

DWR Recap and Looking Ahead (SLIDE 1)

(SLIDE 2) In the Summer of 2019, I had been at the University of Memphis for almost an entire year, and the Research and Instruction department was slightly tweaking the job descriptions of to have dedicated “foci” that the librarians would be in charge of. When the final list was unveiled, there were many options to choose from, including: assessment, curriculum development, on-line experience/instruction, first-year/first-gen outreach, and graduate student outreach. While all of these were intriguing, the one I ended up choosing was Graduate Students, not only because of my way too many years as a graduate student (11 years...so far...assuming I don't go back for that Philosophy degree I want), but because, as we are discussing here, grad students are an underserved population in many ways. They are brought to campus and many are just expected to know what to do. They may have some teaching orientations, maybe a “here is the library” visit during the course of orientation week, but many are just expected to know how to do graduate level research, which is dangerous coming at a time when many graduate programs have either reduced or eliminated requirements for a “research and bibliography” course for graduate students.

I was lucky in my first masters that I had an R&B course, taught by a slightly angry Russian woman who browbeat the importance of proper citations into me, but not all students had that. And during my first orientation week in this new role, I went to the large graduate student orientation to do a breakout session about library resources, and what was initially scheduled to occur in a side room designed for around 35-50 students, had to be moved back into the main ballroom because somewhere around 100 of the assembled students wanted to hear more about the library at their new school. A need for more engagement was certainly there!

Of course, all of this is happening against the backdrop of the University of Memphis pushing to achieve Carnegie R1 status, and one of the metrics we have targeted is number of PhDs graduated. The success of the library orientation program prompted more discussions between the library and graduate school and eventually a meeting was held to discuss partnering with the campus writing center (the Center for Writing and Communication or CWC) to host some sort of dissertation program. However, previous endeavors individually from both the CWC and the Graduate School to host some sort of workshop or bootcamp for dissertation writers had mixed success at best. So, while all were in agreement that something should be done to help spur dissertation competition, we were all a bit stymied as to what that could look like. (I should note that I, having only been at UofM was not a party to any of these events so cannot speak to what they were nor the attendance numbers.)

(SLIDE 3) The idea came to me literally as I was walking to the campus Starbucks in order to brainstorm ideas for what we could do. As so many of us experience, when we need to think, the best thing to do is go for a walk, grab a coffee, something to allow the mind to wander, be distracted, and allow new ideas to come forth. For me, the realization was that the perfect idea had already been done and I had already been a part of it, though it would require a twist.

In my previous job as a visiting research librarian at the College of William & Mary, the library had hosted weeklong writing retreats in the summer and during winter break...however they were put on for faculty. There was breakfast and lunch served, time to mingle and chat with librarians and other participants. For the writers it was great as it gave them a dedicated writing space outside of the house or office, free from distractions, plus ready access to help if they hit a wall on something.

When I was there, I would routinely think, “wow, this would be a great thing for graduate students working on a dissertation. I would have loved something like this back when I was writing mine.” Sure, many students already do this. In my case, a friend’s family had a cabin that I went to for a few days, which is where I finished my final chapter and polished off the first draft to send to my committee ahead of my defense. I have known others who have done similar things, but not all graduate students can do so. Not all have friends with cabins. Some have financial constraints, family obligations, etc. And a place like University of Memphis, with a high number of international students, non-traditional students, finding time and money for such a retreat can be an even greater challenge.

So, my original idea was for five days with breakfast and lunch provided, access to private work space in the library, free childcare, and programming that would address issues like goal setting, reality check on what a dissertation is, mental health, the job market, publishing, and the most annoying part of a dissertation: formatting the document and paperwork to graduate. And everyone thought it was great! I was not able to get everything I asked for, but we had three days of programming and lunch, plus coffee/tea/breakfast snacks for five days, and on-site help from the graduate school for paperwork and formatting issues, consultants from the CWC, and me providing research and citation help. Additionally I was able to arrange for speakers on all of the topics I desired plus childcare! I outlined the idea in an email on October 7th, and by right after Thanksgiving Break we had a registration form live and receiving replies.

And oh, did they reply.

Based on the earlier efforts, we planned for about 30 registrants, though I thought we could have upwards of 50...turns out we were all wrong. Within the first few days we had already blown past 30 and by the time we closed registration we had hit 70! We had to up food

orders, and I had to hustle to find room in the library for everyone. It was a case of more problems, but good problems!

