Empowering Graduate Student Writers and Rejecting Outsourced Mentorship

BY SHANNON MADDEN AND JERRY STINNETT

In this 3-part series of installments on the WCJ Blog, we reject the outsourcing of graduate writing support to inexpert consultants in the private sector and call instead for university stakeholders to attend more systematically to the needs of graduate student writers.

As faculty members and former graduate students ourselves, we like many others have experienced the need for more writing support at the graduate level (see also Caplan & Cox, 2016). Very often, graduate students across the disciplines receive little feedback on their writing projects or instruction in advanced genres even though coursework, conference presentations, job applications, and theses and dissertations are all grounded in specialized disciplinary communication practices (Carter, 2007). As a response to this problem, Daveena Tauber’s (2016) recent article in College Composition and Communication offers a model for private writing consultation as a way to support graduate students as they navigate advanced writing tasks. Tauber advocates expanding the definition of successful academic employment to include writing consulting as a means of helping graduate student writers succeed in the university and of relieving the “job crisis” facing Ph.D. students in the humanities.

While Tauber’s approach attends to some of the problems facing graduate student writers, her model also exacerbates many of the same issues it purports to mitigate. As we explain in this series, because Tauber and similar consulting services offer privatized instruction to support underserved students and underfunded universities, private consulting offloads the cost of educational access problems on those least equipped to handle them. Additionally and also dangerously, she ignores a significant body of existing research on the goals and methods of graduate writing instruction, as well as evidence-based efforts of writing centers, institutional programs, faculty mentors, and scholarly organizations such as the Consortium on Graduate Communication. These elisions together with the absence of data-driven assessments of private consulting services invite questions about how effective this consulting model can be. Ultimately, because the model does not rely on a strong research foundation and legitimizes inexpert writing instruction, it promotes a casualized labor structure and undermines the possibility of more fully integrating writing instruction into graduate education across the curriculum.

In this series, we use Tauber’s article and its appearance in the flagship journal of the field as indicative of the
urgent need for compositionists to attend to graduate writing experiences and articulate better alternatives to the offshoring model of graduate writing support.

**Private Writing Consultants Profit by Exploiting Existing Equity Gaps in Higher Education**

As is well documented, the question of equity in graduate education remains vexed. Nationally, universities are still graduating underserved groups in much smaller numbers than majority students, and this imbalance is even more pronounced at the graduate level. Reports from the Council of Graduate Schools (2011; 2015) demonstrate that students from underserved groups such as students of color, students with disabilities, and nontraditional students are statistically more likely to suffer from attrition and prolonged time to degree. Additionally, attrition typically happens during the dissertation- or thesis-writing phase, which suggests that issues of equity in graduate students’ writing experiences deserve more concentrated attention.

In general, much of the responsibility for mentoring extended graduate writing projects falls on individual committee chairs working in isolation with their advisees, and many students are cut off from the strong networks that are needed to provide frequent and sustained feedback on their writing (see for instance Casanave, 2002; Golde, 2005; Phillips, 2012; Simpson, 2013; Zahl, 2015). While writing is constitutive of disciplinary knowledge-making and comprises much of the work of graduate professionalization, faculty tasked with mentoring graduate students often see writing as a neutral skill distinct from content knowledge (see for instance Gere, Swofford, Silver, & Pugh, 2015). Graduate writing centers, dissertation workshops, and other mentorship services are starting to develop on many campuses but are still not present at the majority of U.S. universities. As a result, many graduate students do not receive the feedback, instruction, or sustained support in writing they need to complete their degrees.

Tauber’s troubling answer to the problem of graduate support need is a private consulting model—one in which for-profit “entrepreneurs” working outside the university consult with students on their theses or with departments on how to integrate more writing support into their graduate programs. In her view, these consultants can provide the focused attention on writing that so many students need and may not be getting from their committee chairs or academic programs. Positioned outside the academy and working for the student, Tauber claims, allows these consultants to work alongside students’ committees to promote retention and success, especially for underserved populations (p. 650). Tauber explains, “For [underserved] students, the opportunity to work on their writing in the context of a supportive, non-evaluative relationship can make the difference between completing and not completing” (pp. 650–651). For this reason, she concludes, “[W]riting consultants are in a strong position to help graduate schools and departments put their rhetoric about supporting diversity into practice” (p. 650).

As becomes clear in her discussion, certain universities and particular stakeholder groups will be more vulnerable to the offshoring model of writing support than others. Tauber admits that of those who hire her services, women and students of color are overrepresented relative to national demographics. She notes that around 81% of her clients are women and around 45% are students of color (p. 649). These certainly don't match graduate demographics overall; the National Center for Education Statistics reports that students of color represent around 14% of all students at the masters level and around 11% at the doctoral level.

