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Listening to the Outliers: Refining the Curriculum for Dissertation Camps

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Abstract Seeking to support graduate student writers, writing centers at research universities have developed highly successful dissertation camps over the past 15 years. Previous research from North American dissertation camps has demonstrated significant benefits from these camps, as dissertation writers developed new writing habits and increased their productivity. In this study, however, a closer look at initial and follow-up survey responses provided by participants from dissertation camps at two institutions—an Upper Midwestern university in the United States that has held camps for 11 years and an Eastern European university that held an online camp during the 2020 pandemic—suggests that focusing on the positive responses may obscure some telling tensions between dissertation camps' benefits and limitations. Our research reveals tensions around four key parts of dissertation camp curricula—developing writing habits and schedules, sustaining a community of writers, focusing on the drafting stage, and emphasizing cross-disciplinary participation. Listening more deeply to these outlier responses sheds valuable light on the affordances and limitations of dissertation writing camps and on how the curricula of dissertation camps might be reimagined to better articulate and embrace those tensions.

Keywords dissertation camps, graduate-level writing, writing center research, writing center curriculum, writing process, international

When it comes to new programs for university writing centers over the past 15 years, dissertation camps (DCs) are undeniably one of the great success stories. These camps—in person, online, or hybrid—are intensive and supportive writing retreats, bringing together 10–20 dissertation writers from an array of disciplines for half- or full-days for one or two weeks, or weekly for an extended period. They combine large blocks of writing time with some small-group discussions of goals and strategies, critical reflection on writing habits, and full-group discussions of process advice and of advanced academic writing. From their scattered beginnings, DCs have become standard offerings in many university writing centers across North America. By developing the curriculum and pedagogy for camps and securing funding to make them sustainable, writing centers have helped thousands of dissertation writers reflect deeply on their writing habits

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and cultivate new ones, benefit from the support of a community of writers, deepen confidence and identity as scholarly writers, and make substantial progress on chapters and move toward graduation (see, e.g., Busl et al., 2015; Cayley, 2020; Fladd et al., 2019; Simpson, 2013; Smith et al., 2018). These camps have also proven to have exceptionally strong multiplier effects. DCs have associated writing centers with some of the highest levels of academic writing done at universities, strengthened their partnerships with graduate deans and faculty, and spun off other successful writing center programming—including writing groups and retreats for undergraduates, graduates, and faculty. Graduates of camps disseminate DC philosophies and pedagogies widely, often creating dissertation writing groups of their own and even sponsoring departmental DCs. From teaching in DCs, writing center instructors deepen their own knowledge about disciplinary genres of dissertations, improve their understanding of the complex lives of advanced graduate student writers, and generate new knowledge from DC-related research.

As the published literature about DCs documents and as we demonstrate from our new study, dissertation camp participants give DCs consistently positive—often glowing—evaluations, attesting to how much they learned and to how much progress they made during camps. This comment from a participant in our study, shared in a survey seven months after camp, illustrates just how transformative this experience can be at its best:

> *The Writing Camp was the single best thing I've done my entire graduate career. I had been floundering in an unwritten, overly stressful dissertation and it helped me approach my writing much more efficiently and effectively. I had a great experience and I don't think I would be as far along now as I am without having done the camp. I would love to do something like it again.*

Stories about the successes of DCs are powerful ones for writing centers to tell—and our new research from both North America and Eastern Europe advances that important narrative.

