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## Multidisciplinary Staffing in a Graduate Writing Center: Making Writing Labor Visible, Valued, and Shared

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### Cover Page Footnote

We are grateful to two anonymous reviewers for WCJ for their generous readings and substantive contributions to this essay.

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**Abstract** Writing studies and writing center scholars have recently focused much-needed attention on how graduate student writers are taught, mentored, and supported. This scholarship also points to a persistent and stubborn conundrum: Graduate students must write their way into disciplinary belonging, yet most advisors lack a language for, or even awareness of, the specialized practices and tacit expectations shaping written discourse in their fields. While graduate student-serving writing centers help fill this writing-support gap, a reliance on English and humanities graduate students for staff reproduces a status quo in which the genre awareness and rhetorical vocabulary needed to mentor advanced academic writers are neither widely distributed nor recognized and valued. This essay offers the counterexample of a graduate writing center whose consultants hail primarily from master's and doctoral programs in the sciences and social sciences. Using feminist social reproduction theory to examine this case study of one graduate writing center, the authors explore how multidisciplinary staffing resists the enclaving of writing process and rhetorical knowledge and points to a future in which the responsibility for mentoring graduate student writers is visible, valued, and shared.

**Keywords** graduate writing centers, advanced academic writing, social reproduction theory, multidisciplinary staffing

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We start this essay with the quandary confounding graduate student writers and their advisors. Graduate students, Mary Jane Curry (2016) stresses, rely on writing as the primary “means of developing and displaying an identity as a scholar, researcher, or other professional” (p. 80). Yet graduate students struggle to compose these identities under advisors who, Shannon Madden (2020) observes, “assume too much about students’ capabilities coming into their graduate programs” and so “communicate too little about the discursive practices that matter in particular disciplinary spaces” (p. 9). Even if an advisor recognizes the mounting difficulty and stakes for these writers, few faculty possess a meta-communicative language to acquaint advisees with the moves that matter. “Vague or abstract advice” from committee members, report Paul Rogers, Terry Myers Zawacki, and Sarah Baker (2016), is thus a chief complaint of dissertation-stage graduate students (p. 65).

From the graduate writing center at our midsize public research university, we have witnessed these divides between student knowledge and faculty expectation, between student needs and advisors’ (limited or nonexistent) meta-communicative understandings. There is, to give an extreme case, the faculty member in a two-year graduate health sciences program who regularly calls on the campus center for academic integrity to adjudicate first-semester graduate students’ APA citation errors. Another faculty member—in a professional program whose diverse students seek master’s degrees after a decade or more in the field—similarly insists that teaching advanced academic genres and citation practices is “not my job.” In these examples we find the “stubbornly persistent view,” as Steve Simpson (2016) writes, “that graduate students should have learned how to write earlier in their education, despite the fact that the genres [and citation systems] they encounter in graduate school might be far different from any they have previously experienced” (p. 2; see also Hjortshoj, 2019, pp. 4–6).

As for the many faculty on our campus who do see providing feedback as part of their job, their language for responding to a draft often begins and ends with an admonishment to “clean up” “choppy sentences” for better “flow.”

Or they exhaust themselves with sentence-by-sentence copyedits. One L2 (second-language) doctoral candidate described feeling road-blocked after more than four years of program success because their advisor’s big-picture encouragement and advice for an early-stage dissertation chapter was accompanied by scores of Track Changes corrections punctuated by frustrated outbursts such as *You need to learn English*, *You need a professional editor*, and *Maybe this paper isn’t going to happen*.

An obvious and compassionate remedy would be to equip faculty across graduate programs with the necessary “linguistic and rhetorical vocabulary” (Paré, 2011, p. 66) to “teach about communication in their (sub)disciplines” (Curry, 2016, p. 92). Writing in the disciplines (WID) programs that focus on coaching undergraduate instructors in stage-appropriate response and multilingual rhetorical awareness could be more intentionally extended to include graduate education and those advisors, particularly in STEMM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medicine), who may not teach in classrooms at all. The expansion of graduate-level writing support is a central aim of such recent collections as *Supporting Graduate Student Writers* (Simpson et al., 2016), *Re/Writing the Center* (Lawrence & Myers Zawacki, 2019), and *Learning from the Lived Experiences of Graduate Student Writers* (Madden et al., 2020). Building on a rich body of graduate student-focused literature from scholars in second-language writing studies (e.g., Casanave & Li, 2008; Swales & Feak, 2012; Tardy, 2009), contributors to these collections call for whole-campus approaches to advanced academic writing support that could, Simpson (2016) argues, “expand” graduate writing specialists’ “sphere of influence” (p. 11). But such expansion is thwarted by disciplinary divides, the ghettoization of writing instruction, and, in an era of austerity budgeting, diminishing resources. Consequently, critical insights remain enclaved in writing and second-language writing studies.

