. (The final report is available at <http://cwp.missouri.edu>.) Although the survey was conducted a while back, the findings and implications are no less relevant today. Indeed, recent WI TA interviews Lannin has conducted corroborate the survey data and reinforce what we learned from it. (See Appendix B for interview protocol.) During 2013-2014, three 60-minute interviews were conducted and transcribed. The interview questions were based on the original survey questions and allowed us to go more deeply into the survey topics and to hear from current TAs how they were viewing the TA experience. We believe the survey findings and interviews studied together offer a fuller picture of the WI TA perspectives.

Among the survey's quantitative findings are these:

1. 70 percent of the graduate students who responded perceive their WI TA experience to be valuable to their career development;
2. 69 percent perceive that their WI TA work enhanced their communication skills;
3. 62 percent perceive their WI TA work helped them understand the content of the courses they were helping to teach;
4. 52 percent perceive their WI TA work helped them with writing in their careers;
5. 49 percent perceive they better understand their own writing;
6. and a surprising 96 percent report they would advise current graduate students in their respective fields to serve as WI TAs if given the opportunity.

Findings 2, 4, and 5 relate directly to the purpose of this book.

Qualitative Findings & Discussion

Perhaps more revealing than the numerical data are the WI TAs' responses to the survey's open-ended questions, reported in the RJI Center's transcript. These comments represent voices from disciplines across the entire spectrum of the university, a *partial* list of which includes: Agricultural Economics, Agricultural Engineering, Animal Science, Archeology, Art and Design, Art History, Biology, Business, Finance, Chemical Engineering, Classical Studies, Communication, Education, English, Entomology, Environmental Design, Fine Arts, Fisheries and Wildlife, Forestry, History, Human Development and Family Studies, Journalism, Law, Nursing, Sociology, Political Science, Sociology, and Theater. In the graduate students' own voices is evidence of the benefits the WI TA experience offers.

A number of themes emerged as we analyzed the open-ended survey responses and the transcripts of the more recent interviews. We begin with a broader focus of the GTAs' acculturation into the academy, those responses that describe how they made the transition into the world of higher education as a TA. Then we look more specifically at the preparation they found helpful in becoming TAs. We also find many of the responses address the educational benefits of being a TA, mainly for learning course content as well as for the development of their own writing. A final theme deals with life beyond the TAs' career at MU as many respondents describe how they were aided in getting and succeeding in their jobs because of their experiences as a TA.

Survey responses are short because interviewees were answering a series of twenty-some questions on the phone, in contrast to the longer in-person interviews that we also share. The themes are presented below with responses from the surveys (participants are anonymous) and interviews (participants are named).

Stepping into Unfamiliar Waters: Acculturation into Academe

Being a graduate student is daunting, yet the experiences of serving as a TA in a writing-intensive course provided our graduate students with a supportive environment to transition into the academy. Jennah Sontag is one of the rare TAs whose WI appointment was far afield from her own discipline. She was just beginning her graduate studies in Journalism when she agreed to step out of her comfort zone to work with Professor Mark Morgan in Parks, Recreation, and Tourism. The students in his course, titled "Social Aspects of Fishing," were about to undertake an innovative project, and Morgan was intentionally seeking someone who could contribute not only writing expertise, but also provide an outsider's perspective on their work. Sontag says:

In preparation for the course, Dr. Morgan involved me in organizing materials, planning the syllabus, and gathering background information. I learned a lot about the field and his research. This experience exposed me to what kinds of research are done in the field of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism, what drives certain professors, what their interests are. I've always been a quantitative research person. Learning about Dr. Morgan's research exposed me to qualitative research in other areas. I struggle with that kind of research at times. Seeing how it is used in fields outside Journalism helped me understand it. (personal interview)

Throughout her WI TA assignment, then, Sontag received a "double dose"

of acculturation—both into academe as well as into a new disciplinary setting. Although we don't recommend this double whammy, the exposure to a new discipline's research methods proved beneficial to Sontag, whose experience we recount in greater detail later in this essay.