But there is also a deeper story to tell, one that explores more fully tensions around some core values or the curriculum of DCs. As we have analyzed participants' survey responses to camps during our long involvement with proposing, designing, and leading DCs (from 2011 to 2021), we have become intrigued by the occasional criticisms that appear, especially those that point to substantive choices in the curriculum of camps. In the quiet voices of a few participants on surveys immediately after each camp and in follow-up surveys, some DC alumni suggested ways that camps sometimes fall short of their ideals, thereby offering powerful insights into the complexities of the camp curriculum. Some participants reported, for example, that the writing habits, goal-setting, and scheduling methods they learned and practiced in the camp did not work for them beyond the camp. A few noted tensions within camps around the ideals of community and around a drafting-focused and cross-disciplinary curriculum. These responses are, admittedly, outliers among all the responses participants have to DCs, and it would, of course, be naive to think that dissertation camps can accomplish every goal they set and that they work for every writer. But we have become convinced that there is a lot to learn from these particular outlier responses. From analyzing tensions within those surveys, we believe that what McKinney (2013) powerfully argued in *Peripheral Visions* about writing centers in general applies to dissertation camps as well—that participants' responses to DCs are complex, but the stories our field tells about them are too simple. We're using the word "tension" in the influential way that Geller et al. (2007) did in *The Everyday Writing Center*. As they rightly insist, tensions are inevitable in writing center work, and we are convinced that recognizing, exploring, and learning from tensions within successful dissertation camps are crucial to creating what Geller et al. describe as a "dynamic learning culture and community" (p. 14) within writing centers.

To explore more systematically the complexities beneath the smooth surface of the learning that occurs in DCs, we have focused our research on how well participants believed that the curriculum met their needs, not only

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immediately after a camp but also months later. We gathered and analyzed participants' surveys from two intentionally very different sites where we have designed and led camps, which give us valuable cross-cultural perspectives: (a) a long-running DC at a major U.S. research university and (b) a new camp required for a cohort of students in an interdisciplinary PhD program at a major research university in Eastern Europe. The latter camp was designed to be held in person in August 2020 but because of the pandemic was moved entirely online. At both universities, we gathered data from surveys a week after the camp and from follow-up surveys done with participants circa seven months after the camp.

Our focus on the curriculum of DCs stems from some published DC research and from larger theory and research in writing studies. Considering what their small sample of follow-up surveys with DC participants told them, Busl et al. (2015) suggested focusing on curriculum in order to strengthen future camps: "Since our research suggests that positive changes in graduate students' beliefs and behaviors decrease over time, researchers and teachers should work to improve the curricula of writing camps and to develop supplementary programs to help graduate student writers to maintain improvements after the camp ends" (p. 12). In the provocative *Reformers, Teachers, Writers*, Lerner (2019) challenged all of us in writing studies, including writing centers, to examine closely the visible and the hidden curriculum of what we teach (as distinct from the pedagogy of how we teach), the values we express through what we talk about in all of our instruction. Heeding this challenge, we have come to see that the complexities identified by a few survey respondents offer generative insights into camp curricula.

In our analysis, the occasional criticisms clustered around four tensions within the curriculum—of what is valued—in many dissertation camps: (a) goal-setting and time-management strategies; (b) communities of writers; (c) focus on the drafting stage; and (d) cross-disciplinary participation. The tensions participants identified were largely similar in the U.S. university and in the Eastern European university. In what follows, we first review relevant literature and describe our research design and methods; then present our findings around the four tensions, suggesting for each possible ways to modify DC curricula; and finally explore some of the larger implications of our findings. By listening carefully to what's easy to overlook in survey responses to camps, our field can understand better the complex lives of advanced graduate student writers who are balancing teaching and research and funding, family responsibilities, life challenges, and the affective dimensions of writing that stem from intellectually daunting projects and often from bleak career prospects. With these insights, we can strengthen DCs by making more of our curriculum visible, talking more explicitly about why we value what's central to that curriculum, sharing with new camp participants some of the challenges that dissertation writers report in enacting those values, and acknowledging limitations of what we are teaching. We hope that our suggestions for broadening the curriculum of DCs help move camps in the direction Leneghan (2018) urged, away from conceptualizing and justifying writing center instruction for graduate students in "remedial or product-oriented or narrow, limited ways" (p. 241), which focus on reducing attrition or shortening time to degree. Leneghan pushed centers to instead conceptualize and describe their work as helping graduate student writers "develop more sophisticated understandings of how writing operates in and outside of academia" (p. 240) and as orienting writing centers to the larger "professional and scholarly aims of doctoral education" (p. 243).

