DOI: 10.37514/WLN-J.2020.44.9.03

WLN

How Do Graduate Writing Specialists and Graduate Tutors Serve Graduate Writers' Needs Differently? A Qualitative Study of Writing Support in a Writing Center

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As more Graduate Writing Specialist (GWS) positions appear in writing centers, more research about this position and how it serves writers appears necessary. Because I am a GWS, I decided to add to this area of inquiry. I explored graduate writers' perceptions in my writing center by asking 1) Why do graduate students choose to meet with a GWS instead of a graduate tutor? 2) What qualifications, experience, and expertise do they feel a person in this role should have? 3) How do they feel the role of a GWS compares with that of a graduate tutor?

First, a little about me and my role. I have a doctorate and work half-time at a large research university. I meet individually with graduate writers in my private office to discuss research papers, journal articles, and job/funding applications or to provide thesis/dissertation coaching. As our website advertises, my services are for students "whose needs go beyond the Writing Center's traditional graduate writing consultations." In addition, I manage graduate writing groups, dissertation boot camps, and graduate research/write-ins. I am encouraged by our director to present at conferences, perform research, publish in journals, and apply for grants.

In addition to me, we have a Director, Associate Director, and Assistant Director, as well as undergraduate and graduate tutors. Our graduate tutors offer individual hour-long graduate writing consultations in our public consulting space. Graduate writers may choose to work with these tutors or with me. To make this decision, writers may visit our GWS webpage, which lists my areas of expertise: graduate-level writing, writer's block, publishing, funding/job applications, and thesis/dissertation coaching.

By studying my role and that of the graduate tutors in my center, I explore one way in which graduate writers receive supplementary support for their writing. Many of us in the writing center field are

already familiar with the struggles graduate writers can face: the need to produce "great quantities of writing of different kinds" (Aitchison 907); cognitive, social, and emotional blocks (Ahern and Manathunga 238); the expectation of a more "authoritative" writing stance; and a new identity as a scholar, researcher, and professional (Curry 87, 80). Many of us also know that not all writers receive help with these issues from their own departments or advisors. Research has already shown how well supplementary communication support systems, like those provided by writing centers, can help fill these gaps and "improve graduate student success" (Simpson 5), but there is still more left to investigate in this area.

PARTICIPANTS

I recruited participants from the thirty-five graduate writers who met with me individually during my office hours in fall 2018 and spring 2019. I typically met with these writers only once or twice in total. Some brought drafts, but many did not. Eighteen took a survey, and five were interviewed. Participants were masters-level and doctoral-level students from a wide range of academic departments, ranging from first-year to sixth-year. Nine survey participants and five interviewees had previously met with a graduate tutor.

METHODOLOGY

After receiving IRB approval, I used a qualitative approach that employed open-ended questions, gathering data from graduate writers, first through online surveys distributed immediately after each consultation and then later through one-to-one structured interviews. I also used grounded theory methodology, collecting my data and then looking for repeating concepts to which I assigned particular codes. Some questions in the survey were replicated in the interviews. To illustrate the similarities and differences, identical questions are italicized in Table 1.

CODING

In the first round of coding I generated a list of 106 initial codes from the surveys and interviews. A second round of coding revealed that these codes fit into three larger conceptual categories. **Graduate Writing Struggles** was comprised of new genres writers were encountering, new writing skills that needed to be built, writing-related emotions being battled, and gaps in writing instruction that needed to be filled. The **Ways to Help** category included ways our professional/graduate staff could help, i.e., by discussing the writing process, drawing on previous experiences, pointing to resources, and helping to process emotions. The **Writing Center Staff** category covered codes related to participants' perceptions of our graduate

TABLE 1: QUESTIONS ASKED IN SURVEYS AND INTERVIEWS

SURVEYS	INTERVIEWS
1. *Year of Study*	1. *Year of Study*
2. *Field of Study*	2. *Field of Study*
3. *What types of struggles do graduate students face?*	3. *What types of struggles do graduate students face?*
	4. What are the best ways to help with these struggles?
	5. How do these struggles differ from those of undergraduate students?
4. What was the reason for your appointment with the GWS?	6. Why did you choose to meet with the GWS instead of a graduate consultant?
5. *How do you view the role of a GWS?*	7. *How do you view the role of a GWS?*
6. *What types of qualifications, experience, and/or expertise should a GWS have?*	8. *What types of qualifications, experience, and/or expertise should a GWS have?*
	9. At what point(s) in a graduate student's career is it most helpful to meet with a GWS?
	10. What is the most helpful structure for students to receive help from a GWS?
7. *Have you ever attended a graduate consultation?*	11. *Have you ever attended a graduate consultation?*
8. If yes, how was your appointment with the GWS different from your graduate consultation(s)?	(If so, explain your experience).
	12. How do you think a consultation with a graduate consultant would be different from a consultation with a GWS?
9. Are there types of writing support that graduate consultants cannot give?	13. How do you think a graduate consultant is different or similar to a GWS?
10. If yes, what types?	
11. *Are there types of writing support that a GWS can provide that graduate writing consultants cannot?*	14. *Are there types of writing support that a GWS can provide that graduate writing consultants cannot?*
12. If yes, what types?	
13. *Related comments or concerns*	15. *Related comments or concerns*

