Carrie Aldrich and Amanda Gallogly

Review: Re/Writing the Center: Approaches to Supporting Graduate Students in the Writing Center by Susan Lawrence and Terry Myers Zawacki

It makes sense that writing studies scholars, from their position on the frontlines of academic writing support, would be among the first to notice graduate student needs around writing. In the 1980s, scholars began pointing out why this population of writers deserves more attention. Fast forward to today, popular academic news outlets like the Chronicle of Higher Education, Times Higher Education, and Inside Higher Ed are abuzz with findings from a number of recent studies highlighting widespread impostor syndrome, depression, and anxiety among graduate students in connection with concerns about student loans, competitive job markets, complex social hierarchies, and work-life balance. These issues of course disproportionately impact demographics like women, gender nonbinary students, first-generation and nontraditional students, international students, and students of color, who are more likely to experience difficulties finding their place in academia than their white, cisgender, and male counterparts. In addition to these challenges, graduate students are likely to find a heightened expectation to publish before completing the degree and
concerns about a lack of access to graduate writing support. Overall, graduate students on the frontlines feel torn between despair (as the popularity of satirical sites such as McSweeney’s and PhD Comics might suggest) and action (as the growth in student-union organizing confirms).

From 2013 to 2016, we worked as graduate assistants in a writing center designed by and for College of Education graduate students at the University of Iowa, who also happened to be our peers. We celebrated one another’s publications, comprehensive-exam successes, dissertation defenses, and career advancements, but we spent far more time talking with students in tears over their perceived failures and overwhelming expectations: many of them worried about plagiarizing their literature reviews; we learned about a paper-writing mill near campus; and we witnessed difficult departures of students who were counseled out or decided graduate school wasn’t right for them. Every student we sat next to in the center was anxious about their writing. In all of these scenarios, we turned to—and benefited from—the existing literature, but we wish Susan Lawrence and Terry Myers Zawacki’s Re/Writing the Center: Approaches to Supporting Graduate Students in the Writing Center could have joined the other volumes on our center’s bookshelf. As Paula Gillespie in the prologue and Sherry Wynn Perdue in the epilogue both point out, until fairly recently, a gap has existed in scholarship about writing center support for graduate student writers.

This 270-page collection helps us understand the complex dynamics at play in graduate writing support. Theoretically rich and grounded in practical application, this volume is evidence that scholarship about supporting graduate student writers is coming of age. The authors engage scholarship about multilingual writers, overview key debates about what it means to support graduate students in their writing, and provide tools for developing support services, as well as suggestions for how tutors, faculty, and administrators might adapt them. This text covers so many of the issues in graduate student writing that the reader might not have to venture far outside this book to pilot a program.

We were impressed with the way this collection truly begins to decenter the tutoring dyad by asking readers to consider how writing centers support the identities of writers developing into full-fledged academics and how writing centers operate within our institutions and communities. Reading this collection made us realize we might have better supported graduate students if we had implemented retreats to promote student-writer communities or experimented with a distributed consultation model to mimic future workplace collaborations or devoted more effort to creating meaningful cross-campus partnerships—ideas presented in chapters by Ashly Bender Smith, Tika Lamsal, Adam Robinson, and Bronwyn T. Williams; Steve Simpson; and Laura Brady, Nathalie Singh-Corcoran, and James Holsinger, respectively.
The writers in this collection come from a variety of institutions and positions related to writing centers, thus offering multiple perspectives on theory, past debate, and practical application. We especially enjoyed the ways the authors resist long-standing writing center dichotomies about academic writing support, such as generalist/specialist, L1/L2, and graduate/undergraduate. The 12 chapters are divided into three parts: 1. Revising our Core Assumptions, 2. Reshaping our Pedagogies and Practices, and 3. Expanding the Center. We review these chapters according to three themes we see in the text: the graduate student crisis narrative and its impact on writing, nuanced understanding of graduate student needs, and the integral position of writing and graduate writing support in the graduate student experience.

Crisis Narrative

As many of the authors acknowledge, the work of graduate writing support has unfolded in a narrative of crisis. In Chapter 2, Sarah Summers points out that university rank-determining metrics such as time-to-degree and retention rates, together with widespread concerns about increasing enrollment among nonnative English speakers and expanding demand for writing support, have driven the growth of graduate writing support nationwide. While these issues cannot be dismissed, and as helpful as this story line has often proven to be in advancing our institutional presence, in Chapter 12, Elizabeth Lenaghan cautions against allowing this narrative to guide our missions because of the faulty assumptions it promulgates about writers and writing support. Specifically, this story of crisis presents writing as straightforward, writers as deficient, and writing centers as deskilled, supplementary, and service-oriented rather than places where people come to learn.

Various authors explain in their chapters the problems of common assumptions about writing at the graduate level: that it is mechanistic, easily transferable, and implicitly learned (Pemberton, p. 35), or that graduate students arrive already skilled in the writing of perfect prose and accurate citations (Turner, p. 97), which can result in remedial labels for students. As Summers notes in her contribution, students subject to these assumptions internalize this struggle in the form of shame, insecurity, or impostor syndrome (p. 57).