We know that our suggestions do not fit every context and that some will be impossible to implement because of limited time and resources. We also know that there are many other complexities that advanced graduate writers face, some of which were powerfully described in Madden et al.'s (2020) *Learning from the Lived Experiences of Graduate Student Writers*. And we know that some of the challenges dissertation writers told us about in their surveys involve large educational forces in graduate education and visible and invisible power within those forces—almost like plate tectonics in geology—far beyond what short-term DCs and writing centers will ever

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be able to change completely. But we believe that writing centers can address some of these complexities in order to improve camps without falling victim to solutionism—believing that there is a full solution to every problem. Beyond their power to make the curriculum of camps more accessible for a broader range of writers, these insights from DC participants also suggest new topics for tutor education and for writing center workshops, and they can help our field understand even better the complex learning needs of advanced research writers.

From Exigency to Models to Research: A Brief Review of the Dissertation Camp Literature

The challenges of graduate school completion—and of dissertation writing as a significant hurdle in that process—are well documented, with a number of studies estimating that the average completion rate hovers at 50% (Cassuto, 2013; Ehrenberg et al., 2010). This worryingly low rate has been attributed to a range of factors, from the difficulties of managing family, school, and work responsibilities to a lack of funding, advising, and other support within students' programs (Casanave, 2016; Hill & Conceição, 2020; Marshall et al., 2017). In addition to these large-scale challenges within graduate education, rhetoric and composition scholars have extensively researched and theorized about the development of graduate writers, the formation of scholarly writing identity in advanced disciplinary writing, as well as the potentials for support for graduate student writers (e.g., Brooks-Gillies et al., 2020; Lawrence & Zawacki, 2018; Madden et al., 2020; Simpson et al., 2016). Our study fits within a subgroup of the last of these emphases: interrogating how writing centers may provide impactful sources of support for graduate writers, particularly through DCs.

As writing centers developed DCs in response to these needs and as those camps garnered enthusiastic responses, the first writing center publications about DCs introduced and described this new form of writing center

instruction and support for graduate student writers in North American universities. Early articles (e.g., Lee & Golde, 2013; Mastroieni & Cheung, 2011; Powers, 2014; Simpson, 2013) shared curricula, goals, methods, models, and schedules for DCs; demonstrated anecdotal success; encouraged other centers to develop DCs; and offered provisional classification systems for different camp models and curricula. As Lee and Golde defined them, "just-write" camps provide time, space, and structure to help dissertation writers spend substantial blocks of time during a camp writing and revising a part of their dissertations. "Writing-process" camps similarly include significant blocks of writing time, but also incorporate conversations about writing in progress, individual consultations for writers to talk with writing tutors, and interactive instruction about writing process and about advanced research writing. Simpson not only described the structure of early DCs designed for an intentionally limited group of departments at New Mexico Tech University, but also used results from surveys and interviews with selected camp participants to offer suggestions for developing DCs that are "outward facing"—designed to influence graduate writing instruction and support across campus.

More recent publications, while continuing to describe variations in the curricula, methods, and audiences for DCs, have reported more systematic research about the camps. Busl, Donnelly, and Capdevielle (2015) assessed whether their writing-process camps affected graduate writers' self-regulation—their "perceived self-efficacy, motivation, and self-regulation" (p. 3) as writers encountered challenges. From pre- and postcamp surveys and follow-up focus groups, they found that, after camps, students were more confident in their skills as writers and were more willing to adopt strategies introduced in the camp:

> *57% indicated they were more likely to share their goals with others, 67% indicated they were more likely to write goals for each writing session, 71% indicated they were more likely to use a journal to track their productivity, and 76% indicated that they were more likely to analyze*

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model writing products within their field. (p. 7)

In order to verify that writing-process camps achieved better learning outcomes than did "just-write" camps, Busl et al. compared pre- and postcamp survey results from one camp of each type and concluded that writing-process "programming is, in fact, necessary to make significant changes in student attitudes and intended behaviors" (p. 8).