Reinforcing this status quo of restricted access to rhetorical training is the reliance of graduate writing centers for their staffing on English and humanities graduate programs. In Sarah Summers’s (2016) survey of

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graduate-serving writing centers, for example, 86% of respondents reported that their staff come primarily or exclusively from English (p. 58). Summers’s survey results make no mention of peer tutors or consultants drawn from STEM fields. The websites of state university graduate-serving writing centers that are similarly sized and situated as ours—Albany, Buffalo, Connecticut, Delaware, New Hampshire, Stony Brook, and Rhode Island—suggest that most continue to be staffed predominantly or entirely by English graduate students. Reasons for relying on students from English and similar programs may seem self-evident (given the career-development interests of these students) or inevitable (when consultant positions are funded through English graduate teaching assistantships). But this reliance also mirrors and perpetuates that gap between graduate advisors who need but lack rhetorical and writing process knowledge and the writing specialists who hold but have limited avenues for sharing that knowledge. The English graduate students on whom the vast majority of graduate writing centers rely may receive direct and necessary training in genres, rhetorical situations, and expectations outside their own fields. Their training may further engage them in an understanding and critique of what Flores and Rosa term the “raciolinguistic ideologies” through which ruling white language norms are reinforced (2015, p. 151). At the very same time, such training and day-to-day practice naturalize for this next generation of highly credentialed scholars, researchers, and professionals the status quo in which writing expertise and responsibility are housed in English and writing studies departments alone and in which all others are cast as uninvested in acquiring and incapable of contributing to rhetorical knowledge.

We approach this seemingly intractable state of affairs from an atypical vantage point: a graduate writing center whose consultants hail primarily not from English and the humanities but from the sciences and social sciences. Since our graduate writing center first opened in January 2016, 41% of our peer consultants have come from STEM fields and 37% from the social sciences. This staffing is, at first glance, a matter of necessity given that

our university has only a handful of two-year humanities graduate programs. Yet as we pass our fifth-year anniversary, we have also come to identify multidisciplinary staffing as a foundational commitment, just as important to how we approach new consultant recruitment as gender identification, race, dis/ability, multilingualism, and other key identity markers.

This commitment to multidisciplinary staffing is only tangentially concerned with the long-running discussion in writing center scholarship about specialist versus generalist tutors. With Sue Dinitz & Susanmarie Harrington (2014) we have found that consultants who are experienced and self-aware writers in their specialties bring an “expert intuition” (p. 94) into working with students across fields. Yet we value multidisciplinary staffing not only because consultants bring into the writing center their varied and rich disciplinary experiences. We also prize multidisciplinary staffing because these students carry back to their fields and professions, during and beyond their graduate educations, an ethos of shared responsibility for mentoring advanced academic writers plus the tools—that meta-communicative understanding—to enact such responsibility. Multidisciplinary staffing in graduate-serving writing centers thus resists enclaving rhetorical and writing process knowledge; it points to a future in which the responsibility for mentoring graduate student writers becomes visible, valued, and shared.

Our aims in this essay, then, are twofold. We will examine the experience and contributions of disciplinary diversity in one graduate writing center through a series of fifth-anniversary self-study interviews between us—former graduate writing consultants and alumnae of programs in biology, natural resources, plant and soil science, psychological sciences, and public administration—and Nancy, our graduate writing center’s inaugural director whose specialties include rhetoric, composition, and writing centers. These conversations form a first step in our anniversary effort to—adopting Ann Berthoff’s (1971) Coleridge-inspired adage—“know our knowledge” (p. 241). The interviews, conducted and recorded in person and over Zoom during the summer and fall of 2019, focused on three questions: *What motivated*

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and made it possible for you to join the graduate writing center staff? What experiences, commitments, and identities did you bring to this work? What did you contribute to, gain from, and carry with you beyond this writing center? At the time, Nancy sought to hone her new-consultant recruitment messaging (by better understanding why graduate students across disciplines would seek a writing center position on top of their considerable academic, lab, and teaching responsibilities); expand and invigorate consultant education (by honoring in institutional memory past consultants' commitments and contributions); and assist the graduate college in advocating for the graduate writing center's value (including its value in expanding consultants' postgraduate career opportunities). Knowing our knowledge has further proved essential to navigating a near future that includes a transition to a new director and ongoing defense against pandemic-era attempts to cheapen how consultants are recruited, trained, and paid.

