

You Are Not Alone: Facilitating a Holistic Graduate Academic Experience through a Dissertation Writing Workshop

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<https://libguides.unco.edu/WritingIntensive>

Presentation Outline

INTRODUCTION

Orientation to UNC -- UNC is a medium-sized university (its FTE hovers between 10,000 to 12,000; currently we have 8,105 undergraduates and 2,713 graduate students—1,707 masters and 577 doctoral, and 429 specialist, licensure or unclassified). Historically the State of Colorado's Normal School, we are located about an hour north of Denver, in Greeley, Colorado.

We are a case study -- This presentation is a case study of our Dissertation Prep & Writing Intensive events. These events were collaboratively planned by two academic units: the University Libraries and the Graduate School. Many academic librarians have facilitated writing groups or retreats or boot camps. We hope that our case study will be helpful to you whether it contrasts with or conforms to similar programs you have implemented, are planning to implement, or seek to improve. As we describe our case, you might think about how your experience or situation compares to ours, and how it differs. We look forward to a lively Q&A for the last 10 or 15 minutes, so please hold your comments and questions till then. In the program, we advertised you would learn the best practices for collaborating with units outside of the library, would receive a template for developing your own workshop, and would learn about event planning, assessment, and revision. I'll be addressing best collaborative practices and the collaborative, logistical, and affective aspects of the workshop template. The first part of the presentation will focus on the inaugural event, held in June 2018.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Our Dissertation Prep & Writing Intensive event started as just a small seedling in the mind of our supervisor, Jen Mayer, and our colleagues Stephanie Wiegand and Stan Trembach --so it was a matter of a fruitful collaboration between a middle manager and her supervisees, the librarians in the Library Research Services department. In 2016 we had a tentative departmental goal to "explore the creation of a student library research group." How did it grow from this modest aspiration in 2016 to a full-fledged success, to be repeated four times and to receive the 2019 Library Project of the Year Award from the Colorado Association of Libraries? Like many successful projects, it was a combination of serendipity, effective management, and hard work!

Our department, Library Research Services (LRS), supports the scholarship activities of students and faculty at UNC with emphases on information literacy, scholarly communication, and educational outreach. The department consists of six faculty librarians with liaison responsibilities to thirty-two academic departments, schools, and centers, including the Graduate School. Because of the department's existing relationship with the Grad School and the department head's outreach work in

this area, coupled with an overall focus on research and scholarship support, the development of a dissertation workshop fit in perfectly with the goals and mandates of the department.

The department recognized a need to “meet students where they are” and bring them out of isolation. Students feel they are working in a vacuum and only have their mentors to talk to, and there might be hesitancy to talk to mentors to avoid looking stupid. The Libraries wanted to provide a forum for students to interact with others who are going through the same thing and address common issues that most students encounter.

WHY THE FIRST INTENSIVE COLLABORATION WAS SUCCESSFUL

By doing some analysis and Monday-morning quarterbacking, we have identified five factors that were critical to the original project’s success: 1)it targeted a **Demonstrated Need**; 2)it fit our cautious culture as it was new enough to be **Trendy but not** old enough to be **Untried**; 3)it was **Administratively Friendly** because it was low-cost and matched our climate of austerity; and); 4)**Collaborative Relationships** provided a strong base; and 5)the project had **Intrinsic Meaning** both for the students—who are the end-users-- and employees who do the work of organizing and implementation.

FIVE SUCCESS FACTORS AND FIVE PLANNING-RELATED PHASES

As we build our Collaborative Template, we’ll say more about these five factors that determined our success. Chronologically, we’ll frame this discussion around the five phases of the planning process: the first is the groundwork phase, the second is preplanning, the third is comprised of the core planning activities, the fourth is execution of the event, and the fifth is follow-up.