Building on Busl et al.'s (2015) comparative research, Fladd, Berminghan, and Stewart (2019) conducted a quantitative study specifically to evaluate the relative success of three different models for writing-process camps offered in 2016–17 by the Writing and Communication Centre at the University of Waterloo. In the first of their models, "students 'met' online at specific times over four days to take part in DBC [dissertation boot camp] workshops but completed the dedicated writing portions independently at whatever time of day best suited their schedules" (p. 199). The second "was an intensive, four-day retreat" held off campus during spring break. And the third "was a sustained program in which graduate-student writers met for half a day every Monday morning for eight weeks between January and March 2017" (p. 199). Participants' responses to surveys precamp, postcamp, and one month after all of the different camps demonstrated significantly higher levels of confidence and lower levels of cognitive and somatic anxiety after the camp, and the participants reported achieving goals and "being more disciplined and motivated to write" (p. 208). "None," however, "of the three DBC delivery models resulted in significant changes in students' writing behaviors in terms of the number of writing days each week or the number of hours students wrote each day" (p. 208). Based on their survey and focus-group results, these researchers concluded that no single dissertation camp model is best for all students, so they recommended that writing centers offer camps with different frequency and modes of meeting, "in order to meet the differing needs and habits of doctoral students, who are likely to self-select" (p. 211). They also cautioned against exaggerating the

effects of DCs—"contrary to much of the literature and advice about productive, sustainable writing habits, our qualitative and quantitative data suggest these programs might not radically transform students' writing behaviors" (p. 211).

Shifting the research focus away from determining whether DCs help writers acquire some skills necessary for writing their dissertations and change writing habits, Smith et al. (2018) focused on a different aspect of the DC curriculum, the effects that their writing-process retreat at the University of Louisville had on participants' development and identity as academic writers. Looking through the lenses of psychology theories about agency, confidence, and mastery, Smith et al. analyzed data from pre- and postretreat interviews with participants. They argued that from retreat conversations about process and from sharing a writing space and community, participants developed "a sense of agency" as academic writers (p. 206). Using voluntary reflective questionnaires after four DCs at the University of Toronto, Cayley (2020) asked respondents to "reflect on the helpfulness of uninterrupted writing time, group discussion, writing in a group, and presentations on writing" (p. 201). Analyzing themes within these reflections, Cayley highlighted two key ways participants benefit from DCs—from developing a sense of self-efficacy as writers and from being part of a writing community. Cayley argued for combining experiential and reflective learning within the curriculum of those DCs. So that writers were not

> *simply hearing what they ought to be doing differently, students were given the opportunity to learn about themselves as writers: that they are capable of writing a great deal in a short time; that they can be at their desk first thing in the morning; that writing breaks are essential and do not have to devolve into procrastination; that struggling as a writer is a common byproduct of the inherent challenge of that undertaking rather than a sign of our inadequacy; and that writing amongst others can be a source of support and accountability. (pp. 212–213)*

Taken as a whole, this research demonstrated the impressive learning that occurs within DCs. At the same time, this research did, in fact, briefly identify some of the curricular tensions we focus on in our study—but briefly enough that they are easy to miss within the overwhelmingly positive results. Fladd et al. (2019), for example, noted that never do all participants find every one of the "writing strategies and activities'' helpful (p. 207), and a few participants did not value the community building within the camps. Previous research also mentioned difficulties some DC alums have sustaining new scheduling and writing habits learned and practiced in the artificial scheduling environment of a DC when writers later faced the difficulties of juggling research writing with teaching, family, and other responsibilities. Fladd et al. found that, "contrary to [their] expectations," in the longer run, DCs did not "encourage students to write more frequently or for shorter periods" (p. 208). And Busl et al. (2015) found, through their follow-up survey, slippage and difficulty in participants' continuing to practice the writing and schedule behaviors that they had learned, practiced, and responded so positively to during the camps. Within the existing literature, there were also some brief questions about the ideal of an interdisciplinary camp. Based on their experiences leading a DC for a group of students almost exclusively from industrial and systems engineering at Georgia Tech, for example, Blake et al. (2015) argued that there was a mismatch between their initial humanities-focused writing-process model camp and the needs and interests of engineering students. Building on these findings, our study spotlights four key tensions in participants' responses to the curriculum of DCs.

