

Collaborating to Support Graduate Student Writers: Working beyond Disciplinary and Institutional Silos

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Simpson, Steve, Nigel A. Caplan, Michelle Cox, and Talinn Phillips, editors. *Supporting Graduate Student Writers: Research, Curriculum, and Program Design*. U of Michigan P, 2016. 320 pages.

It is rare that an edited volume provides an overview of a field, brings together scholars from multiple disciplines, and offers a range of models for programs to consider. *Supporting Graduate Student Writers* does all of these. This volume gives us perhaps the richest description we have to date of the state of graduate communications support. The book is notable in bringing together scholars working in composition, language acquisition studies, linguistics, and English for academic purposes—fields that have worked on similar issues, but which have not always communicated amongst themselves. Likewise, it brings together a variety of methodologies, including quantitative methods, which have been historically neglected, at least in the field of composition (Johanek 9). Contributors hail from a wide range of institutions as well as a handful of countries outside the US. The publication of this book and the formation in 2014 of the Consortium on Graduate Communication (CGC) by editors Michelle Cox and Nigel Caplan attest to the need for this work and the tremendous scholarly energy around it.

Part of the reason that graduate writing has been undertheorized and graduate writers underserved is that university writing programs grew up around undergraduate and especially first-year writers. As editor Steve Simpson points out, the field of composition is a relative latecomer to a discussion that has been advanced primarily by scholars in language acquisition studies, English for academic purposes, and linguistics (3–4)—though there have been calls for graduate writing instruction scattered across

other fields for decades (Bloom; Caffarella and Barnett; Delyser; Golding and Mascaro; Rose and McClafferty; Torrance, Thomas, and Robinson). Though the word “writing” appears in the title, the book actually focuses on communication more broadly.

Supporting Graduate Student Writers is organized into three sections. Part 1, “Graduate Writing Support: What Do We Know? What Do We Need to Know?” gives a useful overview of the state of graduate communication instruction. The section’s first two chapters work to quantify some of what we know about graduate writing and communications support. Recognizing the need for a systematic overview of the state of graduate communications support, in chapter 1 Caplan and Cox survey the membership of the fledgling CGC in 2014, asking questions about the kinds of communication support available on their campuses. They find that 81.2% of respondents report the availability of writing classes, 87.7% report tutoring services, and 72.1% report workshops, which suggests that the preponderance of universities (at least in the US) offer some kind of assistance (28). The most startling finding was the consistently lower levels of writing support for master’s students. This is notable because master’s degrees now constitute the majority of US graduate degrees, comprising 83% of all graduate degrees conferred in the US 2015–16 (Okahana and Zhou 3).

In chapter 2, Paul M. Rogers, Terry Myers Zawacki, and Sarah E. Baker conduct a mixed methods study to try to capture differences in the “attitudes, beliefs, and experiences” (53) of dissertation writers and advisors at a single North American research university. Their survey was completed by 343 students, and results are broken out by first language (L1) and additional language (AL) students. (For consistency, I will use “additional language,” though the book’s contributors use a variety of terms.) Interestingly, these groups rated the difficulty of elements of the dissertation differently, and AL students rated *all* elements of the dissertation as more difficult. Other key survey findings were that both L1 and AL students listed conversations with their advisors as the most helpful support. Overall, the interviews found faculty frustration with students’ inability to conceptualize, theorize, and generate appropriate research projects, while students expressed desire for more concrete instruction and explication. This is a substantial project, and I found myself wishing for a more systematic treatment of the results of the interviews as well as an appendix listing the questions. Some questions received significant discussion while others that interested me, such as “the degree to which [advisors] think it is their responsibility to work with their advisees on their writing” (61), received short shrift. It would have been interesting to see the results consistently broken out by disciplines as well.

The third and fourth chapters in the first section deal with the important affective and identity dimension of graduate-level communications. In chapter 3, Mary Jane Curry writes about the “disciplinary enculturation and academic identity formation” (78) that she rightly argues is more consequential to disciplinary success than the distinction between L1 and AL students that so often determines the instructional resources allocated to these groups. She makes the important point that AL status is often positioned as a *de facto* deficiency—a view that elides the cognitive and perspectival benefits associated with multilingualism and multiculturalism and that assumes that “fixing” grammar will “fix” academic writing. Curry argues that we need to consider not only the many genres involved in graduate education but also the shifting subject positions of students, including the large numbers of students entering graduate study from professions outside of academia.

In chapter 4, Christine Casanave echoes Curry in asserting that successful dissertation completion is about more than executing a writing project. Recalling the high rates of doctoral attrition in the English-dominant world (40–60%), she points out that while “writing problems” are reasonably well accounted for in the literature, challenges related to advising and student life issues are less discussed (98). She raises the question of how much advisors need to know about the nonwriting factors at play in a student’s progress and argues convincingly that knowing the pertinent details of a student’s struggles can make it possible to find solutions, make referrals, and even advise a student to discontinue their studies.