So the first item on our template is: **Ongoing Needs Assessment**

- Our project **ADDRESSED a DEMONSTRATED NEED ON CAMPUS**--Part of the groundwork of collaboration was the identification of a worthy project upon which to collaborate. A consultant had administered a campus climate survey in response to an initiative that was launched to make our campus a more diverse and inclusive community. The survey was begun in September 2016 and the results were announced in March of 2017. 2,574 surveys were completed, and of those 507 were completed by graduate students. Our Supervisor Jen Mayer studied the results of the Campus Climate Survey. It indicated that our UNC graduate students lacked as sense of community on our campus. They wanted more support and opportunities to come together with other graduate students. I’ll quote from the Final Report: “Ninety-six Graduate and Undergraduate Student respondents described a poor sense of belonging and a desire to strengthen their sense of belonging at UNC. Both Graduate and Undergraduate Student respondents suggested more events and more outreach to improve the climate at UNC,” page 372, <https://www.unco.edu/campus-climate/documents/Final-Report.pdf>

The second item on our template is: **Idea Scouting with an Open Mind but Keeping Knowledge of Your Organizational Culture and Budgetary Limits in Mind**

- Another part of the groundwork of collaboration is studying your organization to get a sense of the amount of risk or innovation that your campus culture/library culture allows. 2)innovations that are **TRENDY BUT NOT UNTRIED** are a good match for the cautious culture at UNC and University Libraries; while we are not risk takers and are seldom the first to take the plunge, we

are open to new ideas. We love to jump aboard the bandwagon, to join the parade or concert already in progress. The good collaborator/manager/librarian is always scouting for ideas. Thus Jen and Stephanie could point to the successful examples of peer libraries in Canada--Simon Fraser University and Queens University--whom they'd seen present on writing boot camps at an ACRL conference in 2017.

- An additional aspect of groundwork is knowing what the financial limits might be, and knowing how money is allocated within the organization. This event was **ADMINISTRATOR FRIENDLY**: it fit well with existing departmental/institutional goals regarding outreach and scholarly communications support and it was low-cost; it leveraged our resources and strengths in this time of austerity and precarity. Colorado is a state with a libertarian bent that falls near the bottom of the barrel in terms of higher education support. And we are in the midst of a painful downsizing process (the elimination of 65 positions) to balance our budget. Thus, the shoestring nature of this project was a perfect fit. Our library does not have an ample budget for programming, whereas our primary collaborative partner, the Graduate School, had some funds to share with us for this event.

You'll remember that we identified our fourth success factor as the strong base that **COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS** provided.

- I interviewed my supervisor Jen to ask her about how she built up a collaborative environment for this project: It started with student-centered aspirations, knowledge of the organization, and the gradual accretion of social capital. Jen functioned as the liaison to our Graduate School, our main collaborator in the event. I observed how she built support with library administrators and departmental staff. She integrated the planning and execution of the event into the departmental goals, and delegated responsibility in accordance with individual strengths; the event was shaped to fit library-wide goals. She communicated early and often with UL administrators. I interviewed her about her role as Graduate School liaison asking how she as a Middle Manager built a relationship with the Graduate School Associate Dean--just what kind of legwork does this liaison do)? She explained that she had met the Associate Dean Candidates during interviews. She got to have "really long conversations with each and made connection with successful candidate Cindy Wesley and emailed her right away and they met early on; she was really open to it, was 'all in' from the beginning and offered funds to pay for food and offered help from the Graduate Assistant; it was an easy sell." I asked Jen what advice she would give a fellow librarian about the process of getting buy-in from campus partners. She responded that face-to-face contact (with Graduate School Associate Dean) was important, rather than just emails.
- I inquired why she thought this initiative won the CAL award--what made it stand out? She answered that the student-centered nature of the program and the assessment data made it a stand-out.
- Judging from this interview and my observations of my supervisor, I would add the following practices to our template:
 - Lobbying--take the time to find common ground, get buy-in
 - Ongoing communication and tolerance of repetition, reassurance
 - Realistic goals and comfort with varying participation levels of collaborators
 - Trust (well-founded) in employees in order to be able to efficiently delegate

- Good leadership skills overall, high level of emotional intelligence

AN IMPORTANT CAVEAT TO ADD TO OUR BEST COLLABORATIVE PRACTICES TEMPLATE:

Have PATIENCE & invest TIME (to build relationships) networking requires both patience and time because of personnel changes and academic schedule.

Our process was protracted due to the summer hiatus, our cautious library culture, and the fact that this was our first event. But after much thoughtful groundwork, and the convening of a departmental planning committee that met several times in the spring of 2017, we started planning in earnest in the fall of 2017.

One of the most important things that happens during this phase is that the members of the planning committee make the project their own. With secure footing on the groundwork laid and maintained by our supervisor, the planning committee commenced with preplanning throughout the fall of 2017, the outcome of which were the following: a checklist of logistical details, an hour-by-hour schedule, and an outline of content and associated learning objectives;

The logistical aspects of planning take precedence at this point, in the late winter and early spring of 2018. We had 7 bi-weekly meetings February – early April 2018, and 8 weekly meetings late April up to event on June 8-10, 2018.