Research Design and Methods

Research Questions

We focused our research questions on how the curriculum and some of the common learning goals of DCs are received:

- How well does the curriculum of DCs meet all of the participants' needs? When it does not, what does that tell us about DC curriculum and about the learning needs of advanced research writers?
- How well does what is learned in DCs endure over time?
- How did PhD students in an Eastern European university respond to a North American DC curriculum adapted to that particular context? And how did the global pandemic and remote instruction affect how participants responded to that curriculum?
- How can future DCs be accessible and inclusive for a broader range of writers?

Research Sites

University of Wisconsin–Madison Dissertation Camps

Our first set of data comes from the University of Wisconsin–Madison (UW-Madison), a large U.S. public research university in the Upper Midwest that enrolls approximately 35,000 undergraduates and 12,400 graduate and professional students. Classified as an R1 institution, UW-Madison has been ranked in the top 10 of all U.S. universities in research spending every year since 1972 (Kassulke, 2021). Graduate research is a high priority at UW-Madison, and support for graduate research writing has increased over time.

Through a funding and administrative partnership between its Writing Center and Graduate School, UW-Madison has offered week-long DCs each summer and each January since 2011. Graduate School colleagues help Writing Center staff plan the camp curriculum, publicize the camps, manage student applications and advisor recommendations, coordinate the selection process, provide funding for camp instructors, and administer postcamp surveys. At UW-Madison, DCs emphasize the opportunity to complete a substantial amount of writing, to learn new writing strategies, and to gain support from a community of other writers. Although some of UW-Madison's early camps were funded by the Mellon Foundation specifically

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for humanities students, its DCs now enroll students from all divisions, with applicants hailing from doctoral programs ranging from chemical and biological engineering to curriculum and instruction to history to social work. Students apply online by submitting a dissertation abstract, their current writing progress, specific writing goals, and writing issues or topics they would like to learn more about. Students' advisors complete a brief endorsement, attesting that the student has an overall vision for the project. Writing Center and Graduate School staff then meet to select participants, aiming for representation and balance across divisions, programs, and backgrounds. Each camp accepts 20 participants, with demand far exceeding space. To help make the camps inclusive and accessible, the Graduate School has helped defray transportation and lodging costs for those who have moved away and childcare costs for those with young children. Between June 2011 and January 2022, a total of 576 doctoral students participated in UW-Madison's DCs.

The DCs are facilitated by Writing Center staff, including a lead instructor and two doctoral-level teaching assistants. Camp instructors carefully review participants' applications in efforts to tailor each camp to its particular cohort. Although the participants are spread across dozens of programs, some common concerns and goals persist, including setting reasonable goals, managing and maximizing time, getting unstuck, and working effectively with committee members. Many participants also express an interest in learning more about genres such as literature reviews, developing their writing style, becoming stronger proofreaders, and engaging with dissertation writers beyond their discipline. Required precamp homework has included reviewing excerpts from Paul J. Silvia's (2019) *How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing* and Alison B. Miller's (2009) *Finish Your Dissertation Once and for All! How to Overcome Psychological Barriers, Get Results, and Move on With Your Life* and completing a precamp action plan in which participants draft their writing goals for the week. Participants meet Monday through Thursday from 9:00 a.m. to 3:30 or 4:00 p.m. and Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. Each day includes an opening session with goal setting; dedicated writing time; required and optional one-to-one consultations with camp instructors; and a closing session for reflecting on progress and next steps. Optional lunchtime workshops, each of which typically draws from 10 to 17 participants, focus on topics such as figuring out what kind of writer one is, based on what research says about writing processes for advanced research writers; setting goals, managing time, and staying motivated; working with advisors and committees; working with writing groups; and improving style in advanced research writing. The shorter Friday schedule includes a final writing sprint and a lunchtime celebration for sharing participants' accomplishments and reflections.