Several respondents speak to the value of building closer relationships with the professors in their fields: "It is a really good learning experience working with professors who have had a lot of experience and can become mentors." The closer exposure to more professors' experiences (including perhaps even some who are not their immediate supervisors), the mentoring that develops, and the relative ease of getting to know them were valuable to this group—"priceless" in the words of one. Sontag describes this relationship with Professor Morgan, as he mentored her into a different discipline as well as into the work of a TA. Her experience corroborates this survey response from another TA:

[TA work] helps you form a different relationship with the professor. You have the ability to work together as a team. I got to know all the professors in my department, and it was easier to work with them, rather than if they were professor and I [were just] a student.

With any course, the larger the enrollment, the more challenging course management becomes, especially when TAs are helping to deliver the curriculum—and even more so because the Campus Writing Board works hard to ensure that TAs are *not* relegated to the marginalized role of "grader" while faculty attend to "more important" issues. Our program has worked hard to balance faculty and TA experiences when they work together. We want faculty to retain responsibility for their classrooms and their teaching, while at the same time both receiving the TA help they need *and* mentoring their GTAs about the uses of writing in their discipline-based contexts. Thus, *WI Guideline* number eight, and its explanatory comment, read:

In classes employing graduate teaching assistants, professors should remain firmly in control not only of the writing assignments, but of the grading and marking of papers.

The most common practice in courses with enrollment below 50 is to have the professor read every major written assignment and either assign a grade or approve the GTA's grade. In such courses marking and commenting on papers is usually a responsibility shared by the graduate teaching assistant and the professor. As courses get larger, the professor's role becomes increasingly managerial: he or she may train GTAs in "standard-setting" sessions such as those featured in Campus Writing Program TA workshops and then entrust the actual grading to the graduate teaching assistants. In such circumstances, the Board needs to

be assured that the GTAs assign essentially the same grade the professor would, for essentially the same reasons. Professors are, therefore, encouraged to read a large enough sample of the GTAs' graded papers to verify the accuracy of their evaluations. This sampling will also help the professor assess the effectiveness of the assignment and the need the class may have for additional instruction. (University of Missouri Campus Writing Board)

Before they became full-time academicians, Lisa Higgins and Ginny Muller (1994), then WI TAs themselves, undertook an ethnographic study of professor/WI TA teams at the University of Missouri. Discovering that the specifics of the professor/WI TA relationship often remain unarticulated, and that the roles TAs fulfill vary widely, Higgins and Muller propose a set of generative questions to facilitate a dialogue between professors and TAs. These questions help clarify how the team will work together, thus determining the quality of experience the faculty, the TAs, and their students will have. Higgins, now director of the Missouri Folk Arts Program, and Muller, an award-winning associate teaching professor at MU, conclude:

Working as WI TAs has richly benefited our student and professional careers through acculturation into the academic community, collegial relationships with students and faculty, introductions to teaching in our chosen disciplines, and opportunities to develop and practice our own pedagogical theories with the help of faculty mentors. (p. 2)

Although we can't say for sure that Higgins' and Muller's research led directly to the *WI Guideline* quoted above, or to the item we discuss below, we are sure there is a strong influence. CWP closely heeds the experiences reported to us by faculty and graduate students working together in WI classrooms; the program follows through with changes both subtle and substantive to its guiding documents.

For example, since Higgins' and Muller's article, the Board has developed a complementary set of guidelines to address the special challenges of large-enrollment WI courses. (See Appendix C.) We think it notable that the Board seeks to ensure not only that GTAs' grading across sections is consistent, but also—as indicated in item four—that they are offered professional acculturation into the discipline itself. In CWP's view, this acculturation is as important as grading consistency.

