Out of the Classroom and Away from One-to-One Sessions: The Efficacy of Writing Groups for High-Achieving Students

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[Notes to accompany panel presentation slides]

Slide 1: Title Slide

Slide 2: Panel Overview
Tammy:
At Purdue, we’ve been experimenting with writing groups for a few semesters, targeting specific populations of underserved writers on our campus. Vicki and Amy have been working with a group of graduate students in an interdisciplinary research institute in the social sciences. This particular writing group has been meeting for three years.

More recently, I’ve partnered with our Liberal Arts Honors College to pilot writing groups for undergraduate students.

For both cases, we received IRB approval to look at the efficacy of the groups, and we each have survey results to share. We’ll show what the results say about the participants, the helpfulness of the groups, attitudes toward writing, and other interesting details that allow us to think about the efficacy and sustainability of the writing groups.

We’ll leave time for discussion, and we hope to hear about your own experiences with writing groups.

Slide 3: Graduate Writing Groups
Vicki & Amy

Slide 4: Program Background
Vicki:
Our adventure with graduate-level writing groups began in the late Spring of 2013 when a Professor in the College of Agriculture contacted the Writing Lab for help. His lab group was composed entirely of international students, and he wondered what could be done to help them improve their writing. We had been looking into writing groups as a potential support for graduate students, so his need fit perfectly with the direction we were trying to go. He agreed to a pilot program in which his 5 NNS lab members met on a regular basis with me and 1 of our graduate tutors. “Regular basis” ended up being only 3 sessions that first spring and 4 the following fall. At the end of this time, the Writing Lab had no funding to continue, and the
professor was unable to secure funding from his department, so we regretfully ended the partnership at the close of Fall 2013.

The following Spring (2014), the Writing Lab was again contacted about help for graduate writers—this time by the Research Director of a Research Institute in the College of Health and Human Sciences. He was quite willing to allow us to offer a writing group, AND the Research Institute was able to fund it (in essence, pay for the hours of the graduate tutor who worked with me on this). At our suggestion, attendance would be voluntary. This group has continued every spring and fall semester up to and including the present one, with a workshop series over the summer instead of a writing group. That first spring, we had 5 meetings with 4 attendees. Fall 2014, we had 7 meetings with 5 attendees, and we changed to a different graduate tutor. Spring 2015, we also met 7 times with 5 attendees. Fall 2015, again with a new tutor (Amy), we had 6 meetings with 6 attendees, and currently we have had 4 meetings with 6 attendees. The attendees have changed over time, but 2 of our current members have attended most of the semesters. The demographics have always been different from the original pilot program, with either a mix of NSs and NNSs or else exclusively NSs.

It has been interesting to observe the differences between the two groups. Both were initiated by a supervisor of sorts and both were field-specific, with everyone involved in the same discipline or working on the same sort of research. Differences included the funding source, the number of semesters and sessions within each semester, the language demographics, and the impetus for members to attend (whether it was mandatory or voluntary). What we found anecdotally is that the Ag WG members tended to be less invested; attending was a chore mandated by their professor to which they gave a sort of minimal attention (e.g., we seldom saw a document longer than an abstract). In addition, there was a very clear hierarchy among the writers based on length of time working in that lab. In contrast, the Research Institute WG attendees brought documents of all types and lengths, obviously read each other’s work outside the WG, and had little or no apparent pecking order, even though it was clear that some people had been around longer than others.

**Slide 5: Program Method**

The Writing Groups have been handled in a fairly standard way across time. Each group is limited to 6 attendees. The Writing Lab provides 2 facilitators—me and 1 graduate tutor chosen and trained by me. We try to keep the same tutor for at least 1 academic year. Meetings are held roughly every other week during times that school is in session. One person presents a document several days in advance of the meeting at which the work will be discussed. The writer also submits a form indicating the genre, audience, and type of help requested. All attendees and facilitators read and comment on the document in advance. During the actual meeting, the writer briefly explains the work. Everyone in the group shares things that could be worked on while one attendee keeps a list. (It turns out to be surprisingly
difficult to generate a simple list without actually talking about the various items on the spot). The writer then uses the list to choose the order of discussion. The last 20-30 minutes of the meeting are used for some sort of hands-on activity arranged by the WL facilitators based on material chosen from the paper of the day. This might be individual sentences that need restructuring, it might be using color coding to look at document organization, etc.