University of Warsaw Dissertation Camp

Our second source of data offers a cross-cultural, international, and online perspective: surveys from a DC that two of the authors of this study facilitated remotely for the University of Warsaw's (U-Warsaw) interdisciplinary Nature-Culture PhD program linking humanities, social sciences, and sciences. The 18 PhD students in this program were writing dissertations on topics ranging from human–plant relationships in rural settings to the human voice as a naturo-cultural phenomenon. U-Warsaw is a top research university, enrolling over 50,000 students, including 3,000 doctoral students. We were invited to facilitate this event in June 2020 by a professor with an appointment at both UW-Madison and U-Warsaw. The U-Warsaw cohort had already been studying together for two years, and students were required by the program faculty to participate in the camp events (versus the voluntary participation in UW-Madison DC data). Participants included 12 women and 6 men who were writing in a complex multilingual environment: all students study in Polish and English and other languages—and they may choose to write their dissertations in Polish or English; many also know German, Italian, French, Russian, Belarussian, and more. The cohort's accomplishments were significant, with many having already published articles.

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To adapt our DC model to the context of the U-Warsaw PhD program, we surveyed students well in advance of the camp to learn about their needs, goals, and projects and worked very closely with program faculty in the planning process. Initially, we designed a week-long DC for June 2020. When pandemic lockdowns made meeting in person impossible, we redesigned the camp to have two parts, roughly a month apart. First were 75-minute small (4–5 students) group video meetings. In advance, students read selections from Paul J. Silvia's (2019) *How to Write a Lot*, Joshua Schimel's (2012) *Writing Science: How to Write Papers That Get Cited and Proposals That Get Funded*, and Eric Hayot's (2014) *The Elements of Academic Style: Writing for the Humanities*. They set writing goals for the next month before the camp and shared one key question or challenge. In our discussion, we pulled useful strategies from each reading, had each student share their goals and challenges, and brainstormed potential strategies. Second was a virtual dissertation camp meeting from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. for eight days (Monday through Friday, with a half day on Friday; and Monday through Wednesday, with a half day on Wednesday). The camp devoted the majority of each morning and afternoon to individual writing time (minimizing distractions and interruptions). We asked students to complete an action plan ahead of the first day, to share daily goals in small groups at the beginning and end of each day, to meet with a camp facilitator for a required initial (and optional follow-up) consultation, and to attend optional workshops. We used a Blackboard Collaborate classroom and breakout groups (remixed for the second week) for goal-setting and sharing sessions, and a separate classroom for optional workshops—including "Understanding Your Writing Process"; a panel featuring U-Warsaw faculty discussing scholarly writing; "Analyzing Structure in Sample Dissertations"; and "Improving Style in Research Writing." We selected these topics based on participants' responses to our precamp survey.

Data Collection and Analysis

For our primary sources of data in this IRB-approved study, we gathered and analyzed a sample of anonymous DC student surveys from four different, complementary sources over a broad range of years: two postcamp DC surveys from each of the two universities. The surveys for both universities included a mix of closed (quantitative) and open-ended questions. Participants rated and commented on the helpfulness of different camp activities (such as writing times, goal-setting, group conversations, workshops, consultations, accountability). They described their progress; identified new strategies they learned for goal-setting, time management, and project management; and commented on the camp's impact on their relationship with their advisor, the importance of engagement with students from other disciplines during the camp, and levels of confidence pre- and postcamp. The later postcamp surveys focused on progress since the camp and on the longer-term effects of the camps. All of the surveys were administered online by the university organization sponsoring the camps—the Graduate School at UW-Madison and the faculty of the interdisciplinary PhD program at U-Warsaw—not by the DC facilitators or the Writing Center.