Rather than treating the problem, Tauber’s consulting model treats the symptom while leaving the problem in place. Of course “writing support and instruction should be an integral part of graduate education rather than being self-funded by students” (Tauber, 2016, p. 649). Yet self-funding is exactly what her model proposes, even as she acknowledges structural inequities within academe that contribute to systematic disenfranchisement of students of color, students with disabilities, and low income students. She calls her services a way to promote equity but in fact reproduces the logic of the equity gap in graduate writing support. Students who are well-integrated in peer cohorts and supportive departments and whose committee chairs offer frequent, substantive feedback on their writing.
wouldn’t need to hire a Tauber. If those who have less access are more in need of writing support, then those are also the students who would be forced to shoulder the cost of redressing access problems by paying a nonacademic consultant. In this way, private consulting makes the equity gap in graduate writing support the marginalized student’s own individual problem to solve. Tauber is profiting from those who face inequitable circumstances by asking underserved students to pay additional out of pocket to purchase the writing support that they need.

In a parallel dynamic, the private consulting model also places poorer schools at a disadvantage. Universities such as Penn State, Michigan, Oklahoma, Wisconsin, and Minnesota already have thriving graduate writing support systems and wouldn’t need to hire a nonacademic consultant. However, a consultant who cold-calls a poorer school might be able to solicit their business; universities with fewer resources might opt for a one-time consultant-led workshop in lieu of systemic support for graduate writers. Indeed, as if to persuade those who would de-fund writing centers and slash tenure lines, Tauber lists among the benefits that independent writing consultants help universities cut labor costs (p. 638) and retain student tuition dollars (p. 641). And they do so at the student’s own financial expense and at the expense of writing experts who are already on campus, whose work can presumably be offloaded to the private sector at lower cost. Because they position poor schools and disadvantaged students as an untapped and potentially lucrative market, nonacademic consultants are poised to exploit existing equity gaps in higher education.

Ultimately, Tauber’s article should call university faculty to (re)consider the question that Tauber invokes early on (p. 236): Who is the client of education? Jeffrey Williams (2005) put this question another way when he asked whether educational institutions should benefit primarily the public good or the shareholders—boards of trustees, corporations, and private donors. Is the university’s mission to educate its students, cultivate robust cultures of research, and contribute to a more democratic and ethical society? Or is the university’s primary function to ensure the financial benefit of private interests? When uneven graduate support is viewed as a problem to be offloaded onto students or contracted to the lowest bidder, then education becomes just another land grab in which those who already have resources are better-positioned to benefit and those with less access get left behind.

Our next post will discuss how outsourced private graduate consulting, rather than helping to integrate writing across campus, actually prevents writing from being fully integrated across the academic curriculum. Join us!

References


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ENTREPRENEUR VERSUS EXPERT: HOW OFFSHORED CONSULTING PREVENTS WRITING FROM BEING FULLY INTEGRATED INTO THE ACADEMIC CURRICULUM

BY JERRY STINNETT & SHANNON MADDEN

Because private writing consultants operate outside of disciplinary structures for knowledge-making established by the scholarly community, standards for their expertise will be determined by the market rather than by data-driven research. As a result, private writing consultation can invite instruction that aligns with popular misconceptions of writing as remedial and can shift responsibility for teaching communication practices away from specialist faculty in the disciplines. For these reasons, private writing consultation ultimately prevents writing from being fully integrated across the curriculum.

Recently, private consulting has been offered as a model for supporting graduate writers who may not be getting sufficient writing mentorship on campus. In a way, it should come as little surprise that consulting “entrepreneurs” offer writing instruction—rather than, say, instruction in physics—because writing has historically been figured as remedial and has been taught by a deprofessionalized labor force. Through a self-supporting logic, because writing is viewed as a remedial skill, it can be taught by anyone willing to do it, and as underqualified instructors are assigned to teach writing, writing gets figured as a remedial subject (Bérubé, 1996; Nelson, 1997; Pratt, 1997; Schell, 1997; Watt, 1997; Aronowitz, 2001; Nelson & Watt, 2004; Wills, 2004; Bousquet, 2008; C. Carter, 2008; Schrecker, 2008). In a paradox perhaps unique to the teaching of writing, those holding remedial views of the subject can perceive themselves as knowing what expert writing instruction should look like—the idea that anyone can teach it suggests that it does not require expertise.