**Slide 6: Impetus for the Study**

In working with the initial Ag group, the graduate tutor at the time and I noticed a number of characteristics of the graduate writers in the group, characteristics that we have continued to notice in the Research Institute group as well. While graduate writers are often able to identify problem areas in documents and to interact freely in discussing these problems and, even occasionally, to identify particular skills they lack (e.g., how to use a semi-colon), our writers generally have been less able to suggest solutions to the problems and have not always been able to apply the knowledge they have to their own writing. Let me insert an obligatory caveat here: graduate writers are not all the same. Even within our small number of attendees, there are large differences in all of those abilities. Some members can not only identify a problem but also suggest the appropriate solution (often something they have heard the Writing Lab facilitators say for other papers—e.g., topic sentences), though they may still be unable to avoid that same problem in their own writing. And as you’ll hear later in our talk, their Research Director has seen improvement in writing ability, so even this is changing as they spend time in the Writing Group.

Now I will turn it over to Amy who will tell you about our participants and our methods, and then talk about the survey data.

**Slide 7: Participants**

Amy:

We currently have 6 participants in Writing Group (the average size is about 6-8), though 1 is new this semester so only 5 have filled out our survey data.

Their years in writing group vary: 3 are in their first year and 2 are in their 3rd year.

They are also at different stages of their academic program, from dissertating to 1st year in coursework. One participant is on staff but has an M.Phil.

Also, we have provided a pseudonym for our first participant, Mary. For the coding aspect of our research, the results of which Vicki will be discussing, we chose Mary’s papers to examine since she has been in writing group for the longest. We have named her since we’ll be looking at her as a case study.
Slide 8: Methods: Survey
We designed a survey to examine writing group members’ self-perceptions about their own writing and editing abilities. The questions were clustered into the following categories: Confidence, Ability to Recognize Problems, Ability to Articulate Problems, Value of the Writing Group, and Value of Feedback.

Sample questions on the slide – read 1 or 2.

We were interested in particular in how confident they felt in their abilities as a result of being in Writing Group as well as what particular skills they had developed, what strategies they used, and if they found the experience valuable. By looking at their perceptions, we were trying to understand the value of what such a group could accomplish for writers and use that data to help inform writing lab facilitation.

Slide 9: Methods: Coding
We coded the comments of Mary, a long-term attendee. She has commented on 12 papers across 4 semesters to date.

The first style of coding looks at the style of feedback. We coded the comments into 4 categories:
- **Corrective**: actual insertions and deletions made on the physical paper.
- **Directive**: the commenter tells the writer what to do but doesn’t actually make the change. Example: “You need to rephrase this sentence for clarity.”
- **Interactive**: the commenter engages with the text, asks a question, or offers commentary. Example: “Could you begin this section a little more broadly to re-orient the reader?”
- **Evaluative**: Makes a judgment call, labels something good or bad.

Depending on the type of comments and sometimes the length of the comments, some comments could be both directive and interactive.

Slide 10: Methods: Coding
Some of these do overlap a little with the style of feedback, but here we’re looking at the specific changes and what types of things the editor discussed.

- **Deletions and Insertions**: words, phrases, punctuation that were actually changed on the paper.
- **Discipline-specific**: any content-related help, such as on data-handling, measures, literature/citations, general content.
- **Organization**: discussion of organization either within a paragraph, between paragraphs, or across sections. This could also include transitions and topic sentences.
Sentence level: comments (not insertions/deletions) on grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, clarity, etc.

Some places these overlapped. For example, they are told not to use casual language, which is both discipline-specific and sentence-level.

Slide 11: Survey Results: Overall Confidence
In terms of overall confidence, 100% of writers “agreed” that they felt their writing had improved because of writing group.

80% of writers “agreed” that their editing abilities had improved because of writing group. The last person marked “neither agree nor disagree.”

These numbers of confidence indicate that students find value in participating in writing group and can see growth in themselves regarding how well they write and edit.

Slide 12: Confidence in Skills Compared to Peers
This chart shows how writers feel their skill levels compare to that of their peers in Writing Group.

As indicated by the blue bar, 3 of the 5 writers rated their editing abilities as “better” than their peers in writing group.

- The remaining 2 writers rated their editing abilities as “about the same.”

As indicated by the orange bar, 3 of the 5 writers rated their abilities to discuss writing-related issues as better than their peers in writing group.

- The remaining 2 writers rated their editing abilities as “about the same.”