The first survey was administered a week after the camp (what we call T1, or Timepoint 1). For every DC at UW-Madison since the camps began in 2011, participants have been asked to complete a 23-question survey approximately one week after every camp. The U-Warsaw T1 survey, modeled on the UW-Madison survey, contained 31 questions and was administered approximately one week after that camp. The response rates for the T1 surveys were very high, usually in the 95–100% range. To make our analysis of UW-Madison's DCs T1 surveys manageable, we selected three focal camps that are representative of the over 10 years of rich longitudinal survey data: January 2016, January 2019, and May 2019. Because there was only one camp at U-Warsaw, our study includes all the T1 survey (2020) data from there.

The second survey, designed to capture a longer-term view of learning from the camps, was administered from seven months to two years after camps (T2, or Timepoint 2). The T2 survey at UW-Madison was administered only once to participants in all of the camps

Table 1. Sources of Survey Data from DCs at UW–Madison and U–Warsaw

University	DC Modality	Survey Time Label	Timing of Survey	# of Responses
UW–Madison	In person	T1	One week postcamp, from focal camps in January 2016, January 2019, and May 2019	47
UW–Madison	In person	T2	Seven months to two years postcamp, from 2011–12 camps	41
U–Warsaw	Online	T1	One week postcamp, from August 2020	16
U–Warsaw	Online	T2	Seven months postcamp, from March 2021	16
UW–Madison	In person	Compilation of responses to selected quantitative T1 questions in 2012–15	One week postcamp, from 2012–15 camps	182–184 (depending on the question)

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in 2011–12. The response rate for the T2 survey at UW-Madison was 53.2%. Our study includes all the data from the T2 (2021) survey at U-Warsaw, for which the response rate was 100%.

In addition to these four primary sources of data, for a part of our analysis we also drew from one other source of data from DCs at UW-Madison—a compilation made by the Graduate School of responses to a small number of T1 quantitative survey questions from camps in 2012–15.

Combining these nonintrusive sources of data collected in the course of program evaluation offers, we believe, a relatively comprehensive view of participants' responses to the camps. Table 1 summarizes our sources of data.

To analyze this broad range of survey data, we followed open coding practices of grounded theory to find emerging themes (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2021). From that coding, four themes of particular interest to our research questions emerged—what we have come to see as four tensions in the curricula of DCs: when camps (a) value writing and time-management strategies; (b) value community; (c) value the drafting stage; and (d) value cross-disciplinary participation. We traced these tensions throughout the survey responses from UW-Madison and U-Warsaw.

Tracing Tensions in Responses to Dissertation Camp Curricula

In this section, we aim to listen to the survey responses of participants in both UW-Madison and U-Warsaw DCs: interrogating how well the curriculum of DCs meets participants' needs, how what is learned in DCs endures over time, and how pandemic and online contexts affected U-Warsaw participants. As our results show, the tensions participants identified were largely similar at the two universities. But, understandably, a few participants in the summer 2020 Eastern European camp, done online during the pandemic, described more isolation and more problems scheduling writing times, especially during repeated lockdowns after the camp. In the 2021 U-Warsaw T2 survey, their confidence in their ability to make progress and complete their dissertation in a timely manner declined from how they responded to the same question immediately after the camp. The circumstances of that DC embedded within a particular PhD program demonstrated how complex it can be to align DC curricula with participants' interests. For each of the four tensions that we identified around common components of DC curricula, we analyzed participants' perceived benefits and complexities, and we offer suggestions for future camps to learn from participants'—particularly the outliers'—responses.

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Tension #1: When Camps Emphasize Strategies for Time Management and Goal Setting

Recent research on the practices of academic writers emphasizes the challenge of finding time and space for writing and of developing sustainable habits (e.g., Sword, 2017; Tusting et al., 2019). As Rogers, Zawacki, and Baker (2016) reported, in surveys from 428 dissertation students, at the top of the long list of "difficult elements for dissertation writers" for English L1 writers and near the top for L2 writers was "finding the time to write" (p. 57). While many extol the virtues of "daily writing" (Boice, 1990; Silvia, 2019), Sword's interviews with 100 academic writers revealed that daily writing is far from the only practice used by successful writers, and, instead, tracked writers' wide-ranging behavioral, artisanal, social, and emotional habits. This focus on developing writing and time management strategies has been an important goal and benefit of writing-process DCs (Busl et al., 2015; Fladd et al., 2019).

