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A Space for Change: Writing Center Partnerships to Support Graduate Writing

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As the Council of Graduate Schools Ph.D. Completion Project reports, even under favorable conditions, at least a quarter of the students who begin a Ph.D. do not complete the degree, and the biggest roadblock is often writing the dissertation. In an editorial in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Ph.D. student Kevin Gotkin catalogues the gaps in his graduate writing education:

> I have never workshopped a piece of writing during a course. And no one else in my classes has, either. We usually have a single day in the middle of the semester devoted to talking about our final projects. We go around the room and talk in the most wildly abstract terms about where they might go in 25 pages. It's very exciting, but it's not writing.

We envisioned graduate students like Gotkin finding a space in our writing center to workshop a draft, get feedback on a literature review, or join a dissertation support group, but we did not have the resources to carve out such a space. When we were offered pilot funding to support graduate student writing by expanding our existing writing center services, which were targeted mainly to undergraduates, we knew we needed to act quickly if we wanted to take advantage of the opportunity. But we also knew we needed to anticipate challenges and next steps.

We found that organizational development theory provided practical questions to consider as we changed from a primarily undergraduate center to one that also supported graduate writing. We asked ourselves:

1. Is the change important?
2. Is the change achievable?
3. What resources are available?
4. What alliances enable collaborative problem solving?

5. How do we sustain change?

We will use our local situation to suggest a framework others may use to reflect on the role of change within their own centers, especially as those changes support graduate student writers. The organizational development framework that we use could also prove helpful for any writing center facing a large change.

Supporting graduate student writing relies on partnerships between groups of faculty and students across campus. On our campus, for instance, a WAC/WID alliance with the writing center (The Eberly Writing Studio), provides disciplinary insight: faculty know what counts as evidence in their own fields, how research is conducted, who receives credit, and so forth; but they sometimes have a difficult time conveying this knowledge to students (Paré, et al. 222). The Writing Studio can help graduate students navigate as they learn these disciplinary conventions. Specific alliances, however, depend on local conditions. On other campuses, a writing center might be allied with a center for teaching and learning or perhaps with a university library. The model we propose allows for a range of partnerships. To foster such partnerships, Karen Vaught-Alexander suggests using organizational development (OD) theory. She proposes that WPAs, including writing center directors, are uniquely positioned to create bridges as they negotiate across curricular, student, faculty, staff, and budgetary issues (126). She provides a heuristic, drawn from OD theory, that can help administrators understand the institutional structures, motivations, needs, and resistance associated with change. Vaught-Alexander poses questions that help us consider how we can take active roles as change agents—even at an early stage of program development.

IS THE CHANGE IMPORTANT?
Vaught-Alexander's work inspired us to research current organizational development theory. Particularly useful was Bryan Weiner's observation that readiness for change varies in relation to the perceived value of the change (4). With Weiner's point in mind, before we launched our pilot, we surveyed 126 WVU faculty and 107 WVU graduate students across the disciplines to gauge whether both groups were receptive to graduate writing support. We asked simple multiple-choice questions (e.g., "How likely would you be to recommend or use the following types of writing help?") and included an open-ended question for respondents' additional comments. Although the comments

showed that reasons for support varied, 90% of faculty and 85% of graduate students favored a graduate tutoring pilot. As one faculty member said, "Simply because grad-student writers are more technically proficient or are working on more complex writing tasks doesn't mean they don't need support. All writers do." Representative graduate student comments were similarly positive:

- I think this would be a good idea for graduate students, especially for those writing a thesis or dissertation. A tutor at a writing center might be able to add a new perspective and help the writer adjust the paper so that a general audience would understand it, especially for anyone trying to submit an article for publication in a journal. This would also be helpful with editing for spelling and grammar.

- I would definitely use this service for help with complex and important writing assignments. In-depth help from brainstorming to proof reading would be highly helpful.

But we also heard some resistance, most notably in this faculty response: "Graduate school is sink or swim—if you don't have these skills coming into it, you shouldn't be here. I'm not sure we should be spending our writing center resources worrying about graduate students." We take the resistance seriously. As we work to establish graduate writing support within our existing Writing Studio, we must rely on faculty referrals and insights about differing disciplinary conventions.