Consequently, composition’s emergence as a professional academic discipline was characterized by a recognition of
writing’s complexity and an increased focus on developing specialized knowledge about writing. One of the distinguishing assumptions of professional composition is that specialized, researched-based expertise on writing does exist and can be acquired (Wardle & Adler-Kassner, 2015, p. 15). Recognizing the possibility of expertise in writing inherently challenges popular views of writing as a remedial subject—that anyone can teach it, that writing is separate from content, that teaching writing means correcting surface features, etc.—and this recognition is thus necessary for developing effective, data-driven writing pedagogies.

As a form of private labor, the writing consultant has to prove their expertise not to the disciplinary community but to the non-expert client to whom she is selling her services. She only has to be as expert as is necessary to sell the product. Because popular views of writing do not recognize the possibility of expertise in writing instruction, criteria for what clients perceive as expertise are likely to align with remedial approaches. This model of writing instruction, then, allows for inexpert instruction to be packaged as expert because it is assessed by non-experts. This is not to say that writing consultants cannot be experts, or that anyone who does it is not an expert, but that, since the market sets the standards of expertise, writing consultation can be inexpert even as it is recognizable to a broad clientele as what expert writing should be.

We can see this dynamic reflected in the pedagogy offered by Daveena Tauber, a private writing consultant. In a blog post recently published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Tauber (2016b) offers nine tools for what she calls “the accidental writing teacher”—faculty across the disciplines who need to support students’ communication practices but may not be trained to do so. Tauber’s tips gesture toward more sophisticated views of writing that perform disciplinary expertise. For instance, she says writing is “a complex, iterative process that is not learned once and for all in a single semester” (Tauber, 2016b, tool #1). Likewise, a number of her tools exhibit a sense of procedural learning that is valuable for new writers. For example, she advises that faculty “Stop correcting student work. Make them do it instead” (tool #7). In addition, she advocates providing clear and useful feedback (tool #4), having students teach one another about writing (tool #5), and employing peer review on writing projects (tool #8).

But upon closer inspection, these tips consistently interpret disciplinary concepts as aligned with popular conceptions of writing through a focus on lower-order concerns such as grammar and mechanics. So while she may call for procedural learning in the form of having students correct each other’s “errors,” her examples of “errors” reflect a remedial view of writing in line with popular views of what writing teachers teach—faculty should help students “[r]ecord things like ‘comma splice,’ ‘agreement between plural and singular,’ or ‘unsupported arguments’” (tool #2). Again, when she calls faculty to have students teach writing to one another (tool #5), her examples of what they teach are lessons “about semicolons; commas (Oxford and otherwise); plural and possessives; dependent clauses, comma splices, contractions, sentence fragments, parallel sentence structure, subject-verb agreement, colloquial language . . .” et cetera. (tool #5). So while Tauber’s language suggests sophisticated views of writing, her instructional advice betrays her view of writing instruction as primarily a matter of surface level errors and basic skills.

Because consulting services rely on market-based expertise, they have the potential to gain widespread acceptance—and continue to perpetuate misconceptions about writing. The danger here is that misguided pedagogy packaged as expert reaffirms popular views of writing and undercuts opportunities to challenge these views. It dilutes what counts as expert and prevents writing specialists from promoting more nuanced pedagogies that would teach writing as a situated, rhetorical phenomenon in keeping with composition’s disciplinary assumptions. Within a framework grounded in writing expertise, for instance, faculty would be encouraged to discuss with students the conventions for writing in their disciplines; help students perform genre expectations and identify and join exigent scholarly conversations in their fields; highlight discipline-specific terminology and methods of selecting of evidence; and craft assignments that make clear the criteria used to assess student writing performance, among other things.
Certainly the conscientious consultant may pursue more knowledge of writing, but if one of the marks of non-expert status in writing is failure to recognize the existence of such expertise, there seems little reason for someone like Tauber to spend much time understanding the nuances of disciplinary-specific writing (Russell, 1995; Petraglia, 1995; M. Carter, 2007; Wardle, 2004, 2009), the well-documented challenges of working with writers and faculty across the curriculum (LeCourt, 1996; Tarabochia, 2013), or the pedagogical approaches that foster students’ abilities to transfer writing knowledge across contexts (see for instance Downs & Wardle, 2007; Nowacek, 2011; Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011; Rounsaville, 2012; Yancey, Robertson, & Taczak, 2014; Downs & Robertson, 2015).

But the inexpert consultant is unlikely to pursue further inquiry as this would require a vision of writing as a subject of study about which expertise can exist—that is, an expert perspective. Affirming such a perspective as a private writing consultant would challenge the notion of writing as a discrete, universal, and basic skill on which private consulting as an enterprise is based. Expert private writing consultation would thus become an effort against itself. An expert perspective on writing consultation calls for the integration of writing instruction into disciplinary contexts, or, put another way, calls for the work many WPAs, WAC/WID consultants, writing teachers, and scholars in the field are already attempting to accomplish.

