3. Leadership Project Narrative

In my article, Enter the Dragon: Graduate Tutor Education in the Hall of Mirrors, I argue that graduate writing center directors and administrators should take a leadership role in defining the shape of graduate writing support not just in their centers, but particularly across their campuses and institutional contexts. To begin that process, it is necessary to open productive dialogue with other campus offices, deans and graduate school administrators. What follows is the narrative of such an undertaking at my own university, which I share here as an artifact in the hope that it might provide some ideas for initiating and sustaining conversation with other key partners in graduate writing support on your own campuses.

In January 2014 our center director urged the staff to join with her to create a strategy for addressing persistent faculty concerns that the level of graduate student writing was not meeting expectations. After some discussion, we decided to being at the beginning, so to speak, with a review of learning outcomes and aims for graduate writers. After studying the expressed writing outcomes of the graduate school itself and the websites and printed materials of all nine of our graduate departments we found room for improvement. The goals we found were in many cases vague and underdeveloped, lacking clear connection to the institutional mission and/or individual course syllabi.

While many areas of graduate writing and graduate learning outcomes remain under-researched (Ondrusek 2012, Lavelle and Bushrow 2007), recent findings nonetheless provide some evidence for the effectiveness of robust goals at the graduate level, where Lavelle and Bushrow document a correlation between "the writers' beliefs and strategies and the quality of written outcomes" (2007). Further, the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment argues that clear and accurate learning outcomes should exist at three tiers: the institutional, the departmental, and the classroom-level as vital components to successful learning and assessment (NILOA 2011).

With those caveats in mind, the Writing Center drafted a proposal to support the university graduate school and its departments in the evaluation of existing writing goals and outcomes in the context of broader department and graduate school goals, and if necessary, to help graduate programs to articulate writing specific goals and outcomes for graduate students in their disciplines.

Precedent existed for the Writing Center and its parent Writing Department to take the initiative in such a role. Previously the University had embraced writing across the curriculum. As recently as 2007 the university published a custom edition of Diane Hacker's *A Writer's Reference*, which included a *Guide To Writing in All Disciplines* that articulated discipline-specific writing expectations at the undergraduate level. This guidebook reflected cooperative work between the various departments across campus, and while its audience was limited to undergraduates, it provided a model for process and product in the Writing Center's effort to reach out to graduate departments about their writing specific learning goals. Our long term goal was to help the graduate school produce such a guidebook its students.

The initial proposal to the Dean of the Graduate School required research as well as a concerted effort to gather and evaluate artifacts from other campuses with more developed graduate learning outcomes. Our center staff also worked to discover more sites of support to link our advocacy to national standards of excellence, to help departments locate themselves in relation to what similar programs were doing at other universities, and to build a library of resources for future deployment.

The Associate V.P. of Graduate Studies (Academic Affairs) read our proposal favorably and urged us to gather feedback from other important organizational figures, including Deans and Associate Deans of the College of Arts & Sciences and specific chairs in departments and programs that had already demonstrated significant commitment to their students' writing. Incorporating this early feedback loop broadened the base of ideas; at the same time it worked to raise awareness of the initiative. The most consistent and important piece of advice we received was to express not only the theoretical rationale for our proposal, but also actionable methods of implementation and *budgetary* requirements for completion.

In response to the feedback, the Writing Center developed a multi-phased plan and budget that began with outcome review and ended with the production of a WID-style handbook for graduate writers. After several rounds of editing, the A.V.P. invited the Writing Center to present its proposal at the monthly meeting of Graduate Chairs.

In advance of the presentation, the A.V.P. also urged that we hold face-to-face meetings with as many of the graduate chairs as possible in order to promote understanding and build a coalition of grassroots support. These meetings allowed the Writing Center to accomplish several important tasks in advance of its presentation. First, we were able to emphasize the core-identity of the Writing Center services as based on peer-to-peer ethos and a voluntary commitment. In other words, we wanted departments to understand that it was not our intention to impose goals on them from the top down or to serve as the 'writing police'— rather, we would offer our consultation services on a voluntary basis and work collaboratively to help departments and programs best express their own goals.

In these meetings we gathered frank updates from individual programs about the challenges they faced writing goals in their specific areas. This allowed us to customize the presentation of our proposal to make sure that it addressed the existing climate of concerns. For example, in some cases we learned about the legacies of existing work. Other departments were firmly committed to their current goals because they were the basis of an unfolding assessment and accreditation reports. We also learned that logistics and work flow matter greatly in organization development, such that we had to consider how we could work most effectively with departments and programs with very different operating strategies. With respect to goals and outcomes themselves it became important to define writing in the 21st century in ways that encompassed multiple modalities of 'effective communication' in addition to strictly traditional notions of paper/ink. Last but not least, we also learned that funding would be a major component to success, which led us to our office of research where we began working to exploring grants and other resources.

Prior to the Grad Chairs meeting we met one last time with the AVP, who told us that the university did not have funding to roll out any of our initiatives, but that support for the proposal was widespread. She encouraged us to remain open to the possibility that the presentation might create opportunities for one-off projects with specific departments . . . who would pay for these efforts out of their own departmental budgets . . . but that this work might not get underway until "later".

In fact the meeting did unfold as the AVP predicted. We received no objections or push back against our proposal, and neither did we leave with any firm commitment to action in place. Several chairs indicated their departments might be interested in some kind of collaboration with the Writing Center, to be determined at a later date.

For some time, I thought that we had failed and our work had gone for nothing because no department was willing to provide a course release for any of its faculty to participate in the writing goal review, effectively putting a stop to an activity which everyone agreed was a good idea. I wont lie: I was a bit disheartened.

After some time passed, however, I began to see that proposal and all the effort that went into supporting it as something of a Trojan horse. True, we have yet to help write or revise a single goal or outcome at the institutional, program, department, or course level. But in spite of failing in our attempt there, we did effectively insert our voice into the leadership conversation of graduate writing support. In the process we have opened many new channels with the Dean of the Graduate Studies, experienced ongoing semi-regular invitations to visit the Grad Chairs monthly meeting, enjoyed increased two-way conversation with department chairs across all our programs; and, best of all, we captured the interest of the graduate faculty, many of who have approached us individually about their courses. With graduate professors and department chairs seeking out the writing center and asking how to improve their learning outcomes, we have had the opportunity to develop and pilot specific programs within several graduate departments. Since 2014, these relationships outside the Writing Center have continued to grow. They have direct influence on the kinds of graduate writing support our Writing Center offers, on the graduate students we hire as tutors, and on the both the 'how' and 'what' of our tutor education program.