



# Finding a Room of Their Own: Programming Time and Space for Graduate Student Writing

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In 2005 the University of Connecticut implemented general education reform that included more emphasis on writing-intensive courses and generated a reboot of the writing center. The new University Writing Center, housed in the Institute for Teaching and Learning, was mandated to support writing-intensive courses across the disciplines. Once new directors were hired, we got to work expanding tutoring, forging an array of campus partnerships, delivering teaching workshops, piloting a writing fellows program, leading writing assessment efforts, and conducting research. By 2010 the Center had earned a *CCCC Writing Program Certificate of Excellence*, and the selection committee praised us for “running a rich, complex, and ambitious program touching multiple aspects of students’ writing lives. . . . The Center has forged many partnerships—on campus and off—with sustained evaluation and reflective practice. . . . The Center is very busy, very diverse, very pro-active.” Yet despite the productive ways we expanded during those first five years, we hardly gave a thought to graduate writers.

Still, they found us. During our years of rapid growth, graduate students, mainly international doctoral students, comprised 10-15% of our individual tutorials. While graduate students were a presence at our Center, their numbers were not enough to nudge us to make structural changes to our undergraduate-focused model, although we did offer stand-alone ESL workshops, hire at least one international graduate tutor each year, and train staff on how to tutor graduate student writers. One reason we focused on undergraduates is that our entire funding came from undergraduate tuition dollars. As long as the Graduate School didn’t contribute to our budget, we reasoned, we shouldn’t commit more time and resources to graduate students. We

wanted to resist the habit of writing centers doing ever more with less; we also wanted the Graduate School to support programs for their students.

A new Graduate School dean arrived just as the Graduate Student Senate began advocating for writing support, and as retention and time-to-degree were cycling back in as institutional concerns. The dean responded to our modest request for financial support with a *yes*, funding a 20-hour weekly assistantship for a graduate coordinator. We, in turn, promised to develop a range of graduate programming. Yet this new source of funding forced us to reflect on a key tension in working with graduate student writers on longer projects: how much should our programming focus on creating structured time and space for writing (e.g. retreats, writing groups, boot camps), versus delivering direct instruction (e.g. individual tutorials, formal courses)? In this article, we trace our path toward finding a balance between the two.

## **OVERVIEW OF UCONN'S SOLUTIONS**

We began by offering a semester-long, non-credit-bearing course on academic writing for graduate students, taught by an advanced doctoral student on our staff. More than 150 students applied for 20 slots. We learned, however, that though students valued the course content, attendance dwindled as their teaching, lab, and family demands intensified. Only a dozen participants persisted to the end. To deal with that attrition problem and to reach more students, we altered the course and added a variety of programs. We shortened the course from 15 to 5 weeks and began offering it 3 times a year, which allowed us to enroll 60 students and gave our graduate coordinator time to organize other programs:

- Three 4-day dissertation boots camps (January, Spring Break, May);
- Graduate writing retreats one Saturday each month and 2-hour Monday morning retreats the first 4 weeks of each semester; and
- Thirty-minute workshops on topics relevant to all graduate students, (e.g., personal statements, introductions, abstracts), which replaced sparsely attended, hour-long workshops intended for second language writers.

Later, we began requiring graduate students coming for individual tutorials to schedule a brief intake meeting with our

graduate coordinator.

The first iterations of these programs were promising, although we still fretted about attrition: many more students would sign up than show up. This presented a critical problem because planning and registration for seminars and boot camps were necessary, and no-shows displaced other potential participants. Our fix was to start requiring a \$100 advance deposit at registration, with the understanding that the deposit would be returned if the student attended all of the sessions. For Saturday writing retreats, Monday morning retreats, and thirty-minute workshops, however, we stopped worrying about attrition and came to expect that about a third or more of registrants would not show, and built that expectation into our planning.

Perhaps most importantly, we discovered in program surveys that what graduate students often claim they need (e.g., editing, writing instruction) does not always align with what they appear to need most (e.g., time and space to write). Most of our graduate-specific programming accords with what Sohui Lee and Chris Golde call the Just Write model, which prioritizes providing structured time and space for graduate student writing (2). We had three significant exceptions: our individual tutorials, 30-minute workshops, and 5-week seminars. These all fall under what Lee and Golde call the Writing Process model, which emphasizes building long-term productivity by engaging writers in conversations about writing (2). While direct instruction and workshoping of drafts remain central to our 5-week seminars and tutorials, we realized that to serve the widest range of graduate students with our limited resources, we should focus at least as much—or more—on initiatives that create structured time and space to write.