Preparing for the Professional Work of a Teaching Assistant

Part of the acculturation process includes the preparation that TAs should receive to make sure that expectations are clear for their work as a TA and for their working

relationships with faculty. Higgins' and Muller's ethnographic study was born, in part, of their frustration over unspoken assumptions about how WI faculty and TAs would work together. Through comparing notes on their own TA experiences in separate WI classes, they realized that better communication between WI faculty and TAs was needed if TAs were to fulfill their responsibilities. Thus, their work warrants inclusion under this theme as well. Turning their desire for a better TA preparation system into a research project for the WAC/WID seminar they were then enrolled in, they interviewed WI faculty and TAs about their working relationships, ultimately developing a rubric for dialogue that improves professional preparation. Part of this preparation includes questions for the professor and TAs to discuss:

- What are the specific tasks of the professor and TA in this class?
- How would you describe your expectations for this particular TA/professor relationship?
- What kind of relationship does the professor have with the students in the class?
- What is the role of writing in this course?
- How does the professor facilitate writing?
- How does the TA facilitate writing?
- Would the TA benefit from more training? What sort would you recommend?

As we mentioned earlier, the Campus Writing Program offers workshops for TAs at the start of each semester. Sontag, the Journalism student who worked with Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Professor Mark Morgan, found the TA workshop helpful in preparing her for her assignment:

The TA workshop was really great because we worked with people from other departments and I got to see what their expectations were. We first graded a paper individually and then as a team to see how differently we graded the same assignment. That put grading into perspective about the expectations of us and other teachers of writing and of professors. This helped me see the big picture of writing across all of the curricula. Writing isn't just in journalism but in every field.

Dr. Morgan and I graded papers separately and then together. He involved me at every step: designing the syllabus and requirements, giving feedback. I was hired the semester before the course started. This was smart on his part. It gave me more of a sense of ownership in the course. I'm excited that our students' project, "Hook, Line, and Sinker: A Collection of Fish Tales from Missouri Anglers," is now published. (personal interview)

For Morgan's part, his acknowledgment for the book reads, "Writing, like fishing, is a process that requires careful attention to details. Successful authors and anglers learn to rely on feedback from various sources. I am indebted to . . . Jennah Sontag, our graduate teaching assistant for this project. Already a published author, Jennah provided some much-needed writing savvy. When I found out she enjoyed fishing, [working with her as a TA] was an easy decision—the best one I made."

Preparing to work with a TA, as well as serving as one, requires varied levels of support. From the individual consultation with the faculty, to attending a campus-wide workshop, we strive to ensure that the TAs in this program are well prepared for the demands of assisting in a writing-intensive course.

Learning through Teaching

Our third emergent theme harkens to Seneca's dictum *docendo discimus*: "By teaching, we learn." We turn now to the phone survey responses to hear the voices of these former TAs who make up the 62 percent who perceive their WI TA work as helping them understand course content. Some respondents specifically note that teaching the material helped them learn it, as demonstrated in this survey response:

There's a saying that you never really learn to do something until you have to teach it. You have to understand it well in order to make an essay. I had some [students] writing articles about opera who had no prior writing experience . . . I found myself just pulling out basic structure on how to write an essay. When you are teaching that is very valuable.

Another survey respondent echoes the power of learning through teaching:

I was studying some of the same material I was teaching as a TA. The material actually overlapped with the graduate program as far as the philosophy and some of the ethics [and] legal issues. So, in teaching that I was learning it as well.

One of the strengths of the Missouri model is that WI TAs are selected to work with WI courses in their own disciplines. (Sontag's case is a rare exception.) So, as graduate students help the WI professor prepare teaching materials, attend the WI classes, read and respond to student writing, and occasionally teach the WI class themselves, they are not only gaining extra exposure to content that may be quite close to their own area of interest, but also reinforcing it in their own minds. In Cisco's interview, he elaborated on his own learning through his work as a TA:

Graduate work in quantitative methods is so complex and so swift that it's easy to forget why something works. The tutoring

and teaching of writing put me in an environment where I had to make sense of things to the undergraduate students who were terribly unprepared for advanced statistics. I had to find a way to teach multiple regression—and how to write about it—in a 50-minute tutorial session. I did this over and over and over again. Through that process, I learned how to explain regression simply and in such a way that the hows and whys made quick sense to the students. Transference was inevitable. I learned by doing. (personal interview)

Developing as a Writer

The more I looked at others' writing styles, the more I focused on my own.