As indicated by the gray bar, 3 of the 5 writers rated their ability to discuss content-related issues as “about the same” as their peers in writing group.

- One (1) writer marked “better than” and 1 writer marked “worse than”.

In terms of confidence, this may also indicate a success of writing group. To have 3 people feel better (perhaps more advanced students) but no one feel they are unequal to the group perhaps demonstrates WG’s ability to improve students’ writing.

The final data on content-related issues indicates that the other answers may not be a result of over-confidence as these numbers are skewed lower. The difference in content-related work could also be a result of years in the program. As indicated on our participant slide, we have writers new to the research institute and writers who have been in the research institute for quite some time, so experience may also account for some of these confidence perceptions.
For future facilitation, it also highlights perhaps the need to have specific writing-related and content-related discussions as students report different abilities.

It’s also important to allow space for writing-related and content-related discussions.

**Slide 13: Survey Results: Recognizing Problems**
100% of writers indicate they can diagnose problems more easily in their own writing. (80% agree, 20% strongly agree).

80% of writers indicate they can diagnose problems more easily in others’ writing. (80% agree, 20% neither agree nor disagree.)

Data on diagnosing: This data indicates that writing group may be particularly effective for the writers’ own processes.

It also may suggest that it helps them become more critical readers of others’ work (at least in terms of perception). We’d have to look at everyone’s comments to determine if perceptions match what they actually do.

I also interviewed the Assistant Director of the Research Institute about the changes he has seen in students from Writing Group. Since our survey data is based on perceptions, which don’t always match reality, an outside opinion could provide a different perspective. He noted that he felt the students had a much better sense of the architecture of manuscripts and the “big arc” that such pieces should make. According to him, they can see better how sections flow and tie together. He reported that one of their Advisors has remarked that the students’ criticism of manuscripts is succinct and on point in the feedback they give to her. (Apparently their feedback looks much like the type of feedback she gives too.) She described it as “spot on.”

**Slide 14: Usefulness of Seeing Errors and Strategies of Other Writers**
As seen on the chart, all writers agreed that seeing other people’s errors helped them with their own writing while only most writers said seeing others’ strategies helped them.

This is not to suggest that seeing strategies were unhelpful but that more reported that it was useful to learn what not to do.

This may be in part due to the nature of editing, where we are more inclined to look specifically for what to give feedback on. Anecdotally, in conversation, writers do discuss strategies aloud, though too. As Writing Lab facilitators, we usually have a brief exercise (often relevant to an
issue in that week’s paper) to help teach strategies. This could be organizational, editing, commas, etc.

**Slide 15: Survey Results: Value of the Writing Group**

ALL writers said the writing group gave them transferable skills:
- 40% “strongly agree” and 60% “agree” (transferable skills)
- This suggests the efficacy of the writing group as students can take their knowledge and apply it elsewhere, perhaps without the writing group.

ALL writers said that WG has given them writing-related help they wouldn’t get in a classroom.
- 60% “strongly agree” and 40% “agree” (not in classroom setting)

ALL writers said that WG has given them writing-related help they wouldn’t get in the program
- 40% “strongly agree” and 60% “agree” (not in academic program)

This data speaks to the value of writing group. While the group is supplementary, it is distinctly a type of support not provided by professors or the academic program. This could have important implications for facilitation by the Writing Lab.
- Reasons to involve the academic program in the group
- Writing in the discipline and Writing more generally
- Is writing taught in classrooms at the graduate level

**Slide 16: Survey Results: Value of Feedback**

100% of writers said they are now more likely to seek feedback on their writing because of WG.

80% said they would participate in WG without presence of the WL. 1 person disagreed.

**Slide 17: Value of Feedback**

Peers: 40% strongly, 40% agree, 20% neither agree/disagree – found peer feedback helpful

Lab Staff: 80% strongly agreed that lab feedback was helpful and 20% neither agree/disagree.

BUT 80% of people agreed (and 20% disagreed) that they would do WG without lab staff present.

In an interview with two experienced group members, they indicated that they felt some of the newer members did not provide as substantive of feedback on their papers, compared to the amount of time/comments they themselves spent on others’ papers. One shared that she sometimes does not look at everyone’s feedback, but only that from the WL staff and 1 other experienced person.
This may have important facilitation concerns, which we’ll also address more later in the implications section of our presentation.

How do we ensure (or perhaps teach?) types/amount of feedback? Some people may not be doing the commenting until close to the day of the group.

What kinds of groups – heterogeneous or homogeneous are better and for whom?

