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Going Professional: Writing Centers' Challenges and Possibilities in Working with Emerging Online Professional Graduate Student Programs

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In the summer of 2016, I began studying a rising challenge in writing center pedagogy: meeting the needs of both administrators and students in connection with growing online graduate education. This project demonstrated the urgency of developing writing center pedagogies for adult professionals—those working in fields requiring higher education, usually a college degree, and including formal standards of practice—in contrast to either traditional college student writers or graduate students in scholarly fields.

PROJECT SUMMARY AND RESEARCH METHODS

A mid-size liberal arts university I'll call MLU was launching several new online graduate programs, and their graduate school approached the writing center about expanding to support their incoming students. The writing center, founded nearly twenty years ago, had focused on undergraduate student work and almost exclusively employed undergraduate peer tutors (with the exception of a senior faculty director and graduate student assistant director); the center resided in a popular area of the university library, which allowed the center staff and clients to meet easily. MLU's writing center director, a colleague of mine from past teaching and professional work, hired me to propose a strategy for the center's development after I had collated information about their new programs, their incoming students, and support other writing centers provide in such situations. My own past experience includes working for four different writing centers, as well as working as a project manager for several organizations (both public and private). To prepare my recommendations, I met with nine MLU online graduate program leaders, gathered online data from a dozen comparable schools' writing centers to evaluate their range of advertised services, talked with five writing center directors (gathered from a listserv invitation) who had concentrated experience working

with graduate students, and reviewed recent articles and listserv discussions addressing relevant issues.

REVISED ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT GRADUATE STUDENTS

Having previously worked with graduate students focused on scholarly research at other universities via online tutoring, I began by reading about how to prepare undergraduate students to tutor scholars more advanced than themselves. I had started out concerned with how to support distant scholars through intensive writing projects like theses and dissertations, but I discovered that not only did MLU's online students not aspire to be scholars, none of the new MLU graduate programs required extended academic-research-heavy, original writing. Like those at so many other universities, MLU's expanded programs did not need to emphasize scholarly research, being aimed at mid-career working adults seeking professional development. Their programs included advanced degrees in education, organizational leadership, and business administration, among others.

In reviewing MLU's student demographics and program requirements, I found I'd been operating under two wrong impressions: first, that the writing center would need to support junior scholars, helping to enculturate them into disciplines they were yet to enter; second, that the new graduate students would be advanced writers, at least beyond the undergraduate population MLU's writing center already supported. As it turned out, a significant percentage of the incoming students were beginning graduate school on probation, having not met the minimum GPA requirement or having transcripts too outdated to evaluate properly. MLU already had three online graduate programs in place, and faculty reported students in those programs struggled with foundational writing tasks, including forming thesis statements, developing paragraphs, and organizing ideas, as well as managing grammatical construction and spelling. Whereas I might have wished to focus on the knowledge-making activities of writing, MLU program leaders campus-wide wanted writing center intervention with sentence-level and formatting issues so faculty could better understand their students' content.

Accordingly, I briefly shifted my research toward remedial resources before realizing that these were equally inappropriate for supporting MLU's graduate students. In contrast to students early in their studies who still have little content knowledge upon which to draw, these MLU students had extensive content knowledge in their fields. Their experiences as professionals in

their fields also meant that they were not being apprenticed into new discourse communities and that they could tap into their experience and specialized knowledge as they write. Adult-centered pedagogy requires recognizing and leveraging students' accumulated experience and knowledge (see for example Cercone 144). This combination—experienced adults with basic writing skills—presented a new and interesting challenge.