– Survey Respondent

As shown in the quantitative results, 52 percent of the respondents perceived that their WI TA work helped them with writing in their careers, and 49 percent perceived that it helped them better understand their own writing. This finding was explained in the open-ended responses. Spending time reading and grading student papers helped respondents analyze their own writing: “[Working as a WI TA] made me critique my own writing much more. I had friends editing my own class papers and my dissertation and I got fewer red marks from my friends after I had been forced to see others' writing. It improved my critical eye.” The “critical eye” seemed to result in TAs considering the development of ideas, the role of audience, and the stylistic moves in their writing.

Inasmuch as the ability “to think more clearly and express thoughts more precisely” (University of Missouri Campus Writing Board) is an integral part of WI courses and writing assignments, it's not surprising that logic is mentioned by several respondents. Examples include:

It made me be more concise and use more logic in my own writing.

I learned how to be more clear, concise, and logical; the more you see other people's writing, and the more you write, the better you get.

The importance of audience awareness—one of the hardest things for all writers, expert and novice, to nail down—appeared in a couple of responses, such as this one: “I learned about taking into consideration the audience that I'm writing to—developing a style that's having a conversation with the reader and having a discussion be logically consistent. And just nuances about the art of writing.” The concept of audience connects, of course, to the academic reality of being in a conversation with those whose thoughts and research have preceded your own.

Whether the respondent is familiar with the Burkean parlor metaphor is unknown to us, but we suspect it would make complete sense to her.

The idea of concision in some of the responses suggests that in reading unfocused undergraduate writing, these graduate students have become more attuned to producing prose of their own that is as direct and succinct as they can make it—a trait that will no doubt cause their readers to value their work more highly.

From a reference to “nuance” and another respondent’s comment that it “makes you think about how to put words together,” we might deduce an increased awareness of how language works—and maybe even an increased appreciation for using words as effectively as possible. And even though only two respondents directly mention style, several responses could be seen to invoke it generally. Overall, we think this group of respondents would enjoy coming together for a seminar based on Joe Williams and Gregory Colomb’s *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* (2010)—and might then teach it competently as well.

I was reviewing technical science writing for the [WI] course and that’s what I’m doing as I prepare my dissertation now.

Three of the survey respondents specifically refer to the effect of WI TA work on their own dissertations, while two other respondents allude to wanting their writing to be better for their professors as a result of WI TA work:

After I started grading others’ papers I understood what my professors had been telling me all those years. It was before me in black and white and it made me change what I was doing.

The ideas of critique, having a critical eye, and seeing something “in black and white,” suggest the transfer that students found as they connected their TA experiences with writing to their own writing tasks.

Getting a Job and Succeeding in the Workforce

Based on the survey responses, 70 percent of these former graduate students believe that the WI TA experience helped with job acquisition, from high school, to college, to an extra job within the new place of employment. As one respondent remarks: “Monitoring the students helped me tighten up my own writing and went a long way toward getting me my present job at a university.” This comment also fits into the group that responded about how the WI TA experience affected their own writing. Other responses indicate that what they gained from their TA work became necessary aspects of their jobs: “I’m a trial lawyer and my job is to speak for a living—and that’s what I did every time I went to class to teach and help my students.”

The WI TA experience was also significant in helping students acquire jobs: “My primary professor has asked me to come back and be an adjunct professor for

a couple of classes. Last winter semester and this one, I was an adjunct professor on top of my [regular] job.” Or in the next example, the former TA found a job that was directly connected to his university teaching: “I taught the German Civilization recitation sections and this was the most helpful to my professional development because I’m now teaching that class at a high school.”

Another aspect of job success was in the people skills, as well as writing skills, that this respondent noted:

Working with the students some interesting situations arose due to the controversial subject matter. Dealing with students’ emotions tactfully while trying to get them to think analytically. It taught me how to deal with people’s emotions when I went into sales. A lot of employers liked that I had taught writing and knew how to write. I was assigned to teach a professional writing class for a company I worked for.