consulting staff and GWS. During a third round of coding I looked for codes in each of these three larger categories that could be grouped together. I ended up with thirteen process codes (codes

describing actions with gerunds). For the purposes of this article I have chosen to focus on six: 1) "zooming out," 2) "processing emotions," 3) "navigating the thesis/dissertation process," 4) "publishing," 5) "applying for funding," and 6) "hunting for jobs." These were selected because they highlighted the perceived differences between support provided by graduate tutors and by a GWS. Each is defined in the following section.

RESULTS

The process codes indicated several areas of support our writers believe are particularly suited to a GWS. I also found that participants drew several distinctions between the roles of a GWS and a peer tutor. A GWS was likened to a "guide," "mentor," or "coach" twenty-two times in the surveys. Interview participants used similar vocabulary, such as "mentor," "guide," "specialist," and "professional staff person." The participants who had experience working with peer tutors described these tutors differently—as "readers," "sets of eyes," and "in-between people." These writers pointed to the fact that tutors provide an outside perspective on a piece of writing as well as a peer-to-peer relationship. It appeared that when these writers needed help from a peer, another set of eyes on their writing, or help with a specific draft, they might choose to work with a graduate tutor. On the other hand, they might decide to meet with a GWS if they wanted an experienced mentor to guide them through a writing-related process or to discuss issues that reached beyond a particular draft.

ZOOMING OUT

"Zooming out" is a term I use to describe graduate writers' need to talk about the writing process itself. This proved to be the most popular reason to meet with a GWS. Nine of the eighteen survey participants listed "discuss the writing process itself" as the basis for their appointment, and "expertise in the writing process (time management, writing goals, outlining, etc.)" was the most popular qualification they chose for a GWS. This same theme emerged in several of the interviews. Participant 2 mentioned the usefulness of "some of the conversations that we had about the process," giving the example of creating a writing calendar. Participant 3 mentioned helpful strategies for "organizing information, taking notes, prewriting, outlining" and "having an outside perspective on the process and frustrations that I was having." Several other study participants also contrasted the two types of consultations, using more abstract vocabulary when describing the differences. One survey respondent described their consultation with me as different because it was "more abstract, creating structure and concept." Other words like "higher-level," "concepts," "design,"

"planning," "larger vision," and "process" cropped up throughout the interviews. Though this may be specific to my institution, undoubtedly many participants felt that one difference between graduate tutor and GWS consultations lay in a focus on specific drafts versus a focus on the process of writing. Because of my advertised expertise in helping writers combat writer's block and adjust to graduate-level writing, these writers may have felt more comfortable coming to me for help with process.

PROCESSING EMOTIONS

"Processing emotions" included advisor/advisee issues, writer's block, imposter syndrome, and lack of confidence and/or motivation related to writing. This theme surfaced often when participants were asked about writing struggles graduate students face. Seven survey participants felt that an important qualification for a GWS was the "ability to discuss emotional issues related to writing," four survey participants listed "experience with the advisor/advisee relationship" as necessary, and interview Participant 5 mentioned "listening skills" as an important qualification. Emotional issues also accounted for some of the perceived differences between graduate tutors and a GWS. Two participants wanted a "private space" (which my office could provide), and two felt that "insight into the advisor/advisee relationship" (i.e., discussing how to improve lines of communication) made our meeting different from a peer consultation. Participant 4 felt strongly about emotion-based writing issues. He mentioned writing at the graduate level as "very stressful—it's a very emotional type of thing" and likened his meeting with the GWS to writing-related "therapy." Though those of us in writing centers know how much emotional labor our tutors do, my study participants still clearly felt that discussions about the emotions related to their writing were something that set graduate tutor and GWS consultations apart.