(SLIDE 4) By far the biggest thing I learned from this experience is that trying to pull together a multi-day event in roughly two months, with multiple speakers, catering, and other arrangements such as reserving space—even on the initially small scale we were imagining—is not easy, but is possible. For myself, this was my first experience with managing and planning such an event (with the exception of a two-day department retreat earlier in 2019) and I had to learn fast how to be a better delegator. I thankfully have supportive bosses and a graduate school dean who were behind the idea, and a great team willing to help as soon as I asked something of them.

However, not everything went smoothly. By far the biggest headache came in the form of my desire to provide childcare. From the very beginning of the project, I knew there were two things I wanted: a talk dealing frankly and directly with mental health during while dissertating (and graduate school in general) based on my own experiences—to get “real,” I know I have struggled with mental health for most of my life (finally diagnosed Social Anxiety a year ago), and graduate school, fueled by that social anxiety and imposter syndrome, was a particularly bad time.

Anyway, the mental health portion was relatively easy to work out, the only speed bump there was that all the students responded saying they would have liked a chance to “debrief” and talk more after—something we implemented for the second time around during Spring Break.

Childcare, on the other hand, was my personal nightmare. Initially we were told that and children ages 2-5 could be housed at the on-campus early childhood research center/pre-school for free. Infant to 2-years-old we would need to arrange for care for, but those numbers turned

out to be small (only two registrants had such needs), so all would be well. Except, right before Winter break, new Department of Education regulations came down saying that no unregistered children could be guests at the school and that the initial people who I was hoping could watch the toddlers were unavailable.

Essentially, I would be forced the week right after break, and the week before the event, to try and put together a team of childcare providers. I freely admit, I made missteps here, some that could have been bad but turned out okay. First, I relied on recommendations from an email sent out to all students in the childhood education program (who all turned out to be wonderful), but I technically “hired” students who had not gone through background checks to be university employees, did not interview them beyond email communication, and essentially put them in charge of five kids without checking references.

I also put myself through the stress of constructing schedules, while waiting for some people to get back to me, dealing with room changes (daily), all while trying to finalize other aspects of the event. Again, major lesson learned was to delegate something more—it is not that I do not trust others to do it right, but rather I would not bother someone else to do something that I could (or feel like I should) do.

I’m working on it.

Bottom line, I was burned out before we the event even began.

(SLIDE 5) However, the week of came and thankfully we had decided to go with a “soft launch” and that Monday was simply a workday for anyone who wanted to show up early and get a jump on things. The event proper with catering and sessions ran Tuesday through Thursday, though childcare was available all five days. I did my best to prep things, but I was still running around that morning making some last-minute swaps on room signs, printing out

sign-in sheets for childcare, etc. I'll talk about this more at the end, but I caused myself to do a lot more work than would be necessary, but I was also trying to personalize the experience for every student as much as possible.

However, as much as it was annoying to see sessions constantly running long, it was also for the best of reasons: students asking lots and lots of questions. And what has emerged is that these are questions that many of them feel like they should have had answers for a long time ago and now finally have a venue to express them. Again, one of the big takeaways is that this filled a very specific need in a way that encouraged students to come and engage. And while we did receive some negative feedback regarding this, many students praised the sessions and how informative they were.

And at the end of the week, it was the feedback from the students that made the entire experience worth it. I received so many thankful emails and gushing comments, and one student even made a thank you card for me. Many were grateful that I even thought to offer childcare and a mental health session. They praised the level of communication we had (something that came in very handy for the spring break retreat which coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic that cancelled this conference), and many even said that I maybe did too much work to personalize the experience when at least 20 or so students never showed up or used their assigned carrels.

Some of the feedback we received was incorporated into the spring break retreat, however the quick turnaround from winter break to spring break made it a bit difficult to truly reflect and retool, something we hope to do soon, though.

(SLIDE 6) So let's talk a little bit about the feedback, though without getting too much into actual numbers (fodder for a future article). One of the biggest comments was to have more

flexibility in the type of rooms and spaces available. Some wanted to work in rooms with other people, others wanted to work with friends, and some ended up finding a space in the library just because it more suited them. However, having options was the biggest thing we changed for Spring Break (though with decreased enrollment overall, 48 down from 70, depressed even further by the time it started because of coronavirus cancellations). I had not anticipated that many students would be looking for a sort of writing community to combat the isolation of dissertation writing, and something I witnessed first-hand as certain people lingered after sessions to chat and started forming ad hoc interdisciplinary writing groups.