Other responses represent benefits the former graduate students perceive as worthwhile to them in their careers, whether in academe or not. Knowing how much writing to assign in a class is key to a new faculty member’s success: “The process helped me later as a professor to know how much writing is appropriate to assign.” Throughout our years in WAC, we have observed several first-time faculty instructors assign far too much writing than is appropriate, as well as assignments beyond the level of ability of undergraduate students. We see value in the lessons learned about amount of writing and appropriateness of expectations for different levels of students.

The following respondent sees the benefit from a continued relationship with her supervising faculty mentors toward her professional success:

I’m still in contact with the professors I worked with, and have presented on panels together with them since then. We continue having a professional collaboration. There were forty-some students in the class, and I was actually able to teach the class sometimes. That was great for my professional development and preparing me to teach college courses. The professors that I worked with treated me as a colleague. It was a very enriching experience.

Very likely, these faculty mentors might well be among the recommenders who helped this former WI TA get her job.

The autonomy that comes with these assistantships, whether the future includes teaching or not, was highly valued by some respondents: “Having to TA the class by myself gave me an idea of what teaching was like in case I go into the teaching field at some point. Having a little teaching background helps in working with others.”

Finally, this next response demonstrates the many ways that serving as a TA can help students prepare for getting and succeeding in a job:

WI courses teach you how to better express yourself in a professional environment no matter what further career steps you take. Consulting and learning and dealing with both students and professors at all these levels helps you see various sides of writing and compare and contrast your own skills to skills of other professionals in your area of expertise.

Overall Benefits of Working as a TA: Support and Preparation for the Future

An astonishing 96 percent of our respondents replied affirmatively that they would advise graduate students in their field to serve as WI TAs. Following are comments that address these overall benefits. Respondents 1-3, below, speak to some of the ways that WI TA appointments prepare graduate students for future careers: the ability to critique one's own work, the "well roundedness" that comes from seeing differences between disciplines, and the ability to tackle the range of writing tasks that lie ahead. Again, improving one's communication skills in both writing and speaking is invoked.

1. As a WI TA, one of your primary focuses is critiquing the writing and communication skills of others. As you critique others you begin to critique your own work simultaneously. That ultimately flows over into your professional life, too.
2. For the opportunity to sharpen their writing and communication skills: writing and speaking. My experience was in an economics course in agriculture before I was a law student. It was interesting to see the differences in the two disciplines, and it gave me a more well-rounded experience.
3. It's good experience for what lies ahead. I had no idea how much of my current professional life I would spend writing. I'd say about 70 or 80 percent of the time I'm writing reports, memos, or even emails that have to be written in a certain way.

Many responses constitute a sort of "catch all" category: "If nothing else, financially [being a TA] was great for me as a single mom. It was enjoyable and interesting work." Presumably, as a single mother, this graduate student was able to do much of her WI TA work at home, while still earning money to support her children. Some of the respondents felt that the work as a TA resulted in acquisition of knowledge that will be important to new graduate students just starting their studies: "It would strengthen their overall knowledge of our field." And our final

comment in this theme provides a summary of all the advantages in one short reply: “The experience, the money, the practice, everything.”

The Naysayers

So, what did the four percent who *wouldn't* recommend WI TA appointments for their peers say? And what were some of the other negative answers to survey questions? Although a clear minority, those voices are worth hearing as well.

Those who said the WI TA work didn't help them better understand their own graduate writing cited the difference between graduate and undergraduate writing or noted they were working in a discipline not their own. Response number 4 speaks to why CWP rarely assigns TAs cross-disciplinarily and only if there is a special need, such as the one Morgan presented us with for his students' unusual research project.