THE LOGISTICAL/EMOTIONAL ASPECTS OF CONFERENCE PLANNING AND HOSTING: EFFICIENTLY AND EFFECTIVELY CONVEYING INTRINSIC MEANING

The logistical-emotional aspects of conference planning and hosting cannot be overstated, yet the emotional aspects tend to be assumed and the logistics undervalued as clerical functions. The logistical aspects of a conference are often referred to as “housekeeping.” For example, a schedule change or announcements re: meals are often introduced to the group as “housekeeping items.” This belies the affective nature of logistics. Relegated to “housekeeping,” good leadership with regard to logistics is a crucial executive function that should be acknowledged as such and rewarded. The logistical aspects further refine the “who-what-when-why-where-how” of the planning that is already in place.

- WHO is: the members of the planning committee, the volunteers, the workshop participants, the presenters;
- WHEN is: confirmation and tweaking of the schedule; WHERE is: confirmation of the space reservation, ensuring that it is comfortable and set up properly; WHAT is: presenters’ preparation of program content;
- HOW is: all the preparation and pre-planning involving money, permission, policy, and purpose;
- WHY is: all the affective aspects of the foregoing, plus the intrinsic meaningfulness. This detail management is akin to the multi-tasking of an attentive adults in a large, extended family.

It requires the competent, sensitive juggling of WHO (people), WHAT (events, both planned and unplanned), WHERE (being present and ready for anything), WHEN (time conscious but going with the flow), WHY (being in touch with the meaningfulness of the event and the uniqueness of each person involved), HOW (the combination of collaborative planning and spontaneous creativity necessary to pull

off the event).. Feelings lurk behind the logistics, and the more explicitly they are addressed, the better you can anticipate, acknowledge, and adjust to them.

The workshop was the response to an emotional need expressed in a survey—the need for more community. We branded the conference Affective Aspects: Making sure everyone is informed, on task, and comfortable, and assessing their experience, and showing gratitude; this involves good communication prior, during, and after the conference; it includes attentiveness to mood and pace during the event, and expressing gratitude to all throughout the event and afterward. These affective aspects are often assumed. Fortunately, most small collaborative groups have several members who excel at and naturally gravitate toward these tasks. Volunteers greeted attendees, making them feel welcome, less anxious, and more comfortable. (Informative campus tours and friendly dine-arounds we offered but were not popular.) Librarians maintained a consistent, friendly, unobtrusive, but simultaneously “sympathetic and available” presence during the writing time-blocks. Librarians made use of meal and snack times to engage in the pleasantries of small talk, and were also available for purposeful one-on-one research consultations if needed.

LOGISTICS CHECKLIST (INCLUDING AFFECTIVE ASPECTS IN PARENTHESES)

14 items covering roles, tasks, and areas of responsibility

- Planning, execution, and debriefing (an emotionally rewarding experience)
- Administrative liaison (rhetoric and enthusiasm)
- Advertising and document design (communication; website as touchstone; emotional branding)
- Budget (worthwhile programming and people, worthy of budget expenditure)
- Catering (food, nurture)
- Content (food for thought)
- Date and venue selection (time and space, when/where)
- Deadlines and decisions (multi-tasking/parenting)
- Facilities (keeping participants’ comfort in mind)
- Host for content presenters (ensuring presenters are informed, on task, comfortable)
- Master of ceremonies (ensuring that program is moving along, presenters are appreciated, participants are engaged)
- Registration liaison (ensuring relevance, providing information)
- Schedule (making sure schedule is realistic, appealing)
- Social media (building excitement for event, creating a sense of community)
- Welcoming (beginning on the right foot, decreasing social anxiety)