ONLINE GRADUATE EDUCATION IN THE WRITING CENTER

In writing centers nationwide, we are increasingly likely to meet this emerging client profile, as the master's degree is becoming a necessity for professionals wishing to remain competitive in their fields. As Sean Gallagher pointed out in 2014, "Today, 5 million more U.S. adults hold a master's degree compared with a decade ago," and "more than 40% of entering college freshmen aspire to earn a master's." The National Center for Education Statistics projects that postsecondary enrollment of adults over twenty-five will grow by 14% between 2013 and 2024 ("Postsecondary Education"). Colleges and universities, meanwhile, are trying different strategies to meet this demand while also best supporting their own budget challenges—with some creating bachelor's + master's combination programs and others emphasizing professional certificates via on-site, online, or hybrid channels to allow working adults to expand their marketability without taking on the time commitments associated with full graduate programs. Still others are developing more online, accelerated and/or self-paced graduate degrees. Enrollment numbers continue to rise for online education overall, with experts in education trends expecting the private business sector to push for more online continuing education options for employees (see Friedman) and graduate degree programs experiencing modest, steady growth (see Allen and Seaman).

This expansion into online, professional education—a win-win in many ways for working adults and university administrators—poses distinct opportunities and challenges for writing centers, which are likely to engage this population more frequently over the coming years. Expanding online graduate education holds great potential for expanding writing center scope and resources. University administrators may be interested in increasing funding for value-added support connected to programs that are more lucrative than many traditional programs (see, for example, Marcus). Writing centers may be able to negotiate for increased staffing, enlarged budgets, and upgraded infrastructure. In terms of writing center research, too, working with this distinct group

of writers may offer opportunities to develop and test atypical tutoring methods and theories and to help tutors gain important transferable skills.

One major challenge of this situation is the influx of varied types of basic writers and the potential for administrators or faculty to misunderstand writing center work as remedial in nature. Yet these writers need support: every program head I spoke with at MLU observed that many of these students are coming back to school after years away and are terribly insecure about their abilities to succeed; in order to thrive, they need both practical assistance and sincere encouragement. These assessments by MLU administrators are born out in other research regarding returning adult learners. For example, Patti Shank observes that "Despite the life experiences that adult learners bring to the online classroom, adult learners also bring complex anxieties . . . about remembering how to learn and study . . . . [and about] juggling family, career, and social commitments" (4, 6; see also Fincher; Hoyt et al.). Another challenge is in evaluating and communicating expectations about writing tasks—those of program leaders and faculty, those of students, and those of writing center administrators and tutors. And a final challenge may be identifying and putting into place the infrastructure and resources necessary to support these writers.

In researching and surveying other centers, I found limited but substantive information on developing writing centers for graduate students specifically (see Prince et al.; Dangler et al.; Zimmerelli et al.; Lee and Golde; Powers; Garcia et al.), and more information on how centers are handling online tutoring (see "A Position Statement" and De Herder et al.). I found very little scholarship, however, on writing center work with students who are professionals. While researching that topic, I quickly began hitting walls and had to put pieces together as seemed most sensible. I recommended, for example, that MLU give their writing tutors copies of John Swales and Christine Feak's *Academic Writing for Graduate Students* to help the tutors understand shifts in scopes and aims that take place as students move into graduate writing situations. However, given the professional-not-academic bent of MLU's online graduate programs, I also recommended tutors receive copies of Gerald Alred, et al., *The Business Writer's Companion*, a text that speaks especially to the practical writing situations facing more of MLU's professional students in terms of tone and writing style (though some might need to use it in combination with discipline-specific style guides such as APA

or Chicago), and that the center provide specialized training in genre markers of professional graduate student writing (in and across relevant disciplines). While assembling these resources, I developed a strong sense that writing centers will need to develop specialized pedagogy and practices when engaging this growing client population.

TUTORING STRATEGIES AND IMPLICATIONS

As writing centers build pedagogy and practices for working with professional graduate students, one pressing issue will be negotiating differing expectations about the work of the writing center. In my experience, while centers tend to emphasize process over product and to equip writers to complete their own work, program administrators and faculty often expect our support to be remedial in nature, helping students get their skills "up to speed" and meet minimum program expectations. Professional students, though, are likely to expect writing center support to operate like a company editorial department might, with tutors "cleaning up" their work with an emphasis on the final product. Such misunderstandings may be further complicated by online formats, especially asynchronous delivery, wherein submitting a paper or project for feedback might feel very much like sending a product off for service, rather than inviting a tutorial. To minimize frustration, writing centers beginning to support professional graduate students may wish to evaluate and determine their policies and communicate clearly and early, to all involved.