1. The WI class I was teaching was introductory level, and my own studies were more of a research angle.
2. The kind of writing was different: different goals, different audience.
3. The kinds [of tasks] that undergrads have to do are not tasks grad students have to do. It's apples and oranges.
4. What they were writing about didn't have anything to do with what I was studying. I was getting my degree in one discipline and being a TA in another one.

To our question about what aspects of their experience WI TAs wish could have been different, we received a wide variety of responses. Most center around interaction with their faculty supervisors—wanting more involvement with the curriculum, workload, training, and pay. (Recall Higgins' and Muller's study here.) Most aspects are outside of their control; many are outside of CWP's control as well. Some of these responses include:

1. I had a professor who was in her first year and wasn't prepared. Anytime you have a professor who is getting up in front of students as a professor for the first time, it creates chaos.
2. I wish I had more time to go over the course content with the students.
3. I didn't attend the [pre-semester training workshop] that WI TAs were supposed to go to. I think that would have helped me a lot.
4. I wish the students would actually come to my office hours; the bulk of the students did not.
5. I wish I had more control over the assignments.
6. I wish I could have had a better place to meet with students. My office was dark and small and not very inviting.

7. There was no reason I had to be hired as a TA when I already had a master's degree and was qualified to teach undergraduate courses. They should have hired me as interim faculty.

Those who wouldn't recommend that their fellow graduate students serve as WI TAs referred either to the time commitment or to the lack of fit with their discipline. They said things like:

1. It is very time consuming. It does help with networking but it significantly adds to the workload.
2. The photojournalism track is a very time-consuming travel-oriented course and the WI course requires an enormous amount of time. It is almost a full-time teaching position because you not only grade papers but you are working with the students to improve their work.
3. In my field, the reward for being a WI TA is strictly for personal development. My enhanced abilities to work with students one-on-one won't translate in political science. It won't help me get published, get tenure at a Research I facility. It won't help my personal advancement.
4. The degree that I am doing is so very narrowly focused you probably should be working in a library, not teaching a writing class.

We don't discount these negative responses. Discerned in some of the comments above can be signs of the tension that exists at a research university when teaching becomes the focus. This tension is echoed in the following chapter when Shapiro writes of the disparaging discourse that shapes some graduate students' perceptions of teaching as "a distraction from the real work of research."

WI TA assignments are not perfect for every graduate student, just as WI teaching isn't a comfortable fit for every faculty member. When talking with prospective WI teachers, CWP staff make a point of not dissembling about the effort required. As the WI guidelines read, "The success of a Writing Intensive course depends more on the teacher's commitment to this style of teaching than on adherence to any particular formula. Because of the importance of this commitment, the Campus Writing Board encourages courses from willing faculty participants" (University of Missouri Campus Writing Board). The same goes for graduate assistants, as well. If we were to become aware of a WI TA who is dissatisfied with his appointment, we would try to help that graduate student finish out the semester as comfortably as possible and suggest that the WI faculty instructor seek a replacement for the next term. Or, in a worst-case scenario, we would help find a mid-term replacement, although neither of us recalls this happening. As the WI guidelines suggest, the success of any WAC program depends on the instructors' willingness to commit to this style of teaching. The same goes for WI TAs, as well.

Conclusion

To our knowledge, no similar study of TA involvement in WI courses has been conducted—even though many institutions employ TAs in similar roles. Moreover, we believe the independent nature of the data collection lends credibility to the findings. In our university, where support for graduate student writing is limited, the WI TA model has developed as an essential aspect of graduate students' professional preparation. Earlier in this chapter, we list some of the fields in which these WI TAs were earning their graduate degrees. At the time of their RJI/CWP telephone interviews, they had moved on to more than 50 different colleges and universities (into more advanced graduate work, post-doctoral positions, or faculty appointments) or to a variety of professional jobs.

To illustrate the wide perspectives from which our WI TA alumnae speak, a sample of their titles includes: art director for an advertising firm, senior television producer, student services coordinator, research scientist, senior policy research analyst, alumni coordinator, editorial assistant, consultant, project coordinator, curator of visual art, speech language pathologist, national marketing director, director of human resources, child birth educator, account executive, trial lawyer, entomologist, attorney, and president of a self-owned company. Having this many voices from such a wide array of perspectives illustrates the interdisciplinarity of the WAC program and the caliber of people whose careers have been developed who have then taken on leadership roles in their professions.

