Chapter 21

Creating Support for Graduate Students’ Writing and Publication Endeavors: A Case of a Writing Center

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ABSTRACT

Although research and writing for publication are seen as important responsibilities for most graduate students and faculty, many struggle to understand the process and to succeed. Unfortunately, writing centers at most universities do not cater to these kinds of needs, but rather to course-specific needs of undergraduate students. This chapter describes a writing center, The Office of Academic Writing and Publication Support, at Florida International University, USA that was specifically designed to aid the scholarly writing endeavors of graduate students. First, the authors review literature on how individual instructors and programs assist graduate students in improving their writing skills. Then they provide a history of university writing centers and examine the evolution of their purpose. In the second half of the chapter, the authors share their experiences envisioning and building this writing center and creating, implementing, and improving its services. In doing so, they also reflect on successes and missteps along the way. The authors hope this chapter may be especially helpful to educators who seek to create similar centers or services at their own institutions.

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INTRODUCTION

Writing centers are prevalent within universities in many countries, including the United States, and are typically focused on the improvement of undergraduate student academic writing. Graduate students, in turn, are usually expected to know how to write due to their prior education and work experiences. At the graduate level, students have to write more complex texts in which they explore cause and effect relationships, explore a problem and suggest some solutions, classify, compare and contrast, argue for a position on an issue, or analyze a concept or a phenomenon. Students majoring in social and behavioral sciences usually have to write longer papers than their peers in mathematics and engineering (Hale, Taylor, Bridgeman, Carson, Kroll, & Kanto, 1996). However, students come to master’s and doctoral programs with very different writing skills. “Some students submit polished papers; others submit drafts replete with grammatical errors and lacking structure” (Sallee, Hallett, & Tierney, 2011, p. 67). In fact, 60% of doctoral students have difficulty conducting a literature review and synthesizing that information into a quality dissertation (Switzer & Perdue, 2011). Additionally, graduate students often struggle to address constructive comments given on their writing (Nielsen & Rocco, 2002). While graduate student writing often lacks quality, little has been done to address the problem.

The authors of this chapter have a unique experience with a writing center that focused on assisting graduate students, and faculty, with scholarly writing and the publication process. This center was established in the College of Education at Florida International University, USA, and called The Office of Academic Writing and Publication Support (OAWPS). The first author, Tonette S. Rocco, was OAWPS founding director, Maria S. Plakhotnik and Lori Ann Gionti served as assistant directors, and Sunny L. Munn and Joshua C. Collins received OAWPS services as graduate students. As the directors, we created services, built partnerships, sought feedback, made mistakes, and improved processes around teaching scholarly writing. Our work was based on Rankin’s (2001) The Work of Writing, Vopat’s (2009) Writing Circles, Rocco and Hatcher’s (2011) edited volume The Handbook of Scholarly Writing and Publishing, and other literature on scholarly writing. The purpose of this chapter is to share our experiences envisioning and building this writing center and creating, implementing, and improving its services to improve graduate student writing. To contextualize our experiences, in the beginning of the chapter, we, first, review literature on how individual instructors and programs assist graduate students in improving their writing skills, and then we provide a history of university writing centers and examine the evolution of their purpose.

Assistance From Instructors and Programs to Improve Graduate Student Writing

Occasionally, colleges offer a stand-alone graduate writing course (e.g., Street & Stang, 2008) or decide to embed scholarly writing in a research course (e.g., Sallee et al., 2011). Although such writing courses are much needed, most programs cannot offer them as a required course, partially due to the program curricular demands (Sallee et al., 2011). If schools support graduate student writing, they may offer such courses as electives or as a part of a professional development initiative. For example, Street and Stang (2008) describe a writing course for graduate teacher educators that incorporated writing various pieces of work (e.g., brief papers, reports to administrators, and class assignments). These assignments focused on “effective writing, writing across the curriculum, writing for professional audiences, and
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