This fact reveals that the real clients served by private writing consultants, then, are not graduate students, but faculty across the disciplines who hold a remedial view of writing. For example, she advises these teachers to “[create] a set of boilerplate explanations for common writing problems” that come up across many of their students’ papers so that they can cut and paste the same comments rather than retyping the same thing over and over (tool #3). As compositionists know, Nancy Sommers’s (1982) study discredited this approach nearly 40 years ago—“rubber-stamped” comments (what Tauber calls “cut-and-pasted”) are “not anchored in the particulars of the students' texts, but rather are a series of vague directives that are not text-specific” (Sommers, 1982, p. 152). But the enthusiasm for these and other recommendations in the comments section on the Chronicle suggests that Tauber does have a form of expertise these faculty are looking for—how to manage the demands on teachers’ labor in the face of a time-intensive process of teaching writing. And she addresses this problem by perpetuating a remedial version of composition.

Private writing consultants cover over the contradiction that graduate student writing draws into relief—that between the need to improve student writing on one hand and the failure to teach it on the other. Private writing consultants allow faculty across the disciplines to avoid training graduate student writers in discipline-specific writing practices. If students’ writing needs are grammatical, then a consultant can address their problems; if consultants can solve students’ writing problems, then faculty don’t need to change the way they conceptualize or teach writing in their disciplines. In this way the private consultant justifies as an expert perspective the offloading of the responsibility for gaining discipline-specific writing expertise onto individual students.

In all fairness to Tauber, she recognizes some of the limitations of the consulting model she advocates and points to it as a “middle” measure while we work toward the ideal of integrated writing instruction (2016a, p. 634). By appearing to meet graduate students’ need for writing support—at the financial expense of the individual graduate student—private consultants appear to eliminate the “problem” of graduate student writing that might actually drive faculty across the disciplines to consider seriously the idea of integrating more writing instruction into their graduate student training. But with private consultants who can seem like experts affirming a view of writing that denies the need for integrating writing instruction across the disciplines, faculty have reasons to resist writing-intensive policies as unnecessary. The middle measure of private writing consulting, then, is not so much a middle as it is the end of the process that limits the possibilities of integrating writing instruction across the disciplines more fully in the future.
In our final post, we discuss preliminary steps that university administrators and writing experts can take to address the need for systematic graduate writing support.

We welcome your commentary!

References


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Part III: Empowering Graduate Student Writers and Rejecting Outsourced Mentorship

BEYOND SELF HELP: ENACTING A FUTURE IN WHICH GRADUATE SUPPORT IS SYSTEMIC AND WRITING IS RECOGNIZED AS CENTRAL TO KNOWLEDGE-MAKING IN ALL DISCIPLINES

BY SHANNON MADDEN & JERRY STINNETT

This post concludes the series with a call to administrators and writing experts to attend more carefully to structures of support for graduate writers (and student writers more generally). To do so, we should extend existing research on graduate and faculty writers, advocate forcefully for the integration of research-based graduate writing pedagogies across the academic curriculum, and make access and equity the center of our discussions about graduate writing.

As we have discussed in this series, high-level facility in specialized communication practices is required for nearly all the activities students undertake in graduate school—coursework, seminar papers, comprehensive exams, writing lab reports, applying for grants, analyzing data, and giving conference presentations, not to mention theses and dissertations. Yet many of the existing resources for graduate students position writing as remedial rather than as constitutive of academic training and disciplinary professionalization. Self-help manuals with titles like Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day, How to Write a Better Thesis, and even Writing a Dissertation for Dummies encourage writers to believe that their inexpert status in their disciplines and the lack of sustained writing support in their institutions are problems which they alone should solve. Private consulting, as we have shown, is another way of foisting the problem onto students. These models ask graduate students to pick themselves up by the bootstraps and get through the dissertation, and if they can’t do it alone, they should look outside the university for a self-help book or a consultant to purchase.

Teaching writers is a privilege and a responsibility, and it’s not exploitable. In light of neoliberal threats to offshore this valuable work, writing experts must do more to articulate writing’s centrality to thriving research activity and to the advancement of disciplinary knowledge. After all, it will take much more than a one-time consultant-led workshop to foster strong campus “cultures of writing” in which writing—and thus writing support—is recognized
as essential for scholarship itself, as well as for degree completion and career advancement (see Royer et al., 2003; Aitchison & Paré, 2012; Geller, 2013; Moore, Felten, & Strickland, 2013; Simpson, Clemens, Killingsworth, & Ford, 2015).

