2018 Graduate Writing Center Highlights

Last semester, the Graduate Writing Center (GWC) acquired its own WCOnline account, allowing us to keep our registrations, appointments, and consultation reports separate from the Undergraduate Writing Center (UWC). More importantly, WCOnline gives UVM graduate students an easy way to view available appointments and sign up online. No longer do graduate students and graduate writing consultants have to exchange emails to set up an appointment time!

In January, the GWC opened in its newly renovated Bailey Howe office suite. Adjacent to the UWC, our new space features a shared reception area, a group consultation room, and three individual consultation rooms, one of which is equipped for Skype appointments. No longer are students trying to find us in temporary library cubicles and Waterman basement rooms!

Our staff of graduate writing consultants has grown to 11 masters and doctoral students from Arts and Sciences, Education and Social Work, Nursing and Health Sciences, and the Rubenstein School. As required for College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA) tutoring certification, new consultants for Fall 2017 participated in a three-day, 12-hour pre-semester workshop to prepare for joining the GWC. For the Spring semester, three new consultants are being mentored in weekly meetings with an experienced graduate writing consultant to address CRLA Level I topics. All consultants meet three or four times a semester for ongoing staff development on such topics as mentoring science writing, working with L2 (second-language) writers, strategies for advanced academic writing genres such as literature reviews, and practices for advancing diversity and inclusion. By the end of the Spring 2018 semester, all consultants will have earned Level I or II CRLA certification; at least three consultants have achieved the Level III (Master) certification.

In addition to our ongoing partnership with students in the Global Gateway’s Premasters Program (PMP), we have partnered with faculty and classes in Physical Therapy and Education. For a two-semester Physical Therapy doctoral seminar, a graduate writing consultant visits the seminar twice each semester to facilitate in-class writing workshops, then help students sign up for follow-up group appointments with the GWC. For three Education seminars, consultants have facilitated in-class workshops, with students signing up for subsequent individual appointments or attending a GWC Sunday Writing Retreat for feedback and support. We have also improved upon the PMP partnership through having a consultant serve as a liaison and periodically visit the class, coordinating to make sure that PMP student appointments with GWC consultants (typically eight per student over a semester) are in step with writing needs and assignment due dates. Next year we are going to recommend that the GWC liaison and PMP faculty member meet biweekly to ensure coordination.

New programming includes adding an additional two-day Winter Break “camp” for dissertation and thesis writers. Because registration data shows that most students learn about the GWC through their advisors and class presentations, we have also sponsored forums for faculty and graduate students about advanced academic writing: a panel discussion, co-sponsored with the Writing in the Disciplines program, on Mentoring Writing in the Lab plus a panel discussion for Rubenstein faculty and students featuring senior scientists sharing their stories of learning to write in their fields.
Who Visits the Graduate Writing Center

In the 2017 Fall semester plus the first seven weeks of the 2017 Spring semester, the graduate writing consultants have recorded 430 individual and small-group student contact hours (compared with 323 this time last year). The monthly Sunday Graduate Writing Retreats (offering students extended independent writing time with the option of meeting with a graduate writing consultant), the four-day Dissertation and Thesis Jump-Start Camp, and the two-day August and January Camp Completion brought 86 graduate students to the GWC. This brings the total student contact hours with the GWC for the year thus far (not including in-class presentations and workshops) to 1,321.

WHO VISITS THE GRADUATE WRITING CENTER: DEGREE SOUGHT

295 appointments were with masters students.
130 appointments were with doctoral students.
5 appointments were with medical students at work on residency statements.

WHO VISITS THE GRADUATE WRITING CENTER: ON-CAMPUS & SKYPE APPOINTMENTS

Only 4% of appointments were conducted via Skype, suggesting more promotion of GWC services is needed for students in distance and low-residency degree programs.
Thanks to class presentations and workshops, the number of CESS appointments jumped from 4% in 2017 to 23% of FY2018 appointments so far.

Although the share of CALS and RSENR appointments is small, these students have a visible presence in dissertation/thesis camps and Sunday Graduate Writing Retreats as do CAS students in the sciences.

31% of appointments were with L2 writers (students who identify English as a second language). Of these appointments, 70% were with matriculated students and 30% with PMP students.
These indicators show important gains both in number of appointments and in connecting with programs (in CESS and CNHS particularly) and populations (L2 writers beyond the Premasters Program) whose previous participation was much lower. The appointment data also show programs (in CALS, CEMS, and RSENR) where we can do more to connect students with the GWC.