EMOTIONAL APPEAL/IMPORTANCE OF AFFECTIVE ASPECTS: THE FIFTH FACTOR OF MEANINGFULNESS

f the project is INTRINSICALLY MEANINGFUL to the employees--THE LIBRARIANS AND STAFF AND ASSISTANTS ARE ON BOARD AND COMMITTED TO ITS SUCCESS: This programming fits well into the menu of scholarly communications-related services offered to graduate students. This project is student centered; it honors life/school balance. The varied offering of social, cultural, methodological, and rhetorical aspects of the Dissertation Prep & Writing Intensive mirrors the holistic nature of our research support-related departmental goals. We were unabashed in our enthusiasm about creating community and diminishing isolation. We changed the original “boot camp” concept into a less military, more

touch-feely event, called the Dissertation Prep & Writing Intensive and branded it with the tag line “you are not alone!” Don’t be shy about emphasizing the emotional aspects of planning, especially when you can back them up with evidence. You’ll remember that our appeal and the creation of community was a response to survey results. Build upon the cross-campus and intra-organization connections you make. Your event is multi-faceted in that it engages the intellect and the emotions. The credentials of your presenters will build anticipation and their charisma will build momentum during the event. Peer-bonding during discussions will increase participant comfort and also increase their ability to absorb and enjoy the event. The creation of a sense of community is intrinsically motivating for participants and also for planners.

HOW WE DECIDED WHAT TO COVER/INCLUDE IN THE PILOT WORKSHOP

It was a challenge to try to figure out what students would most want to learn, and the content of the workshop evolved significantly over time due to their feedback about what they wanted.

Important to cover time management, and the assumption in creating the session on this topic was that most grad students already have a job and/or family so time management is particularly important. The aim was to keep students from feeling overwhelmed by the process, so an emphasis was placed on tracking small achievable goals and this method of breaking down tasks was well received by students. It was also assumed that older students might not be familiar with SMART goals, since it’s more common for high school students to learn that.

Organizers wanted to stress the importance of sitting down to write even if you don’t feel like it or don’t think you have anything to write about; this is a good way to combat writer’s block. They also wanted to stress that students should create multiple drafts.

HOW THE WORKSHOPS WERE ASSESSED

JUNE 2018 (pilot)

- To collect participant feedback regarding the format and content of the Dissertation Prep workshop, a Qualtrics survey was designed prior to the inaugural event in June 2018. The survey was administered electronically to all registrants, with certain topic specific questions modified for one-day vs. multiple-day participants.
- There was a 74% response rate for the June 2018 three-day workshop, which had 23 registrants.
- The survey asked participants to rate their comfort level in various areas, including successfully maintaining a work-life balance, establishing a consistent writing regimen, providing feedback on their peers’ writing, and navigating various aspects of the research process.
- Overall, the survey responses suggest that the majority of the topics discussed in the course of the Writing Intensive were well-received and helpful to the participants in terms of their comfort level with conducting dissertation research and writing.
- While the majority of the participants (86%) rated the workshop as either “Useful” or “Extremely Useful,” they offered a number of constructive suggestions for improving future dissertation writing workshops (Table 4). The following quote from one respondent reflects the perception shared by others and voiced in private conversations with librarians, staff, and volunteers: “Maybe 2 days would be better. I was burnt out by the third day.” Other notable suggestions included:
 - more blocks for writing time with breaks being the presentations
 - splitting up lectures (with more writing time in between);

- more caffeine
- creating tracks to differentiate the different levels that some students may be (e.g., proposal stage vs. data analysis stage)
- asking students to share/comment on their experiences
- having more interactivity and discussion with peers during or immediately following the presentations.

JANUARY 2019

- Based on the student feedback, the format of the workshop was shortened from three days to two days in Winter 2019. There was an 81% response rate after this workshop in January 2019, which had 16 registrants.
- An optional writing-only half-day was offered in June 2019, attended by two participants. No other programming was planned during that designated writing time. Due to expanded programming (addition of Qualitative Research & Managing Your Dissertation Writing presentation by Dr. Lahman), the Qualtrics survey was slightly modified prior to the June workshop to include questions about the participants' ability to conduct qualitative research and manage the writing process to make the most out of a dissertation. The survey was administered electronically to 9 registrants (77% response rate).
- The participants' feedback was gathered with regard to several key aspects of the workshop, including:
 - Comfort level in their ability to perform various essential research functions
 - Most important thing(s) they learned
 - Connections they were able to make, and
 - Suggestions for improving future workshops
- Although the overwhelming majority of the participants rated the workshop as either "Useful" or "Extremely Useful," they offered a number of explicit suggestions for improving future dissertation workshops. The most notable suggestions were related to scheduling and keeping a better balance between presentations and periods of designated writing time. Other important suggestions included:
 - more breaks between the presentations
 - more group-oriented work. Like a working group format in the morning to set your own goals and make your goals public.
 - more structured time to create meaningful connections, particularly in the beginning of the workshop
 - starting the workshop with a shorter 'lecture' followed by a longer writing time
 - more small group discussions with peers during or immediately following the presentations
 - extended designated writing time.