As related to the impetus for the study/group, given how many people would participate without Writing Lab staff present, they clearly see value in the work of the group, and it may be possible for the Writing Center to establish and facilitate and then fade out, but that would require some kind of continuity and having enough established members to teach the newer ones who would then become the advanced ones, etc.

**Slide 18: Coding Method 1 Over Time**

**Vicki:**

For all of our coding, as Amy explained earlier, we looked at the comments written by “Mary”, a long-time attendee of the Writing Group. For method 1, we divided the 12 papers she commented on by semester:

- Fall 2014 4
- Spring 2015 2
- Fall 2015 4
- Spring 2016 2

Total: 12

Working from the bottom up on the graph, we can see that Evaluative comments stayed fairly flat (1.5% to 3%), which is not too surprising given that we did not focus at all on this sort of feedback in the Writing Group. Directive comments also stayed fairly consistent (9 to 15%) and at fairly low levels. What is most interesting to note is the interaction between Corrective feedback (blue line) and Interactive feedback (black line). Corrective starts high (67% semester average) and generally declines across the 4 semesters to a low of 35% (semester average) currently. Interactive does the opposite—going from a low semester average of 23% to a high semester average of 55%. Across the semesters, the growth or decline of the two styles of feedback is opposite—between the first fall and spring, corrective decreases while interactive increases; the reverse is true between the next two semesters but to a lesser degree; and then the trend reverses again between the last two semesters. One thing we have not yet looked at is whether NOT holding WGs in the summer affects the growth of interactive and the decline of corrective comments. Initially, we noticed that between Spring 2015 and Fall 2015, the general upward or downward trend reverses, but only slightly, which could indicate that the summer break was in some way detrimental or could indicate other things or nothing.
Slide 19: Coding Method 2: Change Across Papers (All Categories)
For coding method 2, we looked at changes across individual papers rather than averaging the semesters. The number of coded comments on a single paper ranged from 22 to 197.

If we graph everything, this is what we get—don’t work too hard to interpret any of this; I’ll break it down for you in the next few slides. If we look at type of feedback (and remember, this was divided into deletions, insertions, discipline-specific comments, organization, and sentence level issues), the percentage range across all types of comments is from a low of 0% (both insertion and organization on paper 11) to a high of 61% (Discipline-specific on paper 10).

Slide 20: Coding Method 2: Pairs
If we break the data down into pairs, we can see a number of interesting things. First, we can see that the idea of summer having an effect is called into question—the black line showing discipline-specific comments in the top graph and the orange line showing insertions in the bottom graph do NOT show their biggest decline or increase, respectively, between papers 6 and 7, which is when summer occurred.

Second, you can see here that some types of comments tend to parallel each other (top graph, discipline specific and organization—which are both more global concerns) and some tend to oppose each other (bottom graph, insertions and organization—one local concern, one global concern). You can see in the top graph that the parallel movement is not exact, while in the bottom graph the opposing movement is more closely connected. In both cases, papers 11 and 12 are the outliers, opposing in the top graph and paralleling in the bottom, rather than the reverse. Both of those papers were also outliers in terms of the type of document most commonly submitted to the writing group, with paper 11 being submitted jointly by writers who had been given someone else’s work to revise and paper 12 being submitted by one of those two authors but in a completely different field of study than any other document the Writing Group had worked with. In both cases, that author was our newest Writing Group member as well, still in her 1st semester of attending. This raises some interesting questions for future research, which Amy will talk about shortly.

Slide 21: Coding Method 2: Change Across Papers (3 Categories)
Let’s look a little more closely at 3 of the categories: insertions in orange, deletions in blue, and discipline-specific in black. You’ll notice that insertions and deletions follow roughly the same pattern—unsurprising considering that the comments were usually paired in the draft. Mary would delete one thing in order to insert another in the majority of cases.

What is most interesting, as it was in our coding of the style of comments, is the opposing peaks and valleys between insertion/deletion and discipline-specific comments. For instance, if we look at the changes between papers 1 and 3, the number of discipline-specific comments
went down, while the number of insertions and deletions went up. The reverse was true between papers 3 and 5, with discipline-specific comments increasing and insertion/deletions decreasing.

Despite the ups and downs, and as we found with coding for style of comments, this data showed a general tendency overall toward increases in discipline-specific comments paired with decreases in deletions/insertions over time, which would seem to indicate an increased ability to comment on more global issues. The data also suggest that Mary tends to focus primarily on EITHER surface-level OR content-level for any one paper.