To close, we offer some provisional suggestions for how disciplinary faculty, university administrators, and writing experts on campus can build on existing efforts around writing and move forward in a positive direction. We encourage university stakeholders, first of all, to look to your own institutions and see how existing efforts within your own context can inform one another and become collaborative. Faculty across the disciplines are already writing grants, articles, and books, and performing peer review as part of what it is to be a member of their respective professions. Writing experts, as those who theorize writing, writing pedagogy, and writing assessment, can support faculty across the disciplines in uncovering and becoming metacognitive about the discipline-specific writing they already do and expect students to perform while acquiring content knowledge.

We encourage you to share this post with personnel at your university, circulate it to your networks, and add & respond to it in the comments section below.

Steps for faculty across the disciplines to take toward writing:

- Discuss explicitly with students what writing in your discipline looks like. For instance, highlight conventions such as methods of selecting evidence, how to organize and summarize data, and discipline-specific terminology. If students are having trouble performing the discourse conventions, provide them with a model of writing in your field and discuss with them the features that matter.

- Mentor students on how to identify exigent scholarly conversations in the field and join those conversations in ways appropriate for writing in your discipline. Show students how to use writing to ask questions pertinent to your field, formulate hypotheses about those questions, and select methods for studying them. Help students recognize how writing in your discipline reflects the ways of thinking preferred in the discipline.

- Build writing process into your course. Learning to write is a recursive process that requires instruction, feedback, and practice. Have students write multiple drafts of major projects and give one another directed feedback. Break projects into manageable tasks that grow in complexity as the project develops (e.g. freewrite about research topics, write research questions, draft research plans, write responses to secondary research sources, compose literature reviews, etc.) to make the composing process visible to students and provide time for revision.

- Give students opportunities to practice with different genres (e.g. deliver conference-style presentations in class; write lab reports approximating professional expectations; craft effective reviews of books or articles; etc.) so that they might develop facility in using these genres, moving between them, and writing for multiple situations as does a member of the discipline.

- Create frequent opportunities for students to provide writing feedback for one another as part of learning to write for the discipline. Peer review both allows students to get timely and useful guidance on their own writing but also allows them to apply the things you’ve shown them about writing in your field to one another’s drafts.

- Craft assignments that make clear the criteria you will use to assess students’ writing performance and link those criteria to disciplinary expectations.
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- Draw on the expertise of faculty who study and teach writing. Ask writing faculty on your campus for a conversation.

- Feedback is essential for writers are all levels and tenure demands are increasing, so seek support for your own writing. Join or start an interdisciplinary faculty writing group.

**STEPS FOR ADMINISTRATORS TO TAKE TOWARD WRITING:**

**Use evidence-based practices to design graduate writing support.**

As this series of installments on the *WCJ Community* has worked to illustrate, a significant body of research and pedagogy already exists around writing mentorship, writing centers, and increasingly, graduate writing. We no longer need to start from scratch in order to dream up what a graduate writing center, thesis bootcamp, or discipline-specific writing fellows program could look like. We can now continue the important work begun by researchers and professionals in composition, writing centers, applied linguistics, language acquisition, and the Consortium on Graduate Communication (CGC). The CGC website is a good place for the uninitiated to start; it houses a rich repository of resources such as sample syllabi and student surveys to support university stakeholders in designing effective programs for graduate writing and assessing the needs of their students and campuses. Additionally, several recent and forthcoming collections offer research and pedagogy around graduate writing, such as *Supporting Graduate Student Writers: Research, Curriculum, and Program Design* (2016, Eds. Simpson, Caplan, Cox, & Phillips); *Research Literacies and Writing Pedagogies for Masters and Doctoral Writers* (2016, Eds. Badenhorst & Guerin); and *Re/Writing the Center: Pedagogies, Practices, Partnerships to Support Graduate Students in the Writing Center* (forthcoming 2017, Eds. Lawrence & Zawacki).

In order to help graduate students complete their degrees, we must think systemically and systematically about writing. As Talinn Phillips (2016) has argued, we can design efforts to support student writers across three axes: intensive support (e.g. writing classes, dissertation workshops, writing retreats), sustained support (e.g. dedicated graduate writing centers, writing intensive graduate programs), and supervisor support (e.g. mentoring faculty on working with graduate writers). We know from decades of research in composition that a single writing course is not sufficient for helping students develop the knowledge and habits they will need to write for their academic careers and beyond. Students need writing instruction in addition to other long-term support measures such as writing groups, genre-specific communication workshops, and frequent, substantive feedback from faculty and peers. And faculty across the disciplines should be supported by those with writing expertise in articulating the conventions of writing in their fields to students and designing strategies to intensify the role of writing in their programs (see for instance Rogers, Zawacki, & Baker, 2016). We should budget for efforts in all of these areas.

