The Graduate Writing Center Is Growing
Beyond its Spring 2016 pilot semester, UVM’s Graduate Writing Center has continued to grow in numbers:

- From four graduate writing consultants for Spring 2016 to ten graduate writing consultants (from Communication Sciences and Disorders, Community Development and Applied Economics, Counseling, English, History, Microbiology, Natural Resources, and Psychological Sciences) for Spring 2017
- From 150 graduate student contact hours as of May 1, 2016, to a running total of 609 contact hours as of February 27, 2017

as well as in programming:

- Offering Skype- and Google Doc-assisted appointments for off-campus and distance-degree students
- Holding UVM’s first “summer camps” for thesis and dissertation writers with a four-day Thesis and Dissertation Jump-Start Camp in June 2016 followed by a two-day Camp Completion in August 2016
- Partnering with the Graduate Student Senate to offer workshops for their Fall Professional Development series
- Hosting additional workshops in strategies for clarity and cohesion, literature reviews, and thesis and dissertation proposals as well as monthly Sunday graduate writing retreats
- Offering weekly writing partnerships to support students in the Global Gateway Premasters Program
- Partnering an experienced graduate writing consultant with two faculty in Psychological Sciences and Physical Therapy to assist them in designing and scaffolding writing assignments and offering in-class and out-of-class workshops and group tutorials

In the 2016 Fall semester plus the first month of the 2017 Spring Semester, the graduate writing consultants have recorded 323 individual and small-group student contact hours. With the addition of monthly Sunday graduate writing retreats, special topic workshops, and the summer Dissertation and Thesis Jump-Start Camp and Camp Completion, total contact hours for Fall 2016 and early Spring 2017 have reached 459 (not including the two workshops two consultants facilitated for the Graduate Student Senate’s Professional Development Series, for which attendance records were not kept).

Who Comes to the Graduate Writing Center
The weekly partnership appointments with Global Gateway Premasters Program students comprise the largest share of appointments, followed by appointments with students in Nursing and Health Sciences, Arts and Sciences, and Agriculture and Life Sciences.
The number of students from Rubenstein and Education reached by the Graduate Writing Center increases when contact hours through the monthly Sunday graduate writing retreats, the summer Thesis and Dissertation Jump-Start Camp and Camp Completion, and the special-topic workshops are included.

With the addition of a graduate writing consultant from Natural Resources in January 2017, we are witnessing, and anticipate greater, growth in appointments from Rubenstein. We have also initiated outreach in Education and Social Work (having heard from faculty that they appreciate the Graduate Writing Center’s services while actual appointments remain few), and we have made outreach to Engineering, Math, and Computer Science an additional Spring 2017 goal. I also plan to target Engineering, Computer Science, Education, and Social Work as well as Natural Resources in recruiting three new consultants for next year to replace three current consultants who anticipate graduating in May.
What Our Graduate Students Need from the Graduate Writing Center

We are striving to create a picture of both students’ writing needs that the Graduate Writing Center can help meet and the kinds of projects and goals that bring them in the door. Last Fall 13 percent of UVM graduate students completed our needs-assessment survey. Just over half responded with project-specific goals and deadlines (e.g., “I would like to have a completed draft of my dissertation proposal by December”); a plurality expressed broader concerns about discipline-based meaning-making (“My biggest challenge is finding the story in my data”) and voice (e.g., “I want to become more comfortable writing in a professional tone”). Not surprisingly then, a majority of sessions are devoted to helping students hone in on, articulate, and organize the progression of a “research story” (or similar aim) as well as identify and draw rhetorical lessons from “mentor” or model texts in their fields.

While very few flagged grammatical concerns, an examination of session reports—what students actually work on in the Graduate Writing Center—shows that many students (and their advisors) are very concerned with clarity, concision, and cohesion at the sentence- and paragraph-level. In other words, when meaning breaks down in our graduate students’ writing, it is not typically due to lack of grammatical knowledge per se but the need for lessons in creating sentence-level cohesion—for instance, by moving from old to new information—or improving paragraph-to-paragraph clarity and flow—for instance, by leading with sign-posts instead of burying topic sentences in a paragraph’s middle or end.

What Graduate Students Work on in the Graduate Writing Center

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sample Session Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Telling a Research Story</td>
<td>“Focused on one section that still needed a ‘voice’ and an organizational structure: What is the narrative here?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Big-Picture Organizing</td>
<td>“Talked about organizing around the action statements. Within each section (action statement) how to draw broader conclusions, orient them in the literature, and talk about implications.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Analyzing Models/Conventions of Disciplinary Genres</td>
<td>“Looked at example abstracts and talked about what goes into an abstract. Picked out major details from model paper from intro, methods, results, and conclusions to draft abstract.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sentence-Level Cohesion, Stance-Taking</td>
<td>“Tried using more ‘hedging terms’ for making suggestions based on results.”</td>
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A caveat here is that outside of Global Gateway Premasters Program students, very few international students who identified themselves as L2 (English as a second language) writers have visited the Graduate Writing Center: 10 total (though most have come for multiple and even weekly appointments). At the same time, we have had several queries from L2 graduate student writers seeking a semester’s course to help them with English language proficiency in the context of their advanced disciplinary writing demands. A project for Fall 2017 may be to do a needs-assessment survey of L2 graduate student writers and, following the example of other research universities with graduate writing support, offer a non-credit mini-course or workshop series dedicated to L2 graduate student writers.
What Students Find Beneficial in Their Graduate Writing Center Experience