Concomitantly, we want to place our local knowledge, values, and near-future challenges within a larger societal conflict over whether essential caretaking and provisioning labor is to be recognized and supported—a conflict with consequences for all writing centers, especially those whose budgets are annually cobbled together from multiple and temporary funding sources. Here, we turn to feminist social reproduction theory (SRT). SRT feminists seek to make visible daily social reproductive—“people-making” or “life-making”—labor (Arruzza et al., 2019, pp. 67–69; Bhattacharya, 2020). Capitalism depends on this labor for the daily and generational replenishment of its workforce but also disavows its importance, offloading care and provisioning work onto women, the family, low-waged and undocumented workers, and bootstrapping individuals (Arruzza et al., 2019, pp. 70–72; Bhattacharya, 2017b, pp. 90–91). By disappearing caretaking and provisioning labor or naturalizing it as low-wage or unwaged “women’s work,” capitalism safeguards the conditions for its own reproduction: accumulation dependent on human labor and environmental resources while also evading responsibility to nurture and replenish both. Classical Marxist approaches to political

economy (e.g., Chernomas & Baragar, 2011) unwittingly participate in this disappearing act by categorizing care and service work, whether waged or unwaged, as outside of and inconsequential to the circuit of wealth creation. SRT corrects a myopic focus on exploitation at points of production alone by opening wide the door to the “hidden abode” (Marx, 1992, p. 279) of social reproduction. SRT feminists *literally* flesh out a Marxist understanding of exploitation and interlocking oppression by revealing the laboring bodies and essential activities of caregivers and provisioners on which the global capitalist system pivots and without which no society could function.

For all writing professionals, SRT feminism can provide a critical purchase on the contradictory circumstances in which academic institutions and their administrators simultaneously insist on writing’s importance and deny its labor and costs: one expression of the contradiction that pervades capitalist social relations. More specifically, through SRT, we can return to the question of why the labors of graduate writing and mentoring are persistently disavowed—the underprovisioning of graduate student writers and their advisors continually reproduced despite recognition of unmet student need, the efforts of WID programming, and the popularity of competitions like the University of Queensland’s widely exported Three-Minute Thesis. The burgeoning field of graduate communications, as Paula Gillespie writes (2018, p. 6), can indeed help writing professionals marshal arguments and examples to win the support of this or that dean. Yet the persuasive task remains Sisyphean as the rhetorical situation is not only complicated by rapid administrative turnover and fluctuating institutional priorities but also overdetermined by that tenacious *up-to-the-individual, do-it-yourself* logic needed to justify an entire social and economic order, one that exceeds and imbues academic culture.

At the same time SRT situates the challenges of graduate writing support on this vast ideological plane, it spotlights local agency and the potential of local action, especially in combination with others. For instance, after recounting and reflecting on a successful but defunded graduate writing initiative, Gillespie



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urges graduate writing center directors to forge relationships with other “stakeholders” who include “thesis and dissertation directors” (2018, p. 6). A result: Responsibility and advocacy for this care and provisioning work is distributed beyond a single graduate writing center director. A commitment to multidisciplinary staffing can take us even further. Not only do consultants return to their programs as effective and articulate champions of graduate writing support; they also go on to become scholars, researchers, and professionals who are rhetorically trained and attuned mentors for the next generation. Through reflecting on the lessons of one graduate writing center in its first five years, we can glimpse how graduate writing centers could contribute to a more enabling and socially just reality by much more broadly distributing through multidisciplinary staffing the responsibility and the means to support graduate student writers.

Later in this essay we will turn to a case study of our graduate writing center, including the conditions that made possible its opening and, despite the challenge of COVID budget contraction, its survival (so far). First, we want to develop further the SRT framework and its sensitive—and, in pandemic conditions, urgent—applicability to graduate writing centers as potential sites for alternative social reproduction.

### “Visibilizing” Social Reproductive Labor

Social reproduction is a familiar phrase in writing center studies among scholars committed to exposing and resisting the reproduction of racist, sexist, ableist, and other forms of oppression in tutoring spaces and practices (e.g., Faison & Treviño, 2020; Geller et al., 2007; Grimm, 1999; and Grutsch-McKinney, 2013). These scholars join a broader group of critical educators who have examined education’s role in perpetuating and naturalizing the ladder of social inequality rather than providing any proverbial boost up the rungs. Writes Kirsten T. Edwards (2020), “Despite its dominant narrative as an engine of social equality, [higher education] continues to participate in social

reproduction”—and more particularly, the reproduction of social inequality (p. 282).

SRT feminists, however, distinguish between the *societal* reproduction of capitalism, including the conditions of inequity, oppression, and dispossession on which it relies, and the caretaking and provisioning activities of *social* reproduction that nurture daily life, including for purposes exceeding the motives of profit and accumulation (Bhattacharya, 2017a, p. 6; Brenner & Laslett, 1991, p. 314). When we inventory the necessary supports for life-making, writes Susan Ferguson (2020), we find “meals, clean clothes, community gardens, safe streets, hurricane relief shelters, and mended bones” as well as “more ephemeral ‘things’ such as love, attention, discipline, and knowledge that comprise the emotional and social grounding of life” (p. 123). These and many more supports, Tithi Bhattacharya explains, comprise a “basket of goods” that make it possible for a worker to “arrive at the doors of her place of work every day” (2017a, p. 2; 2017b, p. 73) whether or—much more often the case—not her employer takes any responsibility for helping her to fill and replenish her life-making basket.