I should note, however, that there are other potential variables that we have not yet looked at—for instance, was the author of a paper a NS or NNS? Or, which draft of a paper was it (early or ready for submission)? I already noted on the previous slide that paper #12, with its extreme drop in discipline-specific comments was outside the field of study that was customary for this group. Anecdotally, I can note that during the conversation over this paper, once more information about the larger project had come to light in the discussion, Mary’s verbal comments focused exclusively—and very aptly—on global concerns of organization and content.

Slide 22: Coding Method 2: Parallels and Oppositions
If we look only at writers for whom Mary commented on more than one paper over time, we see the same sorts of parallels between discipline-specific, organization, and sentence level (which includes clarity) on the one hand and insertions and deletions on the other. We also see the same sorts of opposition between those two groups of comments. There were 2 different authors for whom Mary provided comments on 3 papers each. Each of these graphs represents 1 of those 2 authors, and we can see that the parallels and oppositions look similar, although the overall graphs do not. Unfortunately, with only 3 papers in each sample, there is no way to tell if the differences we see here would have continued, and neither author is still contributing papers to the Writing Group (graduated?). Because of the differences between the 2 writers in question (female vs. male, American vs. international), it would be interesting to see if there is any sort of correlation between a particular variable and the results here. Another item for future research...

[Back to Amy for implications and questions for further research.]

Slide 23: Implications
Amy:
Importance of WG Participation across Time
We see slower change from paper to paper and some change between semesters, but the largest changes are visible by comparison across multiple semesters. Paper 1 vs. Paper 11
highlights much more contrast than Paper 2 to Paper 3. What this reveals is that WG participants, or even facilitators, might not see immediate change but rather steady change as a process. Meaning, writing evolves over time.

For facilitation, 1 semester participation in WG may not yield the same kind of larger change in academic writing practices. It might help for the short term (that person’s specific project) but the skills seem to develop across longer periods of time. To some extent this is obvious: writing takes time to develop. It’s not a quick change or learning how to apply a math formula. What may be less obvious is how to put this into practice. Especially for PhD students, and implication may be then to start early. If they aim to professionalize and enter the academic job market, they will need these kinds of skills for both research and teaching. Starting in a Writing Group in their 4th year may not yield the same kinds of outcomes as starting earlier in their program.

**Importance of Modeling**

In our premise for starting the writing groups, we were wondering if graduate students could be trained in writing practices and function independently of the Writing Lab. The survey data reveals that most participants found the WL feedback very helpful (80% strongly agreed) and only 1 person said they would only participate if the lab was present. Most found value in the WG and feedback anyway. The value of the WL feedback may suggest the importance of modeling. (One comment: “As Vicki is always telling us, topic sentences are important.”) They can use the comments we give to help their own writing but also their own editing.

Facilitation is an easier concern than modeling as it involves organizing and running the meetings. 80% said they would participate in WG without us. The high numbers about the value of the feedback (more strongly agree about WL feedback than peer feedback) suggest that it may be the modeling that is more important than simply the WL presence. It may be though that after enough modeling, if the WL were to leave the WG, it could feasibly continue, given the improvement in editing skills. For this to happen though, a certain amount of “transference” is needed. The more advanced people would become the models for the newer people, who would later become the advanced people. For this to work, groups need enough people across the program. If the group lost all of its experienced members, then the modeling would be gone and the group wouldn’t work. This speaks to potential important concerns over the group’s composition.

**Multi-faceted Discussion of Composition / Importance of Discussion of all Elements of Writing**

From coded comments as well as observations in group, the writers’ comments vary across types of comments. There seems to be importance on both content-related concerns and writing-related concerns (and the places for those overlap, such as writing for specific genres in the discipline). The writers often discuss how data is handled in their research institute or specific models and analyses they can use. However, it has been beneficial as well for them to discuss organization of both paragraphs and sections. Anecdotally, one WG member said
“theory is a great way to frame topic sentences of literature reviews,” which is a really nice example of how writing-related issues merge with content-specific concerns. WG members examine how information relates to other parts and builds off of previous points. They can also articulate more specifically how writing is done for specific genres. The program’s Research Director’s comments speak to this quite nicely in that he found that WG participants had a much better sense of the architecture of a piece and how sections tie together.