This study has helped us answer our question of “What are the perspectives of graduate students as teaching assistants in writing-intensive courses?” Through the mixed qualitative and quantitative data, we have a better understanding of how graduate students at our university have perceived their work as TAs. As we noted earlier, we believe the findings offer compelling evidence for the efficacy of the WI TA model in achieving multiple aims: engaging graduate students with discipline-based writing, preparing graduate students for their future careers, improving graduate students' discipline-based teaching ability, and creating mentorships between graduate students and their supervising faculty. All of that adds up to being much more than just a “grader” for a professor in a class. It is the efficacy of meeting multiple institutional goals—the symbiosis we describe in our introduction—that explains and justifies our university's substantial commitment, fiscal and philosophical, to this model.

We don't claim that Missouri's model is the only—or even the best—way to structure a WAC/WID program. Nor do we claim that our model works perfectly every semester or for every course or for every student. But we do claim that the hundreds of TAs who have been involved with MU's writing mission over the years have made significant contributions to undergraduate education at MU. More relevant to our chapter in this collection, we also claim that the vast majority of these GTAs have received significant professional benefits from their work—especially

with regard to their own writing.

We believe these findings, and the corroborating WI TA interviews, are relevant to other WAC/WID programs because of the growing importance of TAs in universities such as ours. We encourage other institutions that use graduate students as part of their writing-based instruction to conduct similar studies, to add to the literature. And, we invite other programs to explore whether their institutions could benefit from the extraordinary symbiosis that we see between graduate education, undergraduate education, and WAC/WID curriculum delivery.

Even though CWP is a 35-year-old program, the writing-intensive course guidelines and variation in class sizes of WI courses have remained. CWP changes have been mostly in the growth over the years. At times of higher University enrollment, the program reviews and approves upwards of 400 courses during an academic year and up to 14,000 students enrolled. Because of this growth, the demand of TAs has increased. Another change is in the increases to minimum stipend for graduate students. This increase has created a burden on departments and CWP to provide funds to hire graduate students. Because of these pressures, this study is even more important for institutions such as ours to pay attention to the role that GTAs provide, the support and benefits they receive, and the challenges they face, which could be a future study.

We give the closing words in our chapter to Jonathan Cisco, the “poster graduate student for interdisciplinarity” who opened our discussion:

I cringe at what I would have become without these experiences because I think so differently now than I did before. There is a critical thinking piece, and we use that term a lot. It was a semester into my graduate education when I think I started to really critically think about stuff. I'm defining critical thinking in all the ways: I am critical of sources; I also reflect on my own type of thinking; I am able to identify what is important and not important. As a WI TA and tutor, I was immersed in various levels of critical thinking on the part of the student. *Most important, the TA and tutoring experiences dramatically influenced my own writing.* (personal interview, emphasis added)

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Appendix A: WI TA Survey Protocol

The following survey does not include demographic questions.

1. On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all significant and 5 is very significant, how significant was each of the following to your professional development?
 - Attending the writing intensive classes themselves
 - Discussing the WI assignments with the professor
 - Discussing the WI assignments with other WI TAs
 - Discussing students' writing with the professor
 - Discussing students' writing with other WI TAs
 - Discussing course content with the professor
 - Discussing course content with other WI TAs
 - Conferencing with students during your office hours
 - Commenting on papers and helping students revise their work
 - Assigning grades to students' papers
 - The rapport that developed between you and the professor
 - The camaraderie that developed between you and other WI TAs
2. Are there any other aspects of your experience as a WI TA that have been significant to your professional development?
3. Of all the aspects mentioned, which one stands out the most? Why do you say so?