The societal reproduction of capitalism is indeed entwined with the social reproductive labor that prepares and replenishes people for work and school. Yet the relationship is not top-down deterministic because, as Ferguson (2020) explains, the “‘product’” of social reproductive work “can and does talk back” and “can even make a point of prioritizing life needs over capital” (p. 128). Such was the case, as we began drafting this essay, in the strike of some 800 Frito-Lay workers in Topeka against 84-hour workweeks that deny them the physical and emotional replenishments of rest, recreation, and family time (Gibson, 2021, n.p.). Though this strike is *at* the point of production, it is *about* the right to social reproduction—to, as the 19th-century eight-hour movement held, *Eight hours for work, eighth hours for rest, and eight hours for what we will*.

Made visible by a strike like this is a capitalist society’s “reluctant dependence” on, rather than iron-grip control over, social reproduction (Bhattacharya, 2020, n.p.). Brought to light too is the clash between the imperatives of

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profit-making and the needs of people-making. Rather than assume social reproductive costs, write Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser (2019), capital tries as much as possible to cast essential resources and services as “free and infinitely available ‘gifts’” (p. 73).<sup>1</sup> Moments of crises—imminent climate catastrophe, pandemic lockdown, a work-week stretched to the breaking point—expose the lie of these limitless “gifts” of nature and human nature; revealed is the central contradiction of a system that must vampirically feed on its own conditions of possibility. That contradiction is also papered-over as capitalist discourse rhetorically inverts the relationship and, rather than acknowledge that *it* freeloards off care work, disparages as “freeloaders” all who require debt relief, rent relief, publicly funded childcare, affordable transportation, and the like. SRT feminism is conversely dedicated to “visibilizing,” as Argentinian feminist economists Luci Cavallero and Verónica Gago (2020) put it, the life-making work—unwaged and waged, within and beyond the family—that is otherwise devalued and dismissed.

An SRT approach can reorient critical education and writing center studies to discern how the social reproduction of injustice can be and is contested. How will children be educated and with what set of ideas, attitudes, and values? Who will have access to college education and with what expansive or narrow set of choices in majors? Will people who can bear children have control over their reproduction, and will people of all genders and sexual identities be recognized? Do we offer safe communities for all, including communities safe from the deadly manifestations of racist policing and climate change? Is the daily and generational work of caretaking, both inside and outside the home, visible and valued? Through these contested questions, we can categorize under the heading of “social reproduction from above” the organizations and legislatures currently pushing to ban critical race theory, deny transgender rights, and criminalize abortion seekers, helpers, and providers. These are top-down assertions of control over bodies, minds, and spaces. And in this way, we can categorize as “social reproduction from below” the Movement for Black Lives, the international

Women’s Strikes, and the Red for Ed teachers’ strike-wave; all are intersecting from-below struggles to prioritize life over capital. Likewise, advocacy for a Green New Deal, a New Deal for Higher Education, and Medicare for All would set a brake on capital accumulation so life-making needs may be prioritized. If mass protests and national policy initiatives appear far removed from writing center concerns, consider too that when the University of Nebraska’s writing center faced shutdown almost 30 years ago, its tutors (Nancy among them) organized a “write-in” and press conference to win funding restoration—a social reproductive victory (Kennedy, 1993, p. A1).

Beyond moments of crisis, an SRT framework practically enables graduate writing center practitioners to revisit their day-to-day practices and their everyday language of advocacy. For example, as a matter of social reproductive justice, we do not call our dissertation camps “bootcamps.” Feedback from (primarily women-identified and nonbinary) participants tells us that what dissertators lack isn’t military discipline but protected time from the demands of family and PIs, a break from the caretaking labor with which they are otherwise tasked. Wrote one doctoral candidate about our week-long Camp Jump-Start, “As a mom and a person with a full-time job, this helped me carve out time in my day I otherwise would not have.” Exclaimed a participant about our two-day Camp Completion: “Such a treat to not have to worry about meals/clean-up for two whole days!” *I Write. What’s Your Superpower?* is stamped on the coffee mugs we set out for camps and retreats. SRT feminism aims to bring into view the full network of care and provisioning support necessary to cultivate such a “superpower.”