Value of Writing Group as Supplement to Program.
All of the respondents said that WG provides them with writing-related help not found in either a classroom setting or academic program. WGs could serve an important role for programs then to provide writing “instruction” at the graduate level. Writing is not necessarily specifically taught to graduate students. Professors might expect their students to know how to write? These are speculations. The findings may reveal a greater need to have a forum like WG for students to practice and develop these professional skills they may not get elsewhere. 80% agree that WG helped their professionalization abilities of reading, writing, and discussing academic papers, articles, and grants. (Or perhaps highlight a need to have a greater focus on writing in classes/programs? Dissertation directors shouldn’t necessarily be expected to teach writing so starting early – again with the importance of time – may be key.)

Slide 24: Questions for Future Research

What types of comments mean better writing?
Do students make more insertions and deletions (corrective) because they know what to fix? Or is this a way to leave comments on only what they know how to fix? OR do they make discipline-specific/interactive comments because they know to focus on larger issues?

Some of this also depends on the type of paper. As Vicki said, one paper was outside of the research group’s field so some of the interactive comments went down. In the WG meeting, they discussed organization extensively once they knew more about the project. Other papers we read were at the proofreading stage just before publication so it might have made more sense to make insertions/deletions.

To what extent are writers aware of the types of comments they leave?
It may be important for writers to recognize if they are focusing on HOCs or LOCs. Self-perception doesn’t always match what they do. For instance, on the survey we asked about the frequency with which they make certain types of comments. 60% said they sometimes leave summative feedback and 20% said frequently. (20% said never). When we checked their papers, nobody left summative feedback on any paper for the entire semester. 40% said they frequently explain their reasoning for sentence level changes rather than only correcting them, but we do see a larger number of insertions/deletions. (Now that’s just 1 person we coded of course.)
Homogenous vs Heterogeneous Grouping: What type works better and for whom?

Amount of Time in Program
Field-specific vs. Non-field-specific

Amount of Time: Early in the academic program vs later in the academic program. Two of our experienced members mention that they felt the newer writers didn’t give them as much help, which may indicate it might not be as helpful for advanced writers to be in heterogeneous groups. On the other hand, it might be more valuable for newer writers to have the experience of the advanced students (they’ve taken the classes before, have written similar things, have worked with the data longer).

Field-specific vs. non-field-specific: These people all work together a lot on very similar data and projects so they have more knowledge of what the writer may be trying to express and can give concrete suggestions about how to handle the data. On one hand this could be valuable, on the other hand, to what extent are they relying on established knowledge rather than being an “outside” reader, or a non-specific audience? (They may seem to prefer homogenous – previous surveys indicated that.)

Will the improvements in writing continue without Writing Group?
To what extent are the improvements we’re seeing due to continued practice? They meet every other week and practice similar skills. Without writing group, would their improved editing/writing skills continue? If they are hired at another university, will the skills transfer? (100% of writers on the survey said WG has given them transferrable skills for future writing projects.)

Do the improvements in writing transfer to papers in other fields?
We’ve seen one paper in another field and with enough context, some writers could talk quite a bit about it, but they said they had a harder time making comments on the paper, or at least expressed out loud “oh, now that I know that, what you should do is...” and then provided helpful feedback.

Slide 25: Undergraduate Writing Groups
Tammy

Slide 26: Pilot Group Background
To provide some background, our Writing Lab was approached by a faculty member directing the Liberal Arts Honors College at Purdue. We have a university-level Honors College, and each individual college has an honors program. At the Liberal Arts level, annual cohorts of 50 students join the HC as first-year students. They take several classes together as a group.
The director of the LA Honors College wanted to collaborate to provide more support for students taking these writing-intensive, higher level courses. According to the director, the students were good writers, but the expectations were higher in these courses. Students needed to produce more writing and research, and since these were first-year students, many were still adjusting to college-level expectations. Even with a strong emphasis on faculty mentoring, students still needed guidance. Although the Writing Lab was always available to Honors College students, as it is available to all other students, the purpose of these writing groups would be to allow students to learn group collaboration skills and achieve a greater sense of independence as they learned strategies to help one another. The cohort model of the courses would extend to the writing groups as a way of community-building. We also decided that participation in the groups should be voluntary to encourage self-motivation rather than compulsory participation.

So we began a pilot. We offered writing groups for a total of two semesters, and because of logistics, those semesters did not occur in the same academic year. We conducted surveys that captured information about how the groups were operating. In the end, we found that, for a number of reasons I’ll describe, the writing groups were not sustainable for this population of students. However, the surveys revealed interesting results about the students’ attitudes toward their writing abilities, their writing practices, why they did or didn’t participate in the writing groups, and why they did or didn’t use the Writing Lab for other services like one-to-one tutorials.