Part 2 covers “Issues in Graduate Program and Curriculum Design.” Chapter 6 by Karyn E. Mallett, Jennifer Haan, and Anna Sophia Habib and chapter 7 by Katya Fairbanks and Shamini Dias address the important work of offering meaningful communications support to multilingual students, particularly those from international backgrounds. This is a resonant issue in an era where public universities have increasingly turned to international recruitment to bolster dwindling state education allocations *and* where xenophobic immigration policy emanates from the White House. These articles point out that AL students are often offered instruction and L1 students are not under the false assumption that only the former need it. As an alternative, Mallett et al. emphasize creating ways to integrate L1/AL instruction and creating multiple ways for students to demonstrate language competence, in part by building a culture that recognizes the value of multilingualism. Looking in more detail at a specific under represented population, chapter 8 gives useful profiles of three institutions that serve majority Latinx students. In their recommendations, the chapter’s authors note the importance of mentoring and individualized instruction to under-

served students—needs that these programs meet through a wide variety of ways including offering online, phone, and Skype consultations.

In chapter 7, Talinn Phillips offers both a pedagogical and an “organizational culture” rationale for establishing a separate graduate writing center (168), noting that the needs of graduate writers are not identical to those of undergraduates and that graduate students are well served by extended meeting times and the ability to meet with a single tutor. Christine Jensen Sundstrom ends the section with a chapter that provides a “cautionary tale” about the demise of a writing program at the University of Kansas. I read this account with interest because I had contacted Sundstrom after the publication of her 2014 *Composition Forum* program profile to express admiration for her program’s multidisciplinary approach, only to learn with dismay that the program was being shuttered. Despite strong buy-in from disciplinary faculty and demonstrated higher completion rates among program participants, the program was defunded when its administrative parent unit was divided. Sundstrom traces the many obstacles to institutionalizing support for graduate communications and concludes that embedding communications support at both the institutional and the program level may offer greater stability.

Part 3, “Program Profiles,” offers portraits of five programs that illustrate the diverse ways that universities are addressing the need for graduate communications support. The opportunity to see where and how a wide variety of institutions locate communications support will make this section particularly interesting to WPAs. For instance, Jane Freeman reports that the University of Toronto provides services through its Office of English Language and Writing Support (ELWS), housed in the School of Graduate Studies, while Sue Starfield and Pamela Mort talk about the Learning Center (LC) at the University of New South Wales, which provides services to the entire university community. At Chalmers University in Sweden, profiled by Magnus Gustafsson, Andreas Eriksson, and Anna Karlsson, Communications courses are created by the Division for Language and Communication (DLC) and are then purchased by individual programs within the university. Meanwhile, James Tierney profiles the Yale English Language Program, which is housed in the Yale Center for Teaching and Learning.

The range and configuration of services in the programs profiled will also interest program administrators, who often have to make difficult decisions about where to allocate limited resources. Many of the programs profiled report using data collection to test and adjust their offerings and several offer evidence of efficacy, which seems like a prudent move in an era of budget cutting. These programs offer a wide variety of courses—from

term long classes to the University of Toronto's short, "modular" courses in oral and writing skills for both L1 and AL students. The shorter structure, they note, makes it possible to offer courses more frequently and to reach more students. Many of the programs also offer workshops, boot camps, and individual consultation.

Collaboration between communications programs and disciplinary units is another important theme in this section. The ELWS at University of Toronto serves as a resource for the faculty of many disciplines as well as a locus for faculty professional development. Yale's English Language Program has created large-scale partnerships with the schools of management and law. Tierney makes the important observation that in these kinds of consulting relationships, it is important for the learning to flow in both directions. Throughout the volume contributors note that cross-campus collaborations not only serve students, but also generate buy-in and support for writing and communications, support that serves as a protective factor against administrative overhauls.

This volume presents an encouraging view of an emerging area of academic practice and scholarship and makes several important interventions—the first of which is simply creating a space for scholars from multiple disciplines to speak to their shared issues. The book also helpfully and forcefully gives the lie to the common misperception that AL learners are "problem" writers and speakers who require remedial instruction while L1 students require no instruction in academic discourse whatsoever. The book also gives compelling examples of collaboration between communications units and disciplinary units that remind us how important it is for people who support graduate communications to educate colleagues and administrators about the fact that oral and literate practices are not simply icing on the academic cake, but rather are key ingredients.

At the same time, the volume doesn't shy away from the difficulties facing the field, one of which is the challenge of occupying a space that is still stubbornly regarded as "remedial" by some faculty. Because graduate education tends to be decentralized, another significant theme is the challenge of working with and around organizational and funding silos. Additionally, programs like many of those described in the book that are characterized by having a few full-time faculty (who may or may not be tenurable) and a plethora of teaching assistants, lecturers, and adjuncts, may be vulnerable simply because they have few permanent members with access to institutional decision making. Further, they offer a sobering reminder of how few family wage jobs await graduates in these fields. While the vexed question of academic labor lies outside the scope of this book, it should not

be far from the consideration of anyone who works in, or trains graduate students to work in, these fields.

Supporting Graduate Student Writers should be on the reading list of every WPA who works in graduate education or who is looking to expand their programs to serve graduate students. The volume is useful in informing our understanding of graduate communications pedagogy and illustrating the various ways that services and courses can be configured. Also importantly, the book provides fodder for those who are trying—sometimes against significant pushback—to make the case on their own campuses that graduate students should not “always already know how to write.” This is an important book in its own right and in light of the conversations that it has generated. The fact that the Consortium on Graduate Communication now convenes an annual conference and supports an active listserv that includes many WPAs ensures that *Supporting Graduate Student Writers* remains, in the best sense, a work in progress.

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