Administrators and faculty can consider what on-campus mechanisms for writing support exist and whether they are accessible to all student stakeholder groups, including underserved students. For example, Steve Simpson (2016) notes that international/L2 students can often fall through the cracks of institutional support systems when writing centers serve undergraduates exclusively and international services don’t include support for writing (p. 1). As this example makes clear, we need to interrogate whether and how the writing needs of all graduate students are provided for within existing institutional structures.

Toward that end, we assert that educational access and equity should be the center of our conversations about graduate writing support services. If attrition rates are higher for underserved student groups and attrition usually happens post-coursework during dissertation- and thesis-writing, then we must attend to the barriers to access that exist for these students around writing. In order to support degree completion for all of our graduate students,
writing support must be more inclusive. Who completes the degree has implications for whose academic perspectives we value and legitimate institutionally and disciplinarily. Who completes also has implications for who goes on to become future university faculty, not to mention accreditation, which is tied to completion rates. As we’ve shown, writing support needs to be **systemic and grounded in expert knowledge** rather than offloaded onto individual students or outsourced to private consultants. “Diversity”—that nebulous, contested term—is an explicit value and stated goal in the mission statements of most higher educational institutions. Efforts such as recruiting students and faculty of color, providing the minimum legal accommodations for students with disabilities, and adding courses in gender and ethnic studies, while important, are not enough and cannot be the end of institutional measures to foster inclusive university spaces.

**Reinvest in writing centers.**

Writing centers are crucial mechanisms of access, equity, retention, and completion. They are not for remediation; they are essential infrastructures for ensuring educational support for students who may not be served or attended to in other areas. Graduate writing centers should be the norm, not the exception. Writing well is not a matter of simply memorizing terms or mastering a formula which students either know or don’t. Rather, writing is central to all the work students do across the academic curriculum; writing is necessary for acquiring and negotiating content knowledge and it is through writing that disciplinary knowledge is constructed (see for instance Russell, 1995; Wardle, 2004; Carter, 2007). Directing a writing center is intellectual work grounded in a well-established body of research on writing and writing centers. Writing centers **should be run** by individuals with significant theoretical knowledge of and practical experience in composition, writing pedagogy, and one-on-one writing mentorship. We cannot let the **market determine** the level of expertise we bring to our curricula and use to educate our graduate students.

**Provide opportunities for faculty and staff across the disciplines to collaborate on the research and teaching of writing.**

On many campuses, faculty have few opportunities for collaborating across disciplinary lines, and in many cases, faculty and staff in different academic units are working to solve similar instructional problems but are not aware of related efforts on their own campuses. As the results of Caplan’s & Cox’s (2016) national survey indicated, people working in isolation often mistakenly believe they’re the only ones on their campuses working on graduate writing (p. 35, p. 39). This not only slows the advancement of data-driven pedagogies and results in isolated individuals having to design support services from scratch, but also means that students can have a hard time identifying where in their local context to go for writing help (Caplan & Cox, 2016, p. 39).

In an effort to redress this problem of institutional fragmentation, administrators can encourage faculty across the curriculum to work together with faculty in writing departments and writing centers to enrich their curricula with stronger emphasis on communication. Several successful models for this work already exist; to cite just a few examples, Pamela Flash has been working for a number of years on writing enriched curricula at the University of Minnesota (wec.umn.edu). Sandra Tarabochia’s (2013) research offers models for interdisciplinary collaboration on writing based on her experiences doing cross-curricular literacy work with a biology department at the University of Nebraska. Elizabeth Boquet & coauthors (2015) created partnerships to support the writing experiences of graduate students in a doctoral-level nursing program. By partnering writing experts on campus with other departments, administrators can facilitate multidisciplinary efforts through which we can do richer and more systemic work to support student writers. Before paying for a private writing consultant, administrators can reach out to writing experts on campus and sponsor these faculty in leading a workshop for graduate writers or talking with their colleagues across the disciplines about how to work more writing into graduate curricula. Faculty in linguistics,
composition, communication and related fields on campus may already be studying and working with graduate writers as part of their research, teaching, and service requirements—meaning that these faculty might easily be able to collaborate on programs and incorporate research-based writing support into their existing workflows.