**Slide 27: General Profile of Participants**

So to reiterate, the students in the LA Honors College, the participants of these writing groups, were high-achieving students in the Liberal Arts. They’re used to writing, and they’re expected to write heavily in their courses. A large percentage of the students are female, and they enter the LA Honors College as a cohort taking some of the same—but not all of the same—classes. Which LA honors classes they take varies by semester. The faculty teaching these courses vary by semester.

The students live, for the most part, in the same dorm, and next year, a dedicated, university-level Honors College dorm will open, complete with classroom and activity space.

One other characteristic to note—which becomes important with some of the survey results—is that our students are facing increasing pressure to graduate in 4 years or less. Keep this thought in mind when we look at the sustainability of the writing groups later.

**Slide 28: Survey Context**

We had two rounds of writing groups. When we began in Spring 2015, we administered a survey at the end which asked participants to share what they liked about the groups and their
group leaders. We were specifically looking for information to improve the writing groups in the future. We also asked students who chose not to participate to state why they didn’t.

I met with my collaborator in the Honors College throughout the semester, and as we planned for fall 2015, we made some changes. We also decided to survey all students—whether they chose to participate in the writing groups or not, at the beginning and end of the semester, what we called pre- and post-participation surveys.

We added specific questions that asked students to identify their writing processes and revision strategies, where they sought feedback, and what they liked and didn’t like about the groups. We also asked students whether they used the Writing Lab, and if they didn’t participate in the writing groups, why they didn’t.

**Slide 29: Results: Writing Practices**

We asked students to describe their writing processes and practices, so they self-reported and described how they approached writing assignments, what kinds of invention and revision strategies they used, and so forth.

Overall, Participants generally valued planning and revision, although those practices and the depth to which they enacted invention or revision strategies varied. Many participants liked drafting and revising in one sitting, as opposed to returning at a later time (after several days, for example) to finish the draft or to make substantial revisions.

Several participants broke up drafting and revision over time, but not many. However, participants didn’t always work linearly, so several liked to write notes and reminders to themselves within the text, or they skipped over sections, in order to return to them later—although later did not always mean a day or two later.

**Slide 30: Results: Revision Strategies**

Not many participants revised multiple times, and as I mentioned, the wait time between drafting and revision was sometimes non-existent. But participants valued revision strategies such as writing on hard copies, reading aloud, looking at word choice or rewriting whole sentences.

It’s important, again, to note that these are self-reported revision strategies and writing practices. Unlike with Vicki’s and Amy’s group, I did not collect drafts and measure how or to what extent participants applied these strategies. Some questions in the survey allowed participants to just describe how they approach a writing project in an open box format. Other questions provided some choices for participants to select and included an *Other* option.

We tried to get students to describe their approach to writing through different questions and from different vantage points. Although we compared overall results from the beginning and
end of the semester to look at trends, similarities, and differences, the goal was not to compare results for individual students.

**Slide 31: Results: Sources of Feedback**

We asked students to select outside sources of feedback, and choices included a range of personal and academic sources that were possible, along with an *Other* option. This specific question related to writing feedback in general, not specifically feedback for writing assignments in the honors courses.

Family members ranked highest for preferred source of feedback, followed by professors, friends, co-authors, and other students. Students also used comments from writing assignments, which is heartening to anyone who spends time writing detailed notes when grading papers. Some students took a visual approach when revising—they looked at the appearance of the draft, how it looked, in order to make changes. Grammar and spell check were also popular.

The Writing Lab ranked the lowest, and a few participants noted that they never get help on their writing. So students are seeking feedback.

I was not surprised that professors would rank highly, but I was very surprised that most participants preferred to contact family members. This preference, however, was not a shock to my collaborator in the Honors College, who shared a story about an HC student a few semesters prior who continuously sought feedback from a youth minister, despite the fact that the feedback was not helpful at all.

**Slide 32: Results: Writing Abilities/Confidence**

I was not surprised that these particular students were confident in their writing abilities. They are, after all, students in Liberal Arts involved in writing intensive courses.

They identified comfort with their ability to address higher order and later order concerns. This particular question in the survey addressed emotion and how students felt about writing generally and certain aspects of writing. Very few participants indicated discomfort or anxiety with writing, seeking feedback, coming up with topics, and writing strategies.