NAVIGATING THE THESIS/DISSERTATION PROCESS

My study participants singled out thesis/dissertation writing from other graduate-level writing and saw it as an entire process to navigate. They wanted someone to preview and offer advice about the steps involved in it. There was overwhelming agreement that this help should come from someone who has already completed a graduate degree. Eleven of the eighteen survey participants listed "completed dissertation" as a desired GWS qualification, and nine listed "a Ph.D." as one. Others listed "expertise in dissertation writing, completion, defense," "advanced degree and experience," and "speaking from experience." All five interviewees mentioned experience with the process, a completed degree, or the Ph.D. as a necessary GWS qualification. Participant 1 mentioned how helpful

it was to work with someone who has "achieved that milestone" and who can provide "that almost life-stage perspective on it." Participant 5 said, "the steps of a doctoral program, […] [the discussion] really is made better by having somebody who's gone through that process guide students."

Publishing

Several study participants wanted help with publishing journal articles, understanding the peer review process, and transforming course papers into articles. This was an area of interest for the majority of the writers. Though only four survey participants listed "publishing" as their primary reason for consulting with me, eleven listed "expertise in publishing" as a qualification for a GWS. Two also listed "experience/expertise in publishing articles" as a way that a GWS could provide support beyond a peer-to-peer consultation. Participant 2 felt this was particularly important and said, "It's that level of professionalism, reliability, and then knowing about conferences and things and knowing about publishing. That's also something that some [graduate tutors] would know about and some wouldn't." For many participants, meeting with a GWS who had already published academic articles was preferable to discussing a manuscript or the publishing process with a graduate tutor who may or may not have had that experience.

APPLYING FOR FUNDING

Students who came to the GWS for help with grants and/or fellowship/scholarship applications felt that this staff member was best situated to provide support. Eight survey participants listed "experience with grants/fellowships" as a qualification for a GWS, and one mentioned "expertise in personal essays and scholarship essays" as a way that a GWS could support writers beyond a graduate consultation. Participant 1, who came to me to work on a National Science Foundation application, mentioned "funding writing" as a graduate writing struggle and "experience with funding writing and grant applications" as an important qualification for a GWS. She went even further, expecting this person to have "done that kind of writing successfully," meaning that "they've written a grant that's been approved." Though we did not discuss the particular grants I had been awarded, she still seemed reassured by the fact that, like her, I had also been through the funding application process.

HUNTING FOR JOBS

Another important concern for participants was the job hunt, though, interestingly, none distinguished between academic and non-academic jobs. Like the thesis/dissertation, this is a high-stakes type of writing that involves both specific documents (cover letters, resumes, teaching/research statements) and a process to navigate.

On the survey, eight participants listed "experience with job materials" as a qualification for a GWS, and five mentioned "insight into the job hunt, job applications, and cover letters" as a way that a GWS could provide support beyond a peer consultation. Participant 3 mentioned "applying for jobs, cover letters, sort of best practices for professional sort of writing standards" as writing support that a GWS could give. Participant 4 mentioned the job process in a different context. He saw that the GWS held a professional position as "proof" of credibility. Ultimately, job application materials and the job process provided an important reason that graduate writers might seek help from a GWS, rather than from a graduate tutor.

DISCUSSION

Writers believe the experience and expertise of a GWS to be useful. These writers feel that they benefit from working with someone who has already gone through the thesis/dissertation process and who has experience hunting for jobs, applying for grants, and publishing. On the other hand, graduate writers feel that they benefit from working with a graduate tutor differently. Writers can gain perspective from a reader outside of their field, get another set of eyes on their work, and receive support with specific drafts of their documents. Because of these differences in perception, websites and promotional materials should distinguish between GWS and graduate tutor services. Student staff should also be trained on the different types of services offered by a GWS and when and how to refer writers to this staff member.

It is important to recognize the limitations of my small, preliminary study, which was not designed to draw overarching conclusions about graduate-level writing support. Future projects on a GWS could include a larger sample size, triangulation of data, and open-ended questions that do not force writers to find and state differences between a GWS and a tutor. Additionally, research should include the many GWSs who hold a master's degree rather than a doctorate. Lastly, in the daily work of our centers, many tutors also perform roles similar to a guide, a mentor, or a coach and are very well placed to discuss the writing process with clients. Further research may help us ascertain whether graduate writers beyond my study associate these roles and skills more with a GWS than with a tutor and, if so, why.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, a graduate tutor and a GWS both fill important roles in a writing center. The peer-to-peer perspective provided by tutors can build rapport and trust with clients because these staff are encountering many of the same writing-related expectations, issues, and emotions as the writers they are working with. A GWS,

on the other hand, adds value by acting as a mentor, rather than a peer, and by drawing upon a wide array of previous experiences. I recognize that it might not be practical or financially feasible to employ a GWS in many centers; however, my study suggests that this position offers different services to clients. A GWS-graduate tutor partnership can work to ensure that graduate writers receive the robust and holistic writing support they need to truly succeed in their programs.

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