**How Students Learn about the Graduate Writing Center and Why They Visit**

Thanks to our new online scheduling system, we can now capture and track how students learned about the GWC and how they describe the concerns bringing them here.

**HOW STUDENTS LEARN ABOUT THE GRADUATE WRITING CENTER**

Students report that faculty and graduate program staff plus in-class presentations and workshops provided primary information about and encouragement for their first GWC visits.

The words students use most to describe what they want to work on highlight concern with meeting reader needs—for “flow,” “clarity,” and “understanding”—and their effort to learn the “structure” and “format” for writing in their fields.

Students are also concerned at the sentence-level about field-specific style, citation practices, and terminology to create a professional “voice” promoting “clarity,” “understanding,” and (of course) “flow.”
These snapshots tell us that connecting with graduate faculty, directors, and student support staff will be key in growing the GWC—just as connecting with more faculty and classes in CESS and CNHS in the past year helped increase the number of those graduate students making appointments. Recent GWC-sponsored panel discussions for faculty and graduate students in the sciences plus a planned GWC-graduate seminar partnership with a faculty member from CALS/Plant Biology are additional steps we’re taking now toward fostering those connections. Students’ most commonly used terms for describing the goals and challenges that bring them to the GWC might also help us educate faculty about the “big-picture” rhetorical questions (“How do I keep my research question visible through every section of a long article without seeming redundant?”) and genre questions (“What’s different about the structure and function of a literature review from an annotated bibliography?”) students can work on in the GWC.

Students’ post-session evaluations underscore that above all what the Graduate Writing Center provides is an audience. The audience of a graduate writing consultant is so beneficial for the students’ common concerns about clarity, structure, and flow because consultants are provide an “outside perspective” or “another set of eyes” plus feedback on “where my implicit knowledge needed be made more explicit,” how to “transform our language from IRB writing style a more professional paper flow,” or “make challenging paragraphs easier for a reader to digest.”

What an examination of the most commonly used terms in students’ post-session evaluations also reveals is that the kind of audience graduate writing consultants serve as matters too: “supportive,” “kind,” “open,” “compassionate,” “invested,” “engaged,” “enthusiastic,” “insightful,” and “motivating.”
Advice, Critical Feedback, and Where the Graduate Writing Center Goes from Here

The biggest concerns students have voiced about the GWC—the difficulty of setting up an appointment, confusion about where to find us—have been addressed with the online scheduling system and our new Bailey Howe suite of consultation rooms. With eleven consultants, the GWC is now able to offer morning, afternoon, and evening appointments Sunday through Friday. Beyond these concerns about access and ease, the most common critical feedback or advice students provide in post-session evaluations is

• do more to make the GWC’s services visible to graduate students
• provide students with the option of longer appointments (beyond 60 minutes) for bigger projects or of sending a draft for a consultant to review in advance of an appointment.
• cultivate greater mindfulness among consultants about students’ access needs (e.g., one disabled student arriving late to a writing retreat found the door closed with no way to open it or to signal her arrival) and identities (e.g., noting a student’s pronouns on the registration form and honoring their gender identity).

Visibility and outreach goals for the remainder of the Spring semester and next year include outreach to offices on campus providing support to matriculated international graduate students, to graduate program directors for distance and low-residency degree programs, and to graduate directors in CALS, CEMS, and RSENR as these students seem particularly underserved by the GWC (outside of our writing camps and retreats) thus far.

The GWC’s upcoming staff development meetings will also focus on developing our first mission or diversity and inclusion statement (following the model of the statement developed and revised over the years by the Undergraduate Writing Center’s tutors) as well as a FAQ about the GWC for graduate students. Through the FAQ and other means, we will aim to communicate to students that they can, after conferring with a consultant, arrange for an extended session (helpful not only for long projects but also for L2 writers or students with language and processing differences), and they can also choose to sign up for more than one appointment in a week or for regular weekly appointments over a semester. Through the FAQ and other means, we will aim as well to communicate the different role a graduate writing consultant plays from that of an advisor or professional editor. While all advanced academic writers certainly benefit from line-by-line or extended editorial feedback and critique, the much more specific niche of the GWC is to foster helpful, clarifying, insight-producing conversation between writer and an engaged, experienced peer—or, as one recent visitor to the GWC put it in their post-session evaluation, provide “patience” and “support” for “wrestling with text together.”