HOW THE WORKSHOPS HAVE EVOLVED BASED ON FEEDBACK

- The workshops became shorter – the first iteration of the event was 20 hours over three days, and by the fourth event it was 11.5 hours over two days
 - student reported they were "burned out by the third day"
- The dine-arounds and tours were removed after the first event due to low/no participation.
 - The free-writing/writer's block session was not repeated

- Author's rights session was not repeated
- Student-led conversation took the place of both icebreaker and work/life balance talk
- Meals were moved from on-site to dining hall
- Fewer breaks were built into the schedule; students were encouraged to come and go as needed
- Discipline-specific networking with professors was discontinued after 2nd iteration, communal meal in dining hall around one table encouraged networking instead
- Allowed masters students after first iteration
- No writing center or dignitaries welcoming after first iteration

PEER Group – discussion group about work life balance, orienting each other to the culture.

Be willing to adapt – some students need writing, this last year, some came who were not writing, they were just interested in what was happening

GRAD SCHOOL AND STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

Graduate school

- Excellent connection and support for the Graduate students
- Always important to offer students food, coffee and support

Student Perspective

- It is invaluable to know who to turn to
- someone who knows the ropes and can help

SUCSESSES AND CHALLENGES

Challenges

- Introducing this new idea and getting buy-in from university administration (Graduate School) -- In the beginning, it was a new project. Not many libraries had offered a program like this, so it was a challenge to introducing this new idea and get buy-in from university administration (Graduate School) -- developing the idea – doing research to develop the idea
- Holistic outlook on project & planning from scratch – it was challenging to have to plan a new program from scratch, looking for templates for success (Stephanie and Jen were able to find some examples as they had attended a conference)
- Format, duration, eligibility criteria -- Deciding what the format would be, duration, eligibility criteria (keep it open to all? Specific groups?) -- people who had finished comps -- then was opened up masters students originally: only those that had completed their comps
- Recruiting campus collaborators -- Figuring out which speakers, departments to invite (as there are many people who contribute to student success)
- Length of workshop -- Initial workshop was 3 days, proved to be too long for a workshop (how to fit a busy program into graduate students' schedule?) Keeping the program dynamic and informative and useful
- Balancing the “dissertation prep” aspect and “writing” aspect of the workshop.
- Maintaining interactivity -- Need to balance program presentations and giving students time to interact and establish connections.

- Meeting every student's needs -- eventually we decided to make it more and more open. Not limiting to those who had finished comps and including master's students). This issue continues (for example: we do not cover capstone projects). Students asking for writing time, us scheduling writing time and students not taking advantage of that time.
- Addressing the needs of distance education students.
- Combating participation attrition -- For those that register and then don't show up; For those who leave early
- Challenging for librarians because most of us don't have actual experience writing a dissertation, although we can relate to the students' experiences due to the requirements we have as faculty to write and conduct research.
- It was observed that students had difficulty sitting and writing for extended periods and would get up to talk or move around. This challenge was addressed by having an "on-call" librarian available to provide research support or act as a sounding board/someone to talk to in order to help them get started on their writing. Students want someone who can listen, since they might not have anyone else to talk to beside their advisor. Providing that presence fulfilled a need that wasn't anticipated.

Successes

- Offering an opportunity for graduate students to build a learning community.
- Development of an innovative program that laid the foundation for experimenting with formats and approaches to research support for graduate students.
- Overall, very positive reception of the project from students, library leadership, and the graduate school.
- Tremendous response from students (registration full within a matter of days).
- Received recognition from library community. Received Library Project of the Year at the Colorado Association of Libraries Conference 2019

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

The School of Nursing heard about the workshop series and pushed for an online version for their distance students who are not able to attend in-person. The online version is currently being created and will be held for the first time in late March. It will be open to students from all disciplines. It is hoped that an online version will be held at least once per semester. The online workshop will be very different from the in-person version and is difficult to translate from the physical version. Giving the participants writing time will be less important; the focus will be more on providing a space to bring students together and giving them a time and place to ask questions and communicate with each other.

Zoom will be used to facilitate the online workshop and the number of participants will need to be capped due to technical limitations and a desire to make sure discussions are productive. This year, the online version is the only one that is being offered. Unclear whether the in-person version will be offered again.