

Fostering a Sense of Belonging in a Graduate Writing Center

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Graduate students, like their undergraduate counterparts, often struggle with writing and benefit from support and guidance (Okuda and Anderson 392). They need to adapt to the demands of graduate studies as they transition from consumers to producers of knowledge while juggling study, work, family, and other commitments. Heather Vorhies notes that as graduate student enrollment at universities has grown, “writing centers are called to aid and adapt for this underserved population” (6).



Models for providing support vary, and some institutions have campus-wide centers that provide cross-campus support to all graduate and undergraduate students whereas others have graduate writing centers that support graduate students across a range of disciplines. Graduate writing centers are positioned to help writers adjust to the rigors of graduate-level writing compared to campus-wide centers that often focus on the needs of undergraduate writers. Another approach is that of discipline-specific centers—stand-alone centers connected with a specific academic unit—that only support students in a specific discipline. At the graduate level, a discipline-specific graduate center approach may benefit writers and programs as such centers are connected to a specific academic unit. For example, tutors in the same discipline as the writers they support can draw on their familiarity with discourse in the genre and their knowledge of courses, assignments, and instructor expectations. Importantly, discipline-specific centers may also help foster a sense of belonging and community.

At Thompson Rivers University the Graduate Student Success Centre (Success Centre), a stand-alone writing center specifically created for graduate students in education, opened in September 2018 at my institution, which is primarily an undergraduate teaching-focused university in Canada. Our student enrollment in the graduate certificate and Master of Education programs has

tripled over the past several years to approximately 400 students.

U and graduate international students at many institutions (Anderson 172). Supporting the distinct needs of international students, primarily multilingual graduate writers (MGWs), as they adapt to life and study in a new context, presents challenges and opportunities. For these reasons, graduate education faculty advocated for discipline-specific writing support for graduate students in education programs. Faculty felt that this approach could support the growing number of MGWs as well as other writers in their programs, create a sense of belonging, and provide meaningful student employment opportunities. As a result, the Success Centre was approved in July 2018 and opened less than two months later. The Centre hires graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) who are senior students in the Master of Education program to support writers, deliver workshops, and provide opportunities for students to connect through various events. I will highlight some of the challenges, opportunities, and initiatives we experienced with our Centre and then explain how our supports have incrementally worked to cultivate a sense of belonging for students.

GETTING STARTED

The transition to graduate studies is challenging for many, and at the graduate level, students are often assumed to be strong writers (Brooks-Gillies et al. 2). Accordingly, Laura Micciche notes that it is not common to teach writing to graduate students (W47). For MGWs, the lack of writing instruction can result in challenges when they work on completing writing assignments. MGWs need support with writing in aspects such as use of language, vocabulary, and genre knowledge as they develop their disciplinary expertise (Phillips 41). MGWs need time and support to adapt to new ways of expressing learning and knowledge in nuanced discipline-specific language. Talinn Phillips argues that writing centers need to adapt and move toward offering supports that are more disciplinarily-informed (41). Given the demands of graduate-level writing, discipline-specific support may be of particular benefit for MGWs as they adapt to graduate discourse in a new context.

Helping writers feel comfortable and establishing a trusting relationship is also critical: writers need to feel confident and at ease in writing center interactions. Beyond a center's physical attributes such as furniture and décor, a welcoming space should

be inclusive. To this end, it may be helpful to have tutors who reflect the diversity of writers they support. In one graduate writing center, Chuck Radke comments that the tutors drive its success as they “share many demographic and psychological characteristics of the students they serve” (15). MGWs may feel a closer connection with a tutor from a similar cultural and linguistic background.

With less than two months to plan and open the Success Centre, a key initial focus was hiring GTAs and helping them gain the skills and confidence to provide one-to-one tutorial writing support. Approximately half of the writers in our graduate programs in education take courses on campus (primarily MGWs), and about half complete coursework online (primarily domestic students who are working professionals). Since opening, over 90% of writers accessing support and attending events have been MGWs. With the new discipline-specific approach in a stand-alone center for graduate students in education, it was unclear how much demand for support there might be. However, we had 251 appointments in our first semester and 890 appointments during the first year. After our inaugural year, we have had 700-1100 appointments each year. Our high number of appointments for a small student body has been a clear indication of writers’ desire for support, confidence in tutors’ ability to help writers, and faculty buy-in and support of the Centre. Each semester, we typically hire three to six GTAs, most of whom are MGWs and who reflect the diversity of writers in the programs in aspects such as country of origin. In addition to providing writing support, we provide workshops, writing resources, support events for specific courses, and social opportunities for writers.