4. Using a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is strongly disagree and 5 is strongly agree, please indicate how much you agree with each of the following statements:
 - My work as a WI TA was valuable to the students who were studying in the courses.
 - My work as a WI TA was valuable to my own studies at the University of Missouri.
 - My work as a WI TA is valuable to my own career development.
5. Using the 1 to 5 scale, how would you describe your level of agreement with each of the following statements:
 - Working as a WI TA helped me better understand the course content that students were studying. Why do you say so?
 - Working as a WI TA helped me better understand the writing I was doing in my graduate studies. Why do you say so?
 - Working as a WI TA helped me with communication skills I have now in my career. Why do you say so?
6. As you now think about it, what aspects of your experience as a WI TA at the University of Missouri were most beneficial to you?
7. What aspects of your experience as a WI TA at the University of Missouri do you wish could have been different?
8. Would you advise current graduate students in your field to serve as WI TAs? Why do you say so?
9. Is there anything else about your WI TA experience at MU you would like us to know?
10. Would you be willing to be interviewed by the researchers of the study in the future?

Appendix B: Guide for TA Interview

Questions

1. How do you perceive your WI TA experience in relation to your career development? Please explain.
2. How did your work as a TA influence or affect your communication skills? What examples can you provide?
3. How did your work as a TA affect your understanding of the content of the course you helped to teach? What examples can you provide?
4. How do you see your work as a TA influence your writing in your graduate studies and/or in your career? How do you see your work as a TA influencing your own writing?

5. In what ways were you mentored (or not) through this WI TA teaching experience?
6. Have you shared your own writing experiences with your WI students? (If so, give examples).
7. What resources, services did you receive as a TA? Did you see your WI TA work as a service to others? Did you bring writing to your CWP mentors? Did you receive help with your own writing from these services?
8. Do you have any stories or memorable moments from your WI TA experience that might help us flesh out our study (on your perspectives of the WI TA-ship as career prep)?

Appendix C: Guidelines for Large-Enrollment Writing-Intensive Courses

1. Before submitting an application for WI status for a large-enrollment course, the department chair and the prospective WI instructor should meet with Campus Writing Program staff and representatives of the appropriate Board subcommittee.

The Campus Writing Board envisions these meetings as an opportunity to clarify the role of writing in the course and to anticipate logistical problems and possible solutions. In particular, these discussions should focus on the use of writing to further course goals, assignment design, the role of TAs, and methods for ensuring grading consistency.

2. An instructor who applies to teach a large-enrollment WI course is expected to attend a CWP workshop within the academic year prior to the scheduled beginning of the large course.

CWP research shows that participation in a CWP workshop is essential to introducing prospective WI instructors to the philosophical principles and practical methods that underlie successful WI courses. Conversely, faculty who teach WI courses without having attended a workshop comprise the largest category of faculty who do not offer subsequent WI courses.

3. Before WI status is granted to a large-enrollment WI course, the instructor should expect to pilot a somewhat smaller version of the course.

The complexities of teaching a large-enrollment WI course demand that an instructor have an opportunity to rehearse major components of the course—writing assignments, grading standards, training sessions with TAs—before being faced with the myriad logistical problems presented by large-enrollment WI courses.

4. Instructors of large-enrollment WI courses should not be assigned additional teaching responsibilities during the semester they are first teaching the course. In subsequent semesters, additional teaching assignments should be very carefully considered.

The Board understands that this guideline may be difficult for some departments to achieve. In stating this preference, the Board wishes to stress the dual teaching responsibility of large WI courses: teachers of such courses actually teach two classes—one for the undergraduate students and another for the graduate student TAs assigned to the course. The latter is as labor-intensive as the former in order not only to ensure grading consistency but also to achieve the professional acculturation of TAs into the teaching of their discipline that is also a purpose of the WI course. The Board encourages departments to consider offering a concurrent, credit-bearing graduate practicum in conjunction with the WI course for those TAs working with the course. In recognition of the work involved and of the service to the University as well as the department, departments might arrange to “count” a three-hour large-enrollment WI course as the equivalent of six credit hours of teaching or take into account the number of FTEs generated.