**Create more employment opportunities for graduate students that will professionalize them as disciplinary communicators and bolster campus cultures of writing.**

Rather than asking students to pay to get their writing help elsewhere, universities should instead give graduate students more on-campus employment opportunities around writing and disciplinary communication. Many of these programs already exist; to provide just one example, Simpson, Clemens, Killingsworth, & Ford (2015) discuss a STEM Communication Fellows program at the University of New Mexico. In this model, graduate students in STEM fields are trained to mentor their peers’ writing and also to work with their home departments to develop resources around writing (par. 8). The fellows model supports graduate student writers in those disciplines, provides material financial support for graduate students, and helps bolster campus cultures of writing. In this way, such fellows programs “create[] opportunities to develop organic, student-run programs catering to the writing activities most suitable for students' disciplines and [] develop more community among graduate students” (par. 2). By creating and expanding such programs, universities can both support graduate students financially and support writing development on campus.

**Support faculty writers.**

As was well established in Geller & Eodice’s *Working with Faculty Writers* (2013) and as any early career faculty member can tell you, writing support is perhaps even more absent for faculty writers than it is for graduate students. Significantly, the access and equity issues that are present at the graduate level parallel those that exist for faculty; scholarship and testimony document the oppression experienced by women, faculty of color, queer faculty, and faculty with disabilities on the tenure track (see for instance Gutiérrez y Muhs, Niemann, González, & Harris, 2012; Stapleton, 2015; Grollman, 2016; facultydiversity.org). Higher education has access problems that don’t end after graduation, and although those problems won’t be solved once and for all with writing support, support for writing is an important step on the way to enacting more robust educational communities that reflect diverse perspectives and foster inclusion. As Anne Ellen Geller (2013) notes, in tenure climates where demands on faculty to publish are steadily increasing, supporting faculty as writers is more important now than ever (p. 2). Supporting faculty across the disciplines as writers will help them write more and better, and will also help them think more carefully about how best to support their students’ writing (Banks & Flinchbaugh, 2013; Phillips, 2016). Further, if universities want to retain faculty of color on the tenure track and help them advance through promotion, more faculty writing support is essential.

**ADDITIONAL STEPS FOR WRITING EXPERTS TO TAKE:**

**Do (more) research, make cross-campus connections, and leverage existing resources.**

Although there is no shortage of anecdotal evidence which attests to the value of writing instruction and feedback for graduate students, anecdote by itself risks getting trivialized as the experiences of a few individuals. In order to make a case to administrators for systemic writing support, we cannot trade in anecdote alone; we need evidence-based practices. We need to extend the research on graduate writing, on student writers’ needs, and on writing support services. We should investigate what factors contribute to successful student writers and create data-driven methods for working with writers (see Haswell, 2005; Lerner, 2009; Driscoll & Perdue, 2012, 2014). As Simpson (2016) points out, efforts at intensive writing support such as dissertation boot camps are starting to develop on
more campuses, but few studies of their effectiveness have been published to date (p. 8). It is likely that many programs are informally assessing these workshops, but without publishing that research and making it available to other institutions and others in the field, we run the risk of inventing and reinventing the wheel of writing support systems (as Michelle Cox recently put it in her introductory remarks at the 2016 CGC Institute).

Indeed, one problem is that publishing research is not a requirement of the job description for everyone who may work with graduate students on a given campus. Staff working off the tenure track in an Intensive English Program may be tasked with creating a language center for International graduate students whose home language is not English, while their job descriptions may neither require nor give credit to publishing. These contexts can teach all of us important lessons about learners’ needs and how to support graduate writing, and we need credible studies of support services in a variety of contexts. Thus we call research faculty in writing studies to do more to reach out to those stakeholders, collaborate with their offices, and work with them to assess their services. Through collaborations, we can build on and extend the advances that are already being made at a variety of sites on campus. As Boquet & co-researchers’ (2015) discussion of the partnership between writing experts and the Nursing program demonstrates, scholar-practitioners working in discrete academic units have much to contribute to each other’s disciplinary understandings and can make our shared work of supporting graduate student writers richer and stronger.

We need to design replicable instruments that can help us understand the lived experience of writing and mentorship and correlate—through data—writing support with degree completion. One of us (Shannon) together with an interdisciplinary research team is in the process of validating and establishing the reliability of an instrument that investigates students’ access to writing support in relation to their development as writers. Similarly, scholars at George Mason University have recently published a study of dissertation students’ writing needs (Rogers, Zawacki, & Baker, 2016) and together with scholars at the University of West Virginia, collaborated across institutions to get a more comprehensive view of graduate writers’ challenges (Zawacki, Singh-Corcoran, Lawrence, & Brady, 2016). We need more studies such as these and we need to continue to establish a strong research base around professionalizing graduate students as communicators.

Make access and equity a priority for graduate writing research and education.