IS THE CHANGE ACHIEVABLE?
To understand the resistance and to strengthen our writing center/WAC/WID partnerships, we followed our initial survey with faculty and student interviews. We spoke with people from the humanities, the sciences, and the social sciences, and the interviews revealed some interesting patterns of miscommunication. For instance, faculty comments repeatedly emphasized the scholarly need to "recognize the relevant literature" before joining the conversation. Graduate students knew they had to "form an analysis without presenting it as a series of disconnected thoughts," but were far less sure about how to form a cohesive argument once completing and comprehending their secondary research. As one student asked, "Do you guys have suggestions for how I might write the way my advisor wants?" From these interviews we realized

that both faculty and graduate students need a language to talk about writing challenges. We were confident that graduate writing support could help bridge this communication gap, but we needed to assess what was realistic in terms of our organizational development. Did we have the financial, material, and intellectual resources necessary to meet the diverse needs of graduate students from across the disciplines?

WHAT RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE?

Expanding the Writing Studio to include graduate-level consultants made us confront *financial resources*. How many consultants would we need for a pilot? How many hours would they work each week? We knew we wanted consultants with prior teaching experience and who were advanced enough in their studies to be familiar with extended academic genres such as theses and dissertations. Because our university strictly limits hourly wage overloads for Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), we asked for the equivalent of one full GTA line (20 hours per week). We also needed funds to continue some support over the summer when many graduate students have more time to write. We did not need additional material resources such as printers, whiteboards, and computers since we would be sharing the existing undergraduate space.

As we continue to expand, however, we will need more *material resources*, starting with a new space for longer (quieter) consultations, presentations, and extended hours. For the moment, we have reserved a small office within the existing Studio. Although larger, more permanent space remains an ongoing challenge, we have already submitted a proposal that invites upper administrators to share our vision. We noted that our established partnership with the new WAC/WID initiative on our campus will help address the disciplinary needs of graduate-level communication. Our proposal describes a flexible hybrid space (with movable furniture and partitions) that allows for activities such as traditional one-to-one consultation work, group projects, workshops of 12 to 20, a reception area, and space for the consultants and the Writing Studio coordinator. We also asked that additional writing and presentation technologies be integrated into the space.

Our more immediate material needs are modest. We need books, handouts, and new Web resources for students and consultants that are tailored to the more extended arguments and specific

genres that graduate students produce, such as literature reviews and dissertations. We also need advertising materials to distinguish between our graduate and undergraduate consulting services since both take place in our Writing Studio. In addition to material and financial support for our graduate consultants, we wanted to establish *intellectual and structural resources*. As we considered how best to prepare new graduate consultants, we reflected on the structures already in place for our undergraduate consultants. Those students take a three-credit practicum course. In the first half of the semester, they do a lot of reading, discussing, observing, and writing. By mid-term, they act as peer consultants with supervision from the director and in tandem with more experienced consultants. If the new students do well, they are eligible to continue working for an hourly wage in our Writing Studio.

At the graduate level, we needed a more flexible training structure for new consultants. These consultants already have teaching experience. So instead of requiring them to attend a course, we ask them to complete a reading list that focuses on writing centers, writing pedagogy, and WAC/WID issues. The graduate consultants also meet regularly with the Writing Studio and WAC/WID directors to discuss their professional development and any issues that may arise from their interactions with graduate student writers. In the future, we want to increase their role in our research on writing at the graduate level.

WHICH ALLIANCES ENABLE COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING?
Extending the idea that organizational change starts by changing what people *do*, we returned to our earlier observation that both faculty and graduate students need a language to talk about writing challenges. We developed a series of questions that are easily adapted to a wide range of writing situations. To make the questions easy to remember, we use the acronym PACT, which stands for *purpose, audience, conventions,* and *trouble-shooting*. Our university is in the process of trademarking PACT and the following circular graphic associated with the key questions:

Purpose: What exactly do I want to happen?
Audience: Who is reading, listening, or viewing?
Conventions: What is expected in this context?
Trouble: What could get in the way of my goals?

