

PART 3: “Help each other. Find a writing group!” OR Collaborations and Programs ‘Alongside’ Curriculum

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I vividly remember gathering in a small conference room in Olds Hall on Michigan State University’s campus in August of 2008. The newest Rhetoric and Writing doctoral student cohort, Graduate Director Malea Powell, and an array of snacks were taking up all the space in the room, which had an air of eager anticipation. Malea reassured us that we would be supported in this program, and she urged us to also care for one another. She stressed that this was a graduate program where we helped each other. That moment has stuck with me, and there were multiple times throughout my first year in the program when various faculty members mentioned that creating a study group or writing group would be productive. At that point, I was in coursework, and the most meaningful kind of support I could think of would be to discuss the dense and extensive reading we were asked to complete for courses. Occasionally a group would come together for a week or two, sometimes to share our thoughts about course-assigned material, sometimes to discuss a well-known text in the field that had not been assigned in its entirety for class. These groups, though, had little staying power.

It was in my second year at MSU and my second year as a graduate consultant in MSU’s Writing Center that I was introduced to more structured writing groups to support graduate students. I had the good fortune to become The Writing Center’s graduate writing group coordinator and had the opportunity to first undergo training as a group facilitator and later facilitate training sessions for other graduate consultants who were interested in guiding groups of graduate writers. That summer, Elena and I also took on the responsibility of facilitating The Writing Center’s Navigating the Ph.D. Workshop. In both of these roles, I was struck by how important it was to address and consider issues that seemed unconnected to writing in order to support writing. We worked with writers to plan out their semesters: What are your primary writing goals? What other commitments in your life need to be considered when planning the semester? What are your known writing strengths and limitations? Who do you seek out for support?

We’d discuss how difficult it was transitioning into graduate school, too. I remember hearing stories about how small concerns made focusing on larger concerns difficult. For example, upon moving to East Lansing, a student was frustrated

by small things like trying to find a place to get their hair cut and the need to continually get quarters from the bank to do laundry. It is easy to dismiss these small, everyday tasks, but they have a real impact on the ways we organize our lives: How long is your commute? Do you have childcare? Are you getting enough sleep? Are you staying active? Are you taking care of yourself?

During the Navigating the Ph.D. Workshop, we spent a lot of time discussing support networks, stressing that students shouldn't expect any one mentor to be able to provide all the different kinds of support that they might need. Instead, they should consider the multiple mentors in their lives—some acting in official capacities, like advisors and committee mentors, some more informal mentors, often professors not on the student's committee as well as colleagues in their Ph.D. program—and recognize that support from non-academic settings—such as a local choir, craft group, running club, or informal gatherings with friends—were of equal importance.

My experience coordinating and facilitating graduate writing groups and the Navigating the Ph.D. Workshop emphasized just how important it is for graduate students to find support outside the classroom. In this section, contributors share a variety of programming and experiences outside but alongside the classroom such as writing centers, writing groups, and writing camps to emphasize the importance of attending to graduate writing needs in structured ways beyond the curriculum.