As suggested above, we already have a considerable knowledge base on which to build a graduate writing center, thesis boot camp, or writing enriched graduate program (See “Use evidence-based practices to design graduate writing support”). Writing specialists working on campus already know and have done a lot for graduate writers, but there is still more we can do. We need now to set an agenda for educational access and inclusion. Writing support services should be designed to attend to diverse learning needs and to support all students through their degree programs. In order to do this important work, we need further research on equity gaps to make visible the experiences of underserved students. If we want to know what barriers exist for students, we should invite them to talk with us and to report on their writing experiences. We should use their experiential differences as resources for understanding the ways our institutions, pedagogies, and mentorship models might privilege some students and exclude others (see Kershbaum, 2014; Inoue, 2015).

We should pay more attention to mentoring practices, especially around writing, and support committee chairs in responding to graduate writers in ways that help students perform disciplinary conventions but also foster inclusion of students’ individual voices. As professors, we can consider the extent to which our methods for evaluating student writing promote academic rigor without placing underserved students at an unfair disadvantage (see Inoue, 2015). We can think more carefully about who we select as our advisees and which graduate students we invite to coauthor with us, and who we leave out. We should employ L2 students and students from linguistic and cultural
minorities in our writing centers. We can create spaces and moments for students to collaborate, give each other feedback, and develop writing communities.

The list can go on. The point is to redress institutional structures and writing spaces that further marginalize those who are already excluded. Writing, graduate teaching and research opportunities, mentorship models, and structures of support are all part of this picture. We can do more to listen to and honor student voices.

For more on this, see "Access and Equity in Graduate Writing Support," the forthcoming special issue of *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal* edited by Shannon Madden & Michele Eodice.

Start a faculty writing group.

As mentioned, faculty also need support as writers. (See “support faculty writers,” above.) If you aren’t already in a writing group, start one. Connect with faculty in other disciplines who want feedback on their writing. Invite graduate students and postdocs to join you.

When all else fails, go grassroots.

To conclude, while we contend that successfully supporting graduate students requires time, labor, and resources, we also acknowledge that opening a dedicated graduate writing center, hiring a tenured director with a degree in writing studies, and paying full time graduate students to work as writing consultants is undoubtedly an expensive venture. On many campuses, even writing centers which only serve undergraduates are in budgetary danger. While we assert that writing centers are crucial mechanisms of access, equity, retention, and completion, we nonetheless recognize that not every university is equally able to fund such necessary services for graduate students. As Tauber (2016) rightly points out, we can’t wait for an ideal solution; we have to take small steps in the present that will help us get closer to that ideal (p. 634).

It is important, then, to consider the micro-level, grassroots ways we can help graduate students help each other and help themselves and support faculty in cases where universities may not be doing enough to sponsor ideal support systems. For instance, Jerry has led workshops for graduate writers in his university’s Pharmaceutics program and is working closely with the Center for Teaching Excellence to develop writing pedagogy workshops for faculty across campus. Shannon is currently involved in a number of informal writing groups and writing partnerships with graduate students and early career faculty. These are small things, and for us as writing experts, the challenge is not in doing this work, as we feel they are necessary aspects of our teaching and service philosophies, but in making these efforts visible to others outside of our classrooms and personal networks. We can help students create student-led writing groups, help them make connections with graduate student researchers in other disciplines, and help them advocate for more writing support. At the University of Michigan, students in STEM fields organized their own graduate writing community. MiSciWriters organizes graduate writing workshops, hosts guest speakers, and holds write-ins, among other efforts. As Christine Feak (2016) recently noted, one way we can support all our graduate students is by helping them to create supportive communities for themselves and each other.

The point is, when the money fails to come through, there are still small things we can do to help our students and ourselves. In some ways, this was the impetus for—and constitutes the history of—our discipline. As Adam Banks (2015) put it in his provocative and incantatory Chair’s address at the CCCC in Tampa:

As real as our struggles are, we act like being broke is new. We always been underfunded. We always been figuring it out as we go. We always been dismissed, disregarded, disrespected. But we served anyhow. We took care of our students anyhow. We transformed one discipline and created our own anyhow. And it was
women who did that work. It was people of color who did that work. It was queer folk who did that work. It was first-generation students in New York City and across the country demanding open admissions who did that work. It was people of all backgrounds teaching four and five courses a semester, contingent and full-time and sometimes even more time, who did that work for us, building and running programs while they taught and theorized. (p. 271)

Graduate writers need us, and their success is crucial to the educational mission, to the perpetuation of thriving scholarly activity and research innovation, and to the advancement of knowledge itself. When our universities fail our students, may we not do the same.

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