In the feedback students provide at the end of a session, the focus is on specific strategies they learned in their one-hour consultation or the helpfulness of conversing, brainstorming, and problem-solving with an experienced peer:

• “The session helped me get a clearer idea about how to approach the problem.”
• “Reverse outlining helped me understand I was structuring my paragraphs in the wrong direction!”
• “Most helpful was being to talk openly, being heard, and receiving constructive feedback.”
• “My consultant had great ideas about how I could synthesize my information more effectively.”
• “It was very helpful reading out loud and getting feedback from someone outside of the medical field.”
• “I would not have figured this out on my own! I most definitely needed another ‘academic eye’ to question why I had written what I did and where it went.”

At the same time, our Fall needs-assessment survey and feedback from retreats and camps make clear that our graduate students have a common need beyond new writing strategies, genre guidance, and draft feedback: help in carving out writing time, setting manageable goals, and maintaining a consistent writing schedule. Our thesis and dissertation camps, for instance, offered mini-workshops in writing strategies as well as feedback from graduate writing consultants, but in their evaluations, students underscored as equally or more important the structured writing time and accountability that the camps provided:

• “I have been distracted/busy with lab work, so I always put aside my writing. Everyone has lots of time for all sorts of activities but not for writing. This camp was about allocating dedicated time for writing. And through writing, I could think about new ideas for my research.”
• “The camp provided me the time to write my fourth thesis chapter instead of making excuses.”
• “I surprised myself by demonstrating just how much I could accomplish given quiet, focused writing time. The internet-free blocks were particularly productive.”
• “This was fantastic. I felt like I had two jobs as a writer this summer: (1) create structure, time, and space to write, and (2) the actual thinking/writing. This camp supported me by being the ‘container’ for my writing, taking that first job from me and helping me focus on the second!”
• “This camp was very helpful in establishing how important routine and accountability for writing are.”
• “Camp was an essential tool that helped me start dissertation writing. I developed writing strategies, learned to plan ahead, and, most importantly, got a lot done.”

Hence while the literature on graduate writing center nationwide shows a divide among those that feature specialized (writing process; advanced academic or professional genre) assistance and those that provide “just-write” time and space, we are trying to chart a course for UVM’s Graduate Writing Center that does both: finding the right allocation of staff resources for individual consultations, faculty partnerships, special-topic workshops, and the primarily “just-write” retreats and camps.
Where the Graduate Writing Center Goes from Here

Although it seems unlikely that the Graduate Writing Center can continue to expand its staff much beyond 10 (UVM has a small graduate population from which to recruit experienced writers who have interest in and time for Graduate Writing Center employment), we anticipate that next year will bring these changes:

- Dedication of two consultants each semester to “embed” in specific seminars and work with faculty (extending this year’s pilot partnerships with faculty in Psychological Sciences and Physical Therapy) who want to develop assignment sequences, scaffolds, workshops, and, especially, their own confidence and effectiveness in mentoring their graduate students as writers.

- Moving from the writing partners model for the Global Gateway Premasters Program to partnering one to two graduate writing consultants each semester more directly with PMP faculty so that consultants are working with students inside as well as outside the classes and are also in regular conversation with faculty about students’ writing experiences and challenges. (PMP students would also have the option of making additional appointments in the Graduate Writing Center.) The reason for this change: The writing partners model we pursued this year was designed with the assumption that students would have sufficient support through their PMP writing and communication classes for those assignments but would need the additional support of a writing partner for assignments in their discipline-based class. What we have found in practice, however, is that these students have very few (and in most cases no) writing assignments outside their PMP classes and could use more support with their PMP writing and communication assignments—support that could be improved by having one or two consultants work much more closely with faculty. With Global Gateway’s Sharon Ultsch, I will return to this year’s Consortium on Graduate Communications Institute to further flesh out these next-year plans.

- Increased outreach to graduate programs with an emphasis not only on getting students into the Graduate Writing Center but bringing the Graduate Writing Center into programs with workshops specifically tailored for a given seminar, new student orientation, lab group etc.

- A new home! We anticipate that by Spring 2018 the Bailey Howe ground-floor renovation will be completed, creating a visible, accessible space for both the Graduate and Undergraduate Writing Centers including a reception area, conference room for workshops, three dedicated Graduate Writing Center consultation rooms, and a sound-proofed room for Skype tutorials. The question of a budget to furnish the new space is still up in the air. However, with the addition of scheduling software for the Graduate Writing Center plus a highly visible campus space, students will be able to sign up online or even drop in for last-minute appointments—something that is not currently possible for our hard-to-find Waterman basement location.

If resources allow, we would also like to follow up on numerous student requests and increase the number of dissertation and thesis camps we offer to include Winter and Spring breaks plus regular mid-week and evening writing retreats for graduate writers. Coupled with the need for tutor-training workshops each August and January plus ongoing staff development meetings, the additional camps and retreats are beyond my current capacity as the Graduate Writing Center’s coordinator. However, if we follow the example of other university graduate writing centers and create for an experienced consultant the position of associate coordinator, this additional programming could become feasible.