Another desire that we hope to implement would be to provide space on a semi-regular basis for drop-in writing group sessions, possibly with some onsite help from library and CWC staff. Conversations around this have already started and we are thinking of utilizing the writing center space “after hours.” The question is how much these will be used based on historical trends of “dissertation boot camps” and such, but this is a completely new model so all we can do is try it out. However, based on the success of the DWR, I do feel that with a solid infrastructure of events throughout the academic year, it could be successful.

As for the sessions themselves, I did some tweaking the second time and limited them to mainly the morning (with the mental health session scheduled for longer in the afternoon to allow for some small group discussion...though not therapy), and tried to emphasize the time limit (which also allowed for some morning yoga, with mixed attendance results). Most of these sessions were also repeats from the first time, also allowing returning retreaters to get to work sooner.

However, this all got me, and many attendees, talking about having the sessions somewhat decoupled from the breakfast gathering time and lunch. Maybe have session blocks in

the morning and afternoon, possible with one or two different one scheduled, which could also cater to students at differing stages rather than just the “late stage” we were targeting in the effort to advance as many students as possible to graduate in May 2020 to boost R1 numbers. There are many populations of graduate students who need support and writing time. An idea that emerged was what if it were more like a graduate information conference that could serve to inform about doing the prospectus? Or studying for comprehensive exams?

These thoughts really do get to the heart of my role as graduate student, for lack of a better term, liaison. How *can* the library act as the gathering point for graduate students to inform so many them, stuck in silos across campus, about not only our resources but also how those resources can help them. Getting back to the initial thought of my position, we bring these students to campus and after putting them through an orientation week when we are throwing information at them left and right, we toss them to the wolves, either with intense course work and teaching and/or TA duties, and just expect them to sink or swim.

However, the biggest barrier to all of these ideas is not size or costs (we can always try and partner more with other programs across campus to defray costs), but rather communication and promotion. I heard so many times from students that they did not hear about the January event until after registration had closed, or it was at last minute that their advisor told them. We had strong word of mouth from winter to spring, but still it seems like there was a disconnect between our promotion efforts and students.

To be clear, we sent out emails to all grad students via the Graduate School, I had the Graduate Student Association send out an email, all library liaisons emailed their departments and asked them to forward it along. We put the event in the weekly announcements calendar and

posted it on internal library boards. Yet we still did not get the word out as widely as we could since students still did not hear about the event in a timely manner.

E-mail overload, both of students and faculty, is real, and so much gets lost in the shuffle. Student told us that we needed to put flyers in every building, in the bathrooms even! That is going to be a real hurdle to overcome and one that may be only overcome by literally posting in bathrooms (what else are you going to do while sitting in a stall? Check your email, scroll through Instagram or Twitter?).

Without a doubt the biggest take away is that the Dissertation Writers' Retreat hit on a winning formula. The right mix of information sessions, dedicated time and space for writing, and free food and coffee. Where "boot camps" and specific workshops failed to engage students with what they needed, by providing a multi-day event that combines what they need to know with time to mentally engage in the work, the secret sauce to catalyze dissertation competition has hopefully been recognized. The exact impact of the DWR is still be calculated, through analyzing feedback surveys and see what students reported they did get done, but colloquially I know of at least one student who completed drafts, many who finished or made significant progress on chapters, and the second time around a number of repeat students were attending to work on edits after successfully defending their dissertation (after getting a boost from the January retreat).

These two events are hopefully the start of a much broader sequence of retreats that can scaffold the dissertation writing experience over the course of a school year, with an early fall or summer retreat kicking off with many of the same programs as the initial event, then subsequent events building on that foundation along with possibly offering programs for students writing prospectuses or getting ready for comps. There is a hunger and a need amongst our graduate

students for support, support that they sometimes find hard to get from faculty mentors either because of schedules, bad advisors, or being scared to ask questions of them and not knowing who to turn to besides other students in their program who have “already been through it” (something I did routinely while a grad student and even after). I guess that work was always fated to continue as I became a librarian.

Throughout the retreat, I made sure to share my personal experiences with the students, tell my story of struggles with mental health, an advisor who was on sabbatical the semester I defended, and finding ad hoc writing mentors who helped me immeasurably along the way. By relating my struggles I emphasize how I was there and understand what they are going through, and that the DWR is designed not from the perspective of a librarian, but rather someone answering the question, “what do I wish I knew when I was a grad student.”

(SLIDE 7) Thank you.