To further situate SRT feminism in a graduate writing context, consider the following two passages. The first is from Bhattacharya’s (2017a) “Mapping Social Reproduction Theory”:

*Capitalism . . . acknowledges productive labor for the market as the sole form of legitimate “work” while the tremendous amount of familial or communitarian work that goes on to sustain and reproduce the worker, or more specifically, her labor*



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*power, is naturalized into nonexistence. . . . Social reproduction theory makes visible labor and work that are analytically hidden by classical economists and politically denied by policy makers. (p. 2)*

Now here is that passage recast for the context of graduate writing:

*The academy acknowledges research and scholarship as the sole form of legitimate “work” while the tremendous amount of teaching, advising, and mentoring work necessary to create, sustain, and reproduce scholars, researchers, and their grant-getting and scholarship-producing power is naturalized into nonexistence. Social reproduction theory can make visible the labor of writing and of mentoring and supporting writing that is otherwise hidden, un(der)funded, privatized, and unrewarded.*

An SRT feminist framework thus situates the neglect of graduate students’ writing development and the underprovisioning of their advisors within the much wider political-economic denial and denigration of caretaking and provisioning labor. More, by bringing the activities and supports of life-making into view and giving them priority, an SRT framework urges full public consideration of who will be engaged in this work and how it will be valued—considerations that likewise guided our anniversary conversations among former consultants who share across their disciplines a commitment to supporting their peers in the life-making work of writing.

### Conditions of Possibility

Launched with a staff of five in January 2016, this graduate writing center grew to 13 consultants by 2019. In this time we also graduated from tutoring on the fly in scattered library cubicles to a fully renovated suite of rooms dedicated to graduate student appointments plus a reception area shared with the undergraduate writing center. In 2019, consultants facilitated nearly 800 individual and group sessions, including two-part “Review and Meet” appoint-

ments for longer and technical drafts; Sunday afternoon writing retreats; and “WriteSpace,” which makes a consultation room available throughout the day for graduate students needing a quiet space for independent writing. Additional programming included multiple multiday dissertation and thesis camps and a dozen consultant-led workshops for seminars and programs. While the pandemic suspended all face-to-face activities, our total appointments in 2020 increased to more than 900. New programming included virtual writing retreats, online workshops, a podcast series for thesis and dissertation writers, and, to mitigate the obstacles of time zone differences and screen fatigue, an asynchronous “Email Feedback Letter” option.

From 2016 through 2021, a total of 46 graduate writing consultants have staffed this writing center and received College Reading and Learning Association certification. Staffing demographics over this period reflect our commitment to building a staff that represents the fuller diversity of the graduate student body; these demographics also reveal some barriers to this goal. For instance, while 78 percent of consultants hail from the sciences and social sciences, in five years we have had only one College of Engineering graduate student serve as a consultant—and then for a single semester before they accepted a prestigious research institute residency. And while each year has brought an increase in the number of consultants who identify as BIPOC, neurodiverse, and queer or nonbinary, we see few applications from male-identified students, and we must heed federal restrictions placed on employment for international graduate students beyond their assistantships.<sup>2</sup>

About three quarters of consultants are assistantship- or fellowship-funded through their departments or through agencies such as the National Science Foundation. For these consultants, the graduate writing center is supplemental employment, up to 10 hours a week, beyond their lab, field, and teaching activities. After an initial orientation, first-semester consultants meet biweekly with a mentor to work through a series of topics, readings, and assignments as well as to reflect on the lessons and questions of recent appointments. All

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consultants attend a monthly staff development meeting that is accompanied by preparatory assignments. Consultants are paid \$18 an hour, and the hours consultants are paid for include those spent in and preparing for staff development and mentor meetings.

In new consultant education, ongoing staff development, and consultations themselves, Berthoff's (1982) powerful heuristic "How does who do what and why?" (p. 71) provides our guide. Whether we are examining the features of a particular disciplinary genre, practicing at the sentence level what Michelle Cox (2019) calls "'noticing' language," or revisiting a challenging or rewarding session, the goal is to put fine-grained observations about *who* and *what* into dialectical and investigatory contact with *how* and *why*. Thus, to the above paragraphs about *who* staffs our graduate writing center and *what* we do, we must likewise investigate and say more about *how* and *why*. How did it happen that, more than four decades after the undergraduate writing center opened, the need for a graduate writing center became visible and actionable? And why, despite more than five years of growth and other measures of success, does the future of this and other graduate-serving writing centers (see Gillespie, 2018) remain so precarious?

Helpful in tackling the "how" question is Deborah Brandt's (1998) definition of literacy sponsors, those "agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way" (p. 166). A partial inventory of our graduate writing center's sponsors begins with the Council of Graduate Schools' (2008) influential *Ph.D. Completion Project*; a graduate college dean inspired by this project to seek avenues for increasing completion rates; and a well-established and highly regarded undergraduate writing center whose director the dean turned to for guidance in initiating graduate writing support. Nourishing these conversations were two WID-sponsored workshop series for faculty and graduate students, one led by Cornell University's Michelle Cox and the other by Massey University's Lisa Emerson.