### **JUST WRITE PROGRAMMING**

*Writing Retreats:* Our monthly Saturday retreats encourage the simple habit of setting structured time for writing. This is a collaborative venture among the Writing Center (organizes everything), Graduate School (funds the person who does that organizing), and Graduate Student Senate (pays for beverages and snacks). Over the first 2 years, workshop registration ranged from 52 to 104. No matter how many registered, however, only about half actually showed up. In our third year, initial sign-ups were lower, but attendance numbers were nearly the same, and over time we came to expect around 50 participants and

a 33% attrition rate. Our 2-hour Monday morning retreats run similarly: we book a free room on campus, invite students, and don't worry about attrition.

Across the first two years of retreats, 60% of the 238 students who responded to surveys noted that they were much more productive at the retreat than they would normally be during the same block of time at home. An additional 25% reported that they were a bit more productive. The most frequent written responses were simply "thank you," although some students were more effusive: "I am coming to as many of these as I can fit into my busy schedule. The whole world stops and I just work." Another: "I am so much more focused at the retreats. I am a slow writer, and this venue provides me a way to be more strategic in what I accomplish. Being here all day removes the pressure of 'I just have x amount of time and need to hurry and be productive!!' Without that kind of pressure, I seem to feel free to actually BE more productive."

In our second year of offering retreats, we considered adding planning activities and goal-sharing conversations. While 55% of our participants said they would *not* like such activities, others noted that brief discussions or handouts would be useful. At a recent retreat, we took small steps toward what we see as more of a Writing Process retreat model by inviting writers to share their goals with others before the session began, fill out a goal-planning worksheet, and attend a conversational lunchtime seminar. While programs such as the Cornell Writing Center have seen success with process-oriented discussions (Allen), our participants met the request to share their goals with blank stares. Survey responses showed that most participants did not value exercises, although some said the planning worksheet was helpful. More telling, only 5 came to the lunchtime workshop. One student's comment seemed to sum up the impressions we got from others: "I found the efforts to direct our productivity or structure the event annoying. Food, coffee, and quiet. That's all I need." It is possible that resistance to the addition of "Writing Process" elements may have occurred because participants are often repeat attendees. They may have come to expect a Just Write model, not knowing the benefits of alternative models. Still, we take returnees as a positive sign and acknowledge that our center is a place to do writing, not just to talk about writing.

*Boot Camps:* Our boot camps also operate with a governing Just Write ethos. They run for 4 consecutive days, are capped

at 20 participants, and encourage a sense of solidarity among participants because they are set in relatively small, distinctive spaces, such as the natural history museum on our campus (for boot camp models see Allen; Lee and Golde; and Simpson). We want predictable attendance and a counterbalance to writing-avoidance behavior, so we require a \$100 deposit, which students get back if they attend the 3-hour morning session all 4 days (though most persist straight through the afternoons, too). In terms of productivity, boot camp results are good: nearly all 43 participants who have responded to our informal surveys on boot camps over the past 3 years told us that they produce much more during the boot camp than they would have in their offices during the same time block; most tell us that they composed between 10 and 38 pages.

### **WRITING PROCESS PROGRAMMING**

*Five-Week Academic Writing Seminars:* The graduate course in academic writing was born of both the calls by some faculty for formal graduate writing instruction and our own center's recognition that some of our repeat visitors could benefit from a formal course. For the Graduate Seminar in Academic Writing we wanted a hybrid seminar and writing group, something akin to what Laura Micciche and Allison Carr hope for in a graduate writing course: one that would "create space, community, and rhetorical awareness/flexibility necessary to brainstorm, create, and sustain a wide variety of critical writing projects" (478). We include some direct instruction—mini-lessons on structure, style, grammar, and so on—discuss writing processes, and model workshop-style writing groups that we hope participants will maintain in the long term.

The curriculum has evolved during the first 3 years. After trying a format that used faculty guest speakers who talked about their own writing processes, we shifted to a workshop model. We required students to bring an ongoing writing project and centered our course around 3 main assignments: 1) analyzing published writing in the same genre as their own; 2) interviewing advisors about discipline-based expectations and the advisors' own writing habits; and 3) meeting one-to-one with the seminar instructor to talk about specific concerns in an ongoing project. We aimed to make the seminar, as Peter Khost, Debra Rudder Lohe, and Chuck Sweetman write, an "occasion to think aloud and hear others discuss creativity, style, and writing process (even writers' block)" with the aim of providing "valuable

opportunities to face, analyze, and discuss the importance of writing” (23). Student response has been affirming. While some participants have acknowledged they would prefer lectures on writing topics, most buy into the workshop model. One participant evaluation noted, “This was a wonderful and useful experience for me, and helped me to familiarize with the general characteristics of scholarly writing standards.” Yet our hope of fostering longer-term writing groups like those Claire Aitchison describes has not panned out—many of our participants wrote in course evaluations that the groups were too dissimilar in disciplinary focus. However, the seminar complements the Just Write retreats and boot camps and remains a vital component of our graduate writing portfolio.