Nuanced Understanding of Student Needs

As Simpson, Laura Turner, and Michelle Cox point out in their respective chapters, expectations of perfect English are particularly fraught for linguistically diverse writers, for whom mastery might be a lifelong pursuit. In order to support nonnative English speakers, we must unpack notions of proficiency and understand microlevel concerns involve much more than
final-stage proofreading. Seemingly small choices affect texts in foundational ways, and scholars in this collection see a role for writing centers in the drafting and revision processes. Turner (p. 100) and Cox (p. 151) each agree that tutoring multilingual writers can be painstaking, time consuming, and more directive than is the norm in writing practitioner practice, but both note that, contrary to common perceptions, this type of language work has the possibility to improve not only the writing but also the writer, with lasting effects.

The advanced nature of graduate student writing will always require attention to disciplinarity. The authors in this collection offer a variety of approaches: a discipline-embedded peer-tutor model (Gillespie); “discipline- and assignment-specific tutoring tools,” cocreated by tutors and faculty (Brady, Singh-Corcoran, & Holsinger, p. 193); a genre-based heuristic that helps position tutors as rhetorical experts (Reineke, Glavan, Phillips, & Wolfe, p. 166); a prereading session that allows tutors time to “venture into a new world of terminology, disciplinary conventions, rhetorical constraints, and complicated ideas” and to engage the writing as more of a disciplinary insider (Kallestinova, p. 143); and the option to prioritize process and interpersonal compatibility over disciplinary specificity, with the idea that reflection and awareness can transfer to future writing projects (Lawrence, Tetreault, & Deans, p. 112).

The authors in this volume also recognize graduate writing support extends far beyond attention to the thesis or dissertation (p. 78). Brady, Singh-Corcoran, and Holsinger remind us of Barbara Kamler and Pat Thomson’s (2014) point that text work is identity work, while Smith, Lamsal, Robinson, and Williams highlight the important role retreats can play in the development of writers’ scholarly identities and sense of community belonging. It is impossible to discuss this socialization process without addressing the affective dimension. Patrick S. Lawrence, Molly Tetreault, and Thomas Deans use intake sessions in part to reduce anxiety.

### Positioning Writing and Graduate Writing Support as Integral to Graduate Learning

Sustainability is central to the work of graduate writing support. Summers points out in her chapter that “the ongoing conversations about graduate completion will [not] hold the attention of administrators and decision makers” forever (p. 61) and that in this climate of limited resources and increasing need, graduate writing centers must find a more solid justification for their work than panicking over graduate student outcomes. Every author in this edited collection recognizes that supporting graduate writers takes a village of diverse stakeholders and that graduate writing centers must be integral to that effort. In order to better position graduate writing support, writing centers must combat fragmentation and improve their institutional status.
Fragmentation is an unavoidable reality of graduate school today. From the sense of isolation many graduate students feel, to the idea that “writing up” research is separate from identity development and knowledge creation, to depictions of writing centers as a “last stop fix-it shop” (Simpson, p. 78) rather than “co-sponsors of disciplinary enculturation” (Pemberton, p. 43), the authors in this collection offer an impressive variety of potential solutions, ranging from intake sessions that can introduce writers to other resources on campus and tailor services to their needs (Lawrence et al.), to expanding graduate writing support’s purview, to professional development (Brady, Singh-Corcoran, & Holsinger; Gray; Simpson), student well-being (Lawrence, Tetreault, & Deans; Lenghan; Smith, Lamsal, Robinson, & Williams), and meeting the need for a supportive writing community (Gray; Reineke, Glavan, Phillips, & Wolfe; Summers). Many solutions in search of greater effectiveness push back against long-standing dogma in writing center work, such as not editing or focusing on sentence-level concerns and challenging the one-to-one configuration.

Central to this effort is elevating the institutional status not only of graduate writing centers but also of writers and writing itself, a challenge that will require graduate writing centers to take an agentive role at the policy and planning levels, efforts that multiple authors within this collection argue should be taken on by writing center directors and tutors alike.

Institutional and Global Change

Like the writers in this collection, we believe the writing center can play an important role in filling this gap in writing support. The graduate students of today are the professors and administrators of tomorrow. Graduate students will take their experiences in writing centers into professional roles, hopefully designing support services that are more interactive, enacting policies that are more sensitive to writers and consequently changing the culture of writing across campus. Don’t be fooled by the title of this book. It isn’t a book just for people who are working with graduate students—many of the issues at stake in these chapters reflect tensions that exist in university writing support more generally.

Talk about the culture of writing on campus has implications for building a healthy culture of writing that considers all students. In making this move, writing centers raise their visibility and recognition on campus in mutually reinforcing ways: the better we support writers, the better we position ourselves; the better we position ourselves, the better we support writers. While this book maintains the idealism that has always guided writing center work, the authors also promote a theoretically grounded, empirically driven pragmatism. Holding both of these visions in mind can inspire writing centers
to continue forging a path forward toward a more positive outlook for graduate writers and the rest of the campus community.

Acknowledgments

*We would like to thank Dr. Bonnie Sunstein and Dr. Carol Severino for their mentorship and encouragement.*
Reference


Carrie Aldrich is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Writing at the University of Alaska Anchorage, where she teaches a variety of writing courses, coordinates writing placement, and is faculty liaison to the Writing Center. Her research focuses on socio-cultural approaches to retention and success in first year writing.

Amanda Gallogly is a PhD candidate in the College of Education and a writing tutor at the University of Iowa. Her dissertation is focused on writing support for publishing academics.