These encouragements for launching a graduate writing center needed also to be

matched by material sponsors. Material sponsorship came foremost in the dubious guise of our university's adoption of incentive-based budgeting (IBB, which at other institutions is also known as RCM or responsibility-centered management). IBB has had the deleterious effect of squeezing program budgets and pitting academic units against one another in a Hunger Games-style competition for student credit hours. But IBB also had, at least initially, the positive effect of channeling new revenue to the graduate college, enabling the dean to move from dreaming of a graduate writing center to opening one. Similarly, an unanticipated imperative to reorganize the library to accommodate a parent-pleasing footbridge to a new first-year dormitory resulted in the assignment of dedicated library space to both the undergraduate and graduate writing centers. The creation of a geographically central and attractive home (a home that the undergraduate writing center had lacked for more than 40 years!) has not only sponsored our growth; it also helped defend us from pandemic budget-panic dissolution. Providing additional fortification was the WID director's decision to share her offices and administrative support with both writing center directors—a decision at once generous and strategic as it pooled resources and heightened visibility for campus writing expertise and support beyond the English department.

This inventory is a start toward answering the question of how this graduate writing center—its conditions of possibility—came to be. Awaiting fuller articulation is why we place such a value on multidisciplinary staffing and how through multidisciplinary staffing this graduate writing center has navigated a course into a more secure future. For these questions, through an SRT prism, we turn to examining our anniversary interviews.

### **What Motivated You to Apply? Social Reproductive Self-Help or Minding the Gaps**

When preparations for this graduate writing center began, unknown was who might answer the recruitment call. The gratifying surprise has been the arrival over the semesters

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of applications from doctoral and master's students across all of the university's colleges and schools. But what motivates someone outside an English, writing studies, or similar program to apply to become a graduate writing consultant? And what, in advance of formal training, equips someone to imagine taking this role?

Notably, many new consultants bring with them substantial experience in coaching and mentoring professional and scientific writing. Diana, who applied as a second-semester doctoral student in natural resources, had previously worked in communications for an environmental conservation nonprofit and then as a science writer for a research and extension organization. In both settings, she describes mentoring interns as "fun and fulfilling": "I would think 'This is professional; we need to have a product come out of the work you're doing.' But also I would think, 'You're an intern; this is skill development.'" Similarly, Rebecca, who applied near the end of her natural resources doctoral program, anticipated from her earlier experience of teaching high school science that a writing center position would bring the "joy and satisfaction . . . of breaking down concepts into something that's usable."

Yet especially motivating consultants to apply was the chasm between the mounting complexity of their graduate writing tasks and available instruction and support. Seth, who became a consultant in the second year of his master's in public administration, points to the double bind of a program that prizes both public-facing and academic communications yet offers no direct instruction for either: "If there was a conversation about writing in my program, it was a conversation about the importance of being able to get published in an academic journal, the importance of being able to communicate to the public, but not a conversation about how to acquire these abilities." The consequences of such a hidden curriculum for Vanesa, studying plant and soil science to build on her biochemistry PhD from Argentina, were compounded by the language policing of academic gatekeepers. "Reviewers don't see the concept of your paper but just look for places where they can judge the English as odd or bad," Vanesa observes. "Sometimes it's as if they just look at where you're from and say 'No.'"

Applying to become a consultant for these students was both a way to remedy the gap they perceived in graduate writing support—what Seth sums up as "the absent conversation about writing"—and take advantage of some social-reproductive "self-help." Vanesa explains, "Applying to the writing center attracted me because I thought I would improve my writing in general and also learn why I was doing each thing that I was doing when I was writing a paper, so I would be a better academic writer and not get those 'No's' from the start." Ashley, who joined the graduate writing center as a doctoral candidate in biology, recalls being motivated to apply for "the training that comes with being a consultant to bolster my writing skills too." While Leigh Ann, from psychological sciences, felt confident about the "writing skill set" she had developed, she sought to become more at ease with sharing work in progress: "As scientists, we share our work through writing and through a peer-review process. . . . I wanted to feel more comfortable with sharing my work and help others with that too." Together these and other consultants describe life-making motivations for joining the graduate writing center staff: their need to provision themselves, their interest in supporting and provisioning others. In consultations, Seth says, "you actually get to see the act of writing happening, which is illuminating and inspiring."

Beyond "ephemeral 'things'" (Ferguson, 2020, p. 123) like joy and satisfaction, our anniversary conversations drew out material life-making motivations: the ability to showcase this experience in job applications; assurance of a steady income source beyond assistantship support. Ashley, for example, sought to equip herself for a possible postgraduate career in science communications: "I was interested in looking into research development and grant-writing support positions, helping others build strong proposals rather than constantly doing that for myself." Her writing center appointment and CRLA certification thus joined conference presentations and journal publications as CV "deliverables." For Judith, a biology PhD and veteran of our dissertation camps, a writing center position mitigated the financial devastation of an abruptly cancelled postdoctoral fellowship. While Diana sounds

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abashed when she says, “I’ll just add that it was nice to have the income along with the experience,” SRT feminism (whose forebears include the Welfare Rights Movement and its push for a guaranteed annual income) recasts economic support as not only nice but necessary.