Writing centers may want to develop foundational writing boot camps or seminars for students and deliver them early in each term. Writing centers might also modify their existing explanations of their services and aims, including excluded services, to share with administrators, faculty, and professional students via their websites. Most centers' existing statements' *content* may be appropriate for a broad audience, yet the phrasing and tone may be more suited to an undergraduate or traditional graduate population than a professional population. Writing centers reaching out to a professional graduate student audience, therefore, might benefit from adjusting their statements or establishing distinct statements for differing clientele.

A companion web page might also include one or more examples of annotated papers that show common points of confusion in drafts and typical tutorial feedback in response. Such examples could help potential clients—and program faculty and administrators—understand what to expect.

In considering how to communicate with professional graduate students during an actual session, whether synchronous or asynchronous, tutors can benefit from noting that these clients may be able to hold a bit more critical distance from their work, yet they may also have unique vulnerabilities. With regard to critical distance, Mark Pedretti, writing center director at Claremont Graduate University (the oldest graduate-only university in the U.S.), notes the following:

> Since most graduate students (ostensibly) have a more developed sense of their academic identity, they don't take criticism personally. We don't have to worry as much about bruising a still-forming writing identity or impinging on a novice writer's sense of autonomy. We still hew closely to the principles of non-directive tutoring (letting the student hold the pen, etc.), but it does seem we can be a bit more straightforward and less Socratic.

Claremont students, as part of an elite academic program, are likely higher-performing than many of the professional graduate students entering programs at MLU and nationwide. These programs seek to bridge a gap between skilled workers and employer needs. Enrollment, though, is based at least in part on the need to justify the development of the programs themselves, as well as to salvage struggling university budgets, and so students may be admitted based on professional experience and baseline knowledge but may lack the writing facility many associate with graduate-level work. One MLU program director (in charge of the three programs that have been running for several years) described the students as insecure writers, aware and embarrassed that writing is a struggle, who need encouragement as much as instruction. With these tensions in place, writing tutors may note that they can speak directly with regard to content, while working gently but clearly when addressing basic writing or affective issues.

Perhaps a key distinction is that with typical writing center tutoring, as much as many centers seek to cultivate a consultant-expert dynamic (where the student is the expert in connection to their own material), I've found the reality can often be more that of a teacher-student dynamic, since many students are still learning how to be experts and tend to either want or need more direction. Professional graduate students, however, have more experience in being experts, and so in some ways allow writing centers to do more of what they want to do—a tutoring session with one of these writers can be a meeting between experts, with the client as the content knowledge expert and the tutor as the

writing expert. The tutor is thus able to serve as a consultant who can explain options regarding both rhetoric and style and allow the client to make informed decisions about their own content and execution, with less of a bent toward an expert-tutor/ novice-client binary yet without slipping into a product-focused and transactional editor-client relationship. Such a dynamic has the potential to be wonderfully collaborative and satisfying in ways that counterbalance the romanticized models of scholarly discourse I originally imagined: instead of lively working sessions talking about academic writing with other academic writers, this reality allows for sharing expertise and therefore, quite possibly, greater mutual enrichment. (And it gives tutors practice in the meeting-of-experts model that can inform other sessions, as well.)

CONCLUSION

The online professional graduate education movement is tricky, raising important questions about the nature of graduate school and testing the intersections of academia and professional life, of online education as an academic environment, and of scholarship and financial enterprise. Writing centers have an important role in supporting today's professionals as writers, and in providing insight—to other writing centers, but also to the whole of academia—into how the project of professional graduate education functions over the coming years. Thoughtful documentation and presentation can inform future program development, which holds importance for both academia and the professional world. For now, those of us facing this kind of development will have to grapple with strategic planning based on available information while remaining flexible enough to shift as necessary along the way. Having to operate in this uncertain environment can also give us empathy for our professional graduate student clients as we all push forward together.

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