A single acronym will never capture all the ways to create, explore, discover, and share ideas and insights. However, a common language used across several contexts can help students analyze the writing and speaking situations they encounter in their classes, work, and communities. As recent work on transfer suggests, language plays a role in how writers connect old and new knowledge and practice; key terms help students create some of those bridges (Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak 132, 134-35). However, we are also mindful of Chris Thaiss and Terry Myers Zawacki's warning: "the common terminology that faculty use often hides basic differences in rhetoric, exigency, epistemology, style, form, and formatting" (59). By shifting from common terms to common *questions*, we hope that PACT will help graduate consultants and graduate student writers reflect on their communicative assumptions, expectations, and needs.

HOW DO WE SUSTAIN CHANGE?

Organizational development theory helped us shift from a primarily undergraduate center to a center that also supports graduate writing. As we now anticipate next steps, the PACT helps us remain mindful of our programmatic situation. We hope the following examples of PACT will help other writing center directors reflect on how they might sustain graduate writing support (or other changes) at their institutions.

Purpose: What exactly do we want to happen? When we began offering graduate writing support, we were responding to larger university concerns about graduate student retention and completion rates. As we move forward, however, we find ourselves responding directly to the needs and concerns of faculty and graduate students from across the disciplines. As a result, our Writing Studio increasingly works in partnership with WAC/WID efforts at our institution. We imagine and then initiate collaborations such as these because we know we cannot sustain support for graduate student writing alone; it must be a collective effort.

Audience: Who is reading, listening, or viewing [or using or collaborating]? As we continue to extend the PACT heuristic, we are also imagining new audiences and alliances. Our Writing Studio/WAC/WID partnership continues to evolve by adapting to our local environment and by taking complex social interactions and ideologies into account, as one of us has explored in another article (Brady 17, 22). Our Writing

Studio partnership is further strengthened by alliances with the Department of English, the College of Arts and Sciences, and the University's Office of Graduate Education as well as the WVU Libraries. Since any program's purpose is often closely tied to its funding, our Writing Studio tries to be aware of what gets funded at our university, what gets cut, who decides, and why. That awareness helps us consider our current allies while also anticipating and imagining new audiences and alliances. If we have to make a case for ourselves to a new dean, how will we do it? Can we start to tell our story in a way that might also appeal to a public audience such as legislators or donors as readers? To tell our story well, we need to be mindful of features and conditions distinctive to our programs (like our use of graduate writing groups, the PACT heuristic, and our partnership with the WAC/WID initiative).

Conventions: What is expected in this context? As we think about purposes and audiences, we also want to keep asking what is (conventionally) expected of our Studio—and what do we or can we imagine for it as we move forward? We agree with Claire Aitchison and Anthony Paré's assertion that "it takes more than one-off courses or writing retreats to create the sort of nurturing and challenging environment that develops writing abilities" (20). In addition to workshops and week-long writing retreats (or "boot camps"), we encourage semester—or year-long—writing groups. We build on the work of Sohui Lee and Chris Golde, who advocate "Writing Process" boot camps over "Just Write" programs that emphasize monitored, uninterrupted time. Their process approach assumes that "students' writing productivity and motivation are enhanced by consistent and on-going conversations about writing" and structured time (2). In our retreats, we emphasize conversations that encourage reflective practice. To illustrate, we use a role-perception scale created by Ingrid Moses, and used by Brian Partridge and Sue Starfield in their handbook for thesis and dissertation advisors, that encourages graduate students to consider their underlying assumptions about thesis supervision. For example, one category asks graduate students to consider whose responsibility it is to initiate meetings: the advisor or the candidate (38). If students are unsure, we remind them that their expectations may differ from their advisors, and it may be time for a meeting or email.

Trouble: What Could Get in the Way of Our Goals? As we consider potential trouble spots as we develop a graduate

writing center, we know that space and funding are limited. To address these limits, we are exploring new alliances with our university librarians and colleagues in Communication Studies. We are talking with the Department of English, our dean, and the Office of Graduate Education about where our growing Writing Studio should be located and the advantages and disadvantages of shared or hybrid spaces. Visibility for new types of graduate support is another challenge. We continue to value the ways in which our writing center's partnership with our WAC/WID program helps support and sustain these efforts. Moving forward, we plan to formalize our use of faculty members as sounding boards into an advisory board that meets regularly. We will also continue to build alliances with administrators across campus. Finally, we hope to avoid some obvious trouble spots by drawing on the expertise and generosity of more established graduate writing centers.

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