Our data featured an impressive volume of and specificity to the strategies participants reported developing—and maintaining—from the camps. UW-Madison and U-Warsaw participants reflected in great detail on how the camps helped them to manage their writing time, break down tasks into manageable chunks, and maintain motivation. When asked "To what extent do you think you will use these new strategies in your ongoing writing practices?" 100% of the January 2016 (T1) participants chose the strongest possible response, "Definitely." The compilation of responses from 184 T1 respondents in UW-Madison camps from 2012 to 2015 reinforced the same finding, with 88% saying they will "definitely," and 8% saying they "may," use strategies from the camps. Those numbers were consistent for the U-Warsaw T1 responses, with 87.5% (14 of 16 students) of writers selecting "definitely will use," and the remaining 12.5% (2 of 16 students) choosing "may use" in response to the question about using writing strategies they learned at the DC.

Perceived Benefits
Participants at both universities especially emphasized the importance of scheduling writing

time: making writing "a regular job" with "dedicated time slots for writing ('meetings' with my dissertation, impossible to cancel)" (U-Warsaw T1), and "try[ing] to build 'writing time' into my schedule, like any other demand on my time" (UW-Madison T2). Daily writing was a habit many participants took with them from the camps: "at least 30 minutes every day" or "writing every day, even if it's just a sentence or two" (UW-Madison T2). Responses to a question on the 2013 UW-Madison T2 survey, seven months or more after the camps concluded, confirmed that participants continued to find the strategies from the camp useful.

An interesting facet of time management was a deep self-awareness, a refining of habits and strategies based on what works best for the writer. One U-Warsaw writer explained being "able to track my tempo of writing and productive habits" (T2). Another described getting to know not only their habits, but also "how to deal with the dangers of these habits." These provocative comments featuring writers' calibration of what works for them resonated with Cayley's (2020) argument that DCs may help writers develop self-awareness. One U-Warsaw T1 survey participant explained "time management" as learning "not to underestimate time which I need to take for quality writing. Also not to overestimate my effectiveness during the day."

Many others reported a deepened awareness of the time of day, or blocks of time, that best suit them:

- "I am definitely focusing my writing time at my best time of day, 9–12 in the morning. I am also becoming more adept at breaking the day up into chunks and using the morning for writing and the afternoon for reading and research." (UW-Madison T1)
- "At camp I learned that I can actually write in the morning, so I've made sure to schedule morning writing sessions four days a week (in between classes). Working on my dissertation in the morning rather than waiting until the evening when I might be too exhausted has been incredibly helpful in terms of making sure I actually get something done." (UW-Madison T1)

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- "I learned how to plan my work. I only write in the morning, then I read (I need to change type of work)[;] as a reward I go to yoga classes." (U-Warsaw T2)
- "I found my prime time (10.30 am) and remember about making breaks." (U-Warsaw T2)
- "I also started to do a semi-pomodoro technique—write 'hard' for 30 minutes, and then take a break." (U-Warsaw T2)
- "The workshop helped [me] to learn how to better allocate time for working on [my] dissertation in [my] everyday work's plan. It helped me to be more consistent and to divide the work into the smaller and manageable parts." (U-Warsaw T2)

Gaining the "know-how to build a stable routine," said a U-Warsaw participant in the T2 survey, was a lasting benefit of the workshop. Those routines included using strategies from "stream of consciousness/freewriting to fight fatigue or blockades" (UW-Madison T1), to noting that the "key to writing is just starting, plus creating the environment and silencing all distractions" (U-Warsaw T1), to appreciating learning to "'park on a downhill slope,' i.e. to leave myself with an easy place to pick up my writing the next day" (UW-Madison T1).

Participants also identified goal-setting as a key takeaway. A UW-Madison T2 survey