### ***What Did You Gain? What Did You Contribute? Provisioning and Provisional Attitudes***

Also recast is the social construction—and bedeviling reality—of care work as a selfless gift that saps the caregiver and stalls out the academic careers of women, faculty of color, and all who bear a disproportionate and unacknowledged share of mentoring. In fact, Rebecca emphasizes, this paid position in supporting other graduate students with their projects is designed to help consultants advance their own: “As a PhD student, dividing your brain and devoting time to anything that’s not your dissertation really just slows things down. But this was a great opportunity to have a job . . . directly connected to the type of skills that I was trying to build.” Vanessa agrees: “My papers are way better than they were before because my advisors had never told me you need to show there’s a gap that your research fills. Unless you’re somehow hardwired for it, you need to learn how to showcase your hard work so others get what’s novel about it.” Diana describes returning to Keith Hjortshoj’s (2019) graphic “The Essential Form of Research Based Writing”—in *Writing from A to B: A Guide to Completing the Dissertation Phase of Doctoral Studies* (p. 23), a foundational orientation text for new consultants—not only when writing her own papers but also in project meetings: “Okay, we have this big concern. What’s our objective for next time we meet? And how do we put what we do next in the perspective of the bigger picture?”

These consultants describe how through their graduate writing center training and experience they acquired rhetorical frameworks, a metacommunicative vocabulary, and stage-appropriate strategies otherwise reserved for writing studies professionals alone. “In the past

when I was working with someone’s writing,” Diana says, “I would, like so many advisors, go straight to copyediting. Now I do a better job of stepping back and saying, ‘Is that where this piece is in the process?’” Seth describes many sessions of pulling back from screen or page and turning to the whiteboard: “Getting [their ideas] literally out of their heads and onto the whiteboard, I think, provided some kind of relief. And for me the experience of seeing a ‘bing’ happen—it’s pretty amazing.” Rebecca recalls her work with an L2 graduate student writer who wanted to understand not just *how* to make grammatical and lexical changes called for by an article’s reviewers but *why*: “I’m glad I didn’t say ‘We don’t do copyediting’ because the conversations we were having about language seemed like a great space to be in.” Described by these consultants are counterlessons to the status quo that generationally reproduces the belief that graduate students should need no direct writing instruction and that teaching writing is *not-my-job* drudgery. Instead, consultants are learning that the complexity of advanced academic writing can (and needs to) be taught and, further, that this teaching can be joyful and sustaining for both mentor and mentee.

At the same that consultants speak of their commitment to provisioning others with rhetorical knowledge, they also stress that this knowledge is itself provisional. Leigh Ann recalls how confronting new genres and higher stakes through her doctoral program dispelled any notion that “I have the formula for how to write.” Notes Rebecca about becoming a consultant after starting her dissertation, “One benefit of being farther along is realizing the more expert you become in one thing, the more you have the permission to say, ‘I’m not an expert in all these other things.’ It improves the peer relationship.” For Judith, a history consultant’s outsider perspective helped her see a new approach to communicating her research in biology: “When I met with her about an award application that needed to appeal to a broad audience, she asked me very different questions than anyone in my field would have thought to ask. It helped me reframe the entire research story.” In these responses, consultants value the development and sharing of



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“expert intuition” (Dinitz & Harrington, 2014, p. 94) over any static notion of disciplinary expertise.

In addition to offering a cross-fertilization of disciplinary perspectives, Diana points out, a diversely staffed graduate writing center can connect students, who frequently experience their programs as “isolating” and “emotionally and financially stressful,” to a “web” of life-making support: introduction to subject-area librarians and data analysis assistance; resources for childcare, food assistance, lunch-time yoga, and mental health counseling; rehearsal space for addressing a truculent committee member or preparing for an interview; webinars affirming and addressing the disorienting challenges of pandemic writing. From an SRT feminist standpoint such activities don’t constitute “emotional labor” differentiated from other forms of work. Rather, when life-making is recognized and prioritized, the needs of bodies and minds, of the person and the professional are neither divorced nor hierarchically weighted. “In my conversations with new consultants,” explains Rebecca, “I try to portray a view of compassion: help students if we have the capacity or help them find who can help.”

Articulated here is Rebecca’s social reproductive commitment to the graduate writing center’s future: helping new consultants likewise cultivate perspectives and practices for what she terms “deep listening.” Other consultants recount composing genre guides and screencasts to support next generations of graduate consultants and writers. Also safeguarding the future, Leigh Ann stresses, is an “architecture” that transcends any of us as individuals: the architecture of our physical library home and also of our widely recognized routines and rituals like writing retreats, camps, workshops, and program partnerships.