In the Success Centre, orientation and training for our GTAs includes a focus on creating a welcoming and safe space for writers and building a sense of belonging. We use strategies and approaches focused on creating a welcoming, inclusive, and open space for dialogue that provide our tutors with both the skills and confidence to support students. For example, the team watches and discusses videos such as *Writing Across Borders* (Robertson) to understand the challenges multilingual writers face, discusses scholarship on writing centers as welcoming spaces, and brainstorms approaches to help engage students and cultivate a sense of belonging. Our discussions provide an opportunity for the GTAs to reflect on their experience and observations as tutors, understand the multidimensional challenges MGWs face, and consider strategies and ideas. Additionally, the GTAs, through

writing consultations and interactions with writers, gain critical insight into how the Centre can serve writers. The GTAs' input

about their observations has culminated into actions that have shaped the Centre, including offering various initiatives and opportunities that resonate with writers.

FOSTERING A SENSE OF BELONGING

Discipline-specific graduate writing centers can help cultivate a sense of belonging; however, there is limited discussion of this aspect of graduate writing centers in the literature. For MGWs, the challenges in adapting to graduate studies are multifaceted and include socio-cultural adjustment to a new academic context (Cheng et al. 66). On campus, one's sense of belonging includes a feeling of being cared about, respected, accepted, and valued, as well as feeling socially supported and connected (Strayhorn 3). Belongingness may be particularly important for MGWs as they transition to living and studying in a new context. Candace Cooper argues, "Building community within a writing center should be a priority for all writing centers, particularly new/emerging writing centers" (1-2). Community building is important for both tutors and writers, and for MGWs, feeling that they belong and are supported and welcomed may help them adapt and be successful. Discipline-specific centers can be a natural space for writers to gather and connect; even so, cultivating a sense of belonging needs to be intentional. Activities, such as writing center social events and workshops, can help graduate writers feel a sense of community if opportunities for socializing are part of the programming (Summers 208). Graduate students are typically connected to a specific department, and unlike undergraduate centers with broader campus-wide support mandates, our discipline-specific writing center provides a natural hub for writers to connect with peers, GTAs, and faculty.

Our events and workshops through the Success Centre, both academic and social, have been effective in drawing in writers to attend and connect with others. We first offered a small number of workshops in winter 2019, our second semester of operation, and then in fall 2019, increased these to include both academic workshops and other more social opportunities for students to connect. Our GTAs both organize and deliver our workshops as well as lead social events, and our workshops on topics such as writing in APA style and developing thesis statements have been well-attended with participation frequently exceeding forty attendees. Our GTAs' leadership may benefit writer engagement as GTAs are also peers in their programs. The GTAs promote

workshops and events through announcements and class visits, and brainstorm ideas for methods to best engage attendees. For example, GTAs now host our first event each semester, a welcome/tips for academic success, and we offer food, time for writers to interact and mingle, and games. Over fifty writers attended a welcome/tips for academic success event in September 2022. Events are also an opportunity for writers to meet and get to know the GTAs in a non-evaluative and welcoming environment. If an event is purely social, writers who are busy with work, family, and other commitments may not attend; however, when combined with a purposeful event they feel is of value, they are more likely to come. Writers “vote with their feet” in attending events which are optional, and many writers have attended multiple events.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, attendance at events dipped, in part as our support and events were all online. After on-campus activities resumed in September 2021, attendance rebounded and grew to record participation. Part of the success may be attributed to a few factors: instructor buy-in and their promotion of events, refreshments/food, prizes, games, and time for social interaction. Notably, our experience is that events can be held economically, and when we have offered light refreshments such as a slice of pizza or games (with small prizes), attendance has increased. By combining academic events with social opportunities, we have observed that attendees, many of whom have relocated to study internationally, often linger and take advantage of the opportunity to connect with others. In turn, they may also be more confident and willing to book appointments or access other supports. Event topics and their timing have been critical, and we sequence these in careful order starting with the broadest needs, such as how to write references and cite sources. Lastly, we try to schedule workshops at times that align with gaps in on-campus course schedules. As a result, writers can often simply head to the event prior to or after class when they are already on campus.