#### *Graduate Student Tutorials and the Graduate Coordinator’s Role:*

As we developed this new spectrum of graduate programming, we were soldiering on with tutorials in the same ways that we always had. Graduate students often brought in dissertation chapters or articles too lengthy to read through and discuss in our standard 45-minute sessions. We responded by training our tutors on strategies for focusing on 5-page sections. Still, we found most undergraduate tutors lacked the disciplinary expertise that Heather Blain Vorhies argues is necessary to help graduates. First-year tutors, in particular, felt intimidated when graduate students asked questions that a peer—a fellow graduate student or an advanced undergraduate student—could handle better. While we employ 6 graduate tutors, their appointments are usually booked first, often by undergrads. A disproportionate number of first-year writers, then, were working with graduate tutors while graduate students were working with undergraduates. The latter mismatch caused anxiety. Moreover, graduate students who persisted often demanded that undergraduates edit for them, which was out of step with our writing center philosophy, and some graduates were signing up for multiple appointments per week—at a time when our undergraduate traffic was increasing to the point where all appointments were booked well in advance. Since our funding comes from undergraduate education tuition moneys, with the Graduate School funding only the graduate coordinator’s assistantship, we had to get creative.

A team of graduate tutors suggested we create more tutorial access and nudge graduate students seeking extensive assistance toward more independence. Borrowing from the University of

New Hampshire's thesis coach model, we now require graduate students to meet with the coordinator before signing up for a set number of sessions with one tutor. After listening carefully to each graduate student's goals and priorities, the coordinator assigns an advanced tutor—a fellow graduate student or senior undergraduate tutor from the same or similar discipline—to that graduate student, referring to a list of tutors' fields and strengths in tutoring devised by the center directors. For international students with little or no experience with writing centers, the coordinator also explains our tutoring philosophy. Our intention is to match the writer with an appropriate tutor, to limit less productive repeat sessions, and to open space for a sustained sequence of tutorials tailored to longer pieces of writing. As with undergraduates, we work with graduate students in all stages of the writing process, including editing. We have found our tutorial pairings ensure that when graduates students do work on editing issues, the issues are addressed collaboratively through incremental, learning-oriented practice. Graduate students have responded positively to this approach. The graduate coordinator, then, wears many hats, including:

1. Matchmaker, who considers on a case-by-case basis the goals and priorities of each graduate student seeking tutoring and pairs them with an appropriate tutor.
2. Tour Guide, who ensures that graduate students are aware of all writing resources and directs them toward the seminars, retreats, and boot camps as appropriate.
3. Gatekeeper, who determines the usefulness of sessions for those graduate students who only want editing or who do not actively participate in sessions.
4. Tutor Confidence Booster, who tells tutors whom they have been paired with and what the writer's goals are. In this role, the coordinator also sets policies that support staff when they inform graduate students about the required meeting with the coordinator and why that step is important (we generally allow a graduate writer to have at least one session if they have booked it before understanding the meeting requirement).
5. Progress Monitor, who evaluates tutor reports that assess effort and progress over the course of several sessions, asks the graduate students about meeting their stated goals, and determines whether more sessions seem warranted.

All of these functions have been working well—with the exception of progress monitoring, since the graduate coordinator does not have enough time to track all the pairings. We plan to develop a more streamlined system to allow the coordinator to simply check our database of tutor notes. The first year of this strategy (2014-2015) resulted in fewer graduate students scheduling appointments than in previous years. By the first half of the fall 2015 semester, however, appointments again picked up as word about successful pairings circulated. We plan to assess the strategy at the end of this academic year to determine whether graduate student numbers are still lower than in previous years, and, if so, whether graduate students are registering for the other graduate student-focused programs, or whether our new policy is perceived as making the center less accessible.

While we don't know what the assessment will show, we've decided that a Just Write approach to retreats and boot camps merits as much—maybe even more—space on the spectrum of graduate writing support as more traditional approaches like tutoring and group instruction. When we tally attendance at all our programs, we are reaching more graduate students from more disciplinary backgrounds per semester than ever before. Our methods are gaining traction, too: we've learned that graduate students in several departments have used our model to create their own writing groups and retreats. We're always tinkering with our graduate student writing assistance, but we think we've struck the right balance. For now.

1. When this article was drafted, Reardon and Maykel were Ph.D. students at UConn.



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