## The Right to Graduate Writing Support

Ever present, of course, is the danger that budget-minded administrators will celebrate the architecture and miss the human labor power that is any writing center. When Nancy, our inaugural director, announced her retire-

ment, one administrator, under intensifying IBB discipline, suggested that the next director might serve without any course releases as the graduate writing center’s public face while 25% of an administrative staff position could be assigned to daily operations. Missed in this penny-wise plan, Diana points out, is how much consultants themselves need to be provisioned and supported by a director “with expertise in writing center pedagogy, a knowledge of the literature, and also time to spend with us. I don’t think a quarter-time staff person and a very tightly squeezed faculty member can replace the guidance of someone with both knowledge and time.”

Established practice has given us ground on which to stand as we have insisted that this architecture be populated not with angels but with human beings—human beings who are caring and resourceful and who are also trained and supported by someone with the knowledge and time to provide that training and support. Thanks to SRT-informed advocacy, robust support has been secured for two experienced and committed faculty members eager to ferry this graduate writing center into the coming years. A multidisciplinary staff has further bolstered our ability to engage effectively in such advocacy. For example, when our graduate writing center faced in late spring 2020 possible pandemic-budget cancellation, consultants circulated a petition that almost instantly garnered the signatures and passionate accolades of hundreds of graduate students plus the support of the graduate student senate. The petition had campus-wide reach, we believe, because this graduate writing center has campus-wide graduate-level representation in its staffing.<sup>3</sup>

As consultants move into their postgraduate careers, the reach of this graduate writing center and its lessons about the social reproductive right to advanced academic writing support extend beyond our campus. Rebecca and Diana took first jobs in climate-change science communications. The biomedical research positions held by Judith and Ashley include significant amounts of writing and developing educational materials. “I have been playing around with a ‘lunch and learn’ for our department on writing and editing skills,” Judith reports. In

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her position with an Argentinian government research center and faculty appointment at the Universidad Nacional del Sur, Vanesa describes colleagues as well as students turning to her for writing support: “We talk about English grammar but also how to make a stronger case for your conclusion or why this paragraph could go higher up.” Leigh Ann, an assistant professor of psychiatry whose position has included directing curricular assessment in a medical school’s Teaching Academy, reports drawing on her writing center experience during her research consultation hours: “When people come to me and say, ‘Hey, I’m doing this whole thing and I’m stuck. Can you help me?’, I know what questions to ask to distill the problem.” Like Seth, she describes as “mutually beneficial and rewarding” the “camaraderie of being in a group of people who enjoy writing, who enjoy talking and learning about writing.” SRT feminism also accounts for and recasts as social rather than individual the 24-hour pandemic parenting responsibilities that many of our students as well as current and former consultants have shouldered.

Although based on a single graduate writing center with its specific conditions of possibility and constraint, our anniversary conversations highlight how the reproduction of graduate writing neglect, underprovisioned advisors, and hardened *not-my-job* attitudes can be disrupted in settings that promote writing camaraderie, that solicit participation across fields in mentoring advanced academic writing, and that materially support this work. To be sure, care and provisioning supports are under constant threat, both in the politics of university budgets and in the bigger-picture contest over whether life-making needs will be funded or denied. At the same time, the long pandemic has resulted not only in budget recession and threats of program cancellation but also long-overdue recognition that our society relies on “essential workers” and on sustaining their bodies and minds, including through extended unemployment, eviction moratoriums, and infusion of federal CARES funding into educational institutions. Such supports, reports the *New York Times*, had the remarkable effect in the pandemic’s first year of reducing U.S. poverty by half (DeParle, 2021). Yet any future

for these support programs beyond pandemic emergency will depend on social movement struggle and social justice articulation to shape policy regarding what Serap Saritas Oran (2017) sums up as “the right to social reproduction” (p. 170). Against this backdrop, graduate writing center and communications scholars can likewise advocate for the social reproductive rights of graduate students; more, by forging a commitment to multidisciplinary staffing, we can distribute across disciplines the means to advocate for and meet graduate students’ writing and communication needs.

## Acknowledgments

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## Notes

1. To the extent that life-making must be paid for, its activities are reduced to ROI (return on investment) metrics, as when a writing center’s impact is measured by number of appointments versus amount spent on staff and operations.

2. In our graduate writing center’s history, one assistantship-funded international graduate, Vanesa, was able through a seminar in writing center pedagogy to gain CRLA Level I certification; she was subsequently approved for paid writing center hours and further CRLA advancement during semester breaks. Visa regulations, however, prevent many more potentially interested international students from bringing their disciplinary and multilingual knowledge to graduate writing centers and bringing rhetorical and writing process knowledge back to their fields and professions.

3. Of course, undergraduate writing centers with multidisciplinary staffing also create campus-wide advocates, some of whom continue to graduate study. Yet when these former undergraduate tutors go on to graduate programs in institutions whose writing support is provided by humanities graduate students alone, the problem with which writing scholars have grappled—the concentration in English departments of rhetorical knowledge and responsibility for writing support—reemerges at the very point where the next generation of scholars and professionals is produced.



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