SUCCESSFUL INITIATIVES

In the Success Centre, three approaches have been effective in engaging writers: course-specific support events, conversation circles, and events not typically associated with writing centers such as career workshops. First, we have offered course-specific capstone support events which have been well-attended. Capstone support events, typically three hours long, bring writers together as a community of learners using a binge-writing

approach at which students can access support multiple times during the event. At these events, where food and refreshments are served, between ten to fifteen writers who are at the final stage of their program come for support to help finish their

project. During these events, writers can receive writing support two to three times, and between consultations, they work on their writing, which is often accomplished collaboratively with peers. Additional benefits for our course-specific events are that instructors provide GTAs with guidance and suggestions for students to focus on. This course-specific approach also helps us manage overall demand by clustering support for a specific course on one day. Tutors also benefit from working with multiple writers on a similar assignment, and writers feel less lonely in working through major assignments and meeting deadlines.

Secondly, our weekly GTA-facilitated conversation circles focus less on academic topics and instead on adjusting to life and study in a new context, or opportunities and resources on campus. With snacks and games, coupled with some time on topics such as thesis statements or citations, conversation circles provide space for writers to connect. Attendance at the conversation circles is typically between five to ten writers, except during the pandemic when attendance was lower for the online meetings. Additionally, writers bring a variety of questions and concerns, many unrelated to academic needs, and often conversations focus on simply adjusting to living and studying in Canada. Because writers appreciate these opportunities, they often return multiple times.

Lastly, some of our other non-academic initiatives have been well-attended. These initiatives may help position the Success Centre as a hub for graduate-student interactions and learning beyond coursework and assignments. For example, we have offered events on topics not typically associated with writing centers such workshops on careers and wellness, and career-focused workshops are particularly popular. Further, we have also offered some seasonal or holiday events (sometimes combined with workshops) as well as ones on baking and nature walks to provide opportunity for students to interact more informally. In summary, these distinct approaches create space for students to interact with others in meaningful ways and develop relationships that augment the heart of our mission of providing writing support.

Our activities and initiatives are constantly evaluated. Our weekly GTA meetings provide opportunities for the team to assess what is working and how we can best engage writers. We can often make changes quickly if initiatives do not work and this ability to

pivot is critical. Lastly, the GTAs, students themselves, are our “ears on the ground” and frequently hear suggestions on things the center can do or change. The GTA voice is critical in helping the center both support writers and create a sense of belonging.

The center cannot address all the challenges writers face, but it may help them feel connected to others.

LESSONS LEARNED AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Developing a clear vision for our Success Centre, avoiding over-promising, and taking incremental steps toward our goals have helped make tasks manageable. Embedded in nearly all aspects of our success have been the GTAs, mostly MGWs, having the voice to help shape the Centre, and their insight in aspects such as events and social opportunities has been critical. Furthermore, combining academic events with social opportunities, hosting a range of non-academic opportunities, and being intentional in identifying ways for writers to connect with peers have helped the Centre cultivate a sense of belonging.

The shift to online delivery and support during the COVID-19 pandemic likely led to writers feeling less connected with peers, faculty, and the institution. However, a benefit of the switch to the online modality provided insight into how the Centre can be more flexible and inclusive of all writers. Our experience is that events that bring writers together provide opportunities for them to feel a stronger sense of belonging, and offering food, games, and door prizes have been effective. More importantly, students have found it valuable to connect through our varied opportunities that include combined workshops/social events, special events, and conversation circles. Though we have faced the significant challenges of starting up in a condensed timeline, having to pivot to online support in our second year, and supporting a rapidly growing number of writers, primarily MGWs, with limited resources, the Success Centre has filled a gap in providing writers with both writing support and opportunities to connect with others. In the future, the Centre will continue to evolve and require continual rethinking about how to provide meaningful academic writing support while simultaneously fostering a sense of belonging.



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