**Slide 33: Results: Efficacy of Groups**

The surveys from both semesters indicated logistical problems with how the groups operated, as well as unrealistic expectations for the groups or for the tutors’ roles in the groups. Quite a large percentage of students indicated interest in joining the groups. Due to the number of students, we offered 3 different group options each semester. However, students’ time constraints and other activities made it difficult for some groups to really launch. In each semester, we had one group that simply failed to meet after an initial meet-and-greet session. In both semesters, we had one group that was overwhelmingly successful. In both semesters,
the third group was sporadic, and the tutor would be regularly available, but the number of
participants would vary from 1 to 3.

For the most part, those who participated in the groups really valued them. They liked their
tutor, and they felt that the tutor was helpful. A few participants and some students who didn’t
join the groups seemed to have unrealistic expectations for what the tutor should be doing or
how to offer the groups so they could more readily participate. Their suggestions included a
desire for more directive, editorial work from the tutors, demanding discipline-specific
expertise, or making the groups mandatory or available during class time. They wanted
incentives to participate, and many students indicated their busy schedules and activities as
reasons for why they couldn’t participate at all or why their participation was sporadic.

Throughout the semesters, I informally gathered information from tutors, and we invited the
director of the HC to join us for some discussions. Unsurprisingly, tutors who had groups that
didn’t meet regularly were frustrated by the experience and by students’ expectations.

Slide 34: Group Participation Effects
Results indicated that participation in the groups—or merely hearing about the Writing Lab all
semester long—did not mean that students were more likely to visit the Writing Lab for one-to-
one tutorials. We expected the writing groups to serve as a supplement to, and not a
replacement for, our tutorial services. Unfortunately, even students who couldn’t participate in
the groups weren’t seeking out the Writing Lab in other ways.

Here’s where students noted lack of time as a factor. I suspect, too, that if students are already
seeking feedback from family or faculty members, they didn’t see the need to use the Writing Lab.

In general, self-reported writing and revision practices did not change from the pre- and post-
participation survey.

Slide 35: Overall Takeaways
The results from all the surveys showed that students are generally confident about their
writing, and they’re comfortable using different approaches to writing. Results showed that
students, and in this case, high-achieving students, valued writing feedback. Just because these
students were confident about their writing abilities didn’t mean they avoided feedback. But
the source of the feedback varied, and the Writing lab was not the primary source of that
feedback.

Furthermore, students’ lack of engagement with the Writing Lab did not seem to be due to
misconceptions about the Lab (which some did have) or because they had reservations about
the setting or approach of the Writing Lab. Instead, students already had a trusted source for
feedback or because they had serious time constraints.
Participation in the writing groups added to the long list of obligations and pressures these students, and quite a lot of other students on our campus, face. Our administration is focusing heavily on on-time graduation within four years. More students are regularly taking 19-20 credit hours to fulfill degree requirements while also engaging in summer or year-long internships and co-ops. It’s no surprise that even adding a voluntary, helpful support program like these writing groups would be unsustainable for much of this population.

Slide 36: From Groups to Writing Fellows

So we decided to try another approach this spring semester.

My collaborator in the Honors College, along with two faculty members teaching honors courses, still wanted to work together and involve the Writing Lab in the spring 2016 courses. The HC director informally noted that she saw improvement in her students’ papers as a result of the fall semester’s groups, but agreed that groups were untenable. We nixed the writing groups altogether and have started a program similar to a writing fellows program.

Tutors were assigned to each of three courses, and they visited the courses very early in the semester to introduce themselves. They provided information about the Writing Lab and invited students to schedule tutorials with them in the Writing Lab if they wanted feedback for these particular honors courses.

The tutors will return for later visits during in-class peer review sessions this week and then again in April. The tutors have been in contact with the faculty members, so there’s constant communication about course assignments and expectations. The faculty members have intentionally involved tutors to assist with the course activities for these later visits.

Embedding tutors in these courses has already had a positive effect for the Writing Lab and for these tutors: students made appointments with these tutors almost immediately after the tutors’ initial visits to the classes. This model is already showing signs of being a more fulfilling experience for students, tutors, and faculty members.

Slide 37: Discussion/Q&A

Now we’d like to hear from you. You’re welcome to offer any comments or pose any questions you’d like.

We’ve offered some questions here just as a guide and because we’d like to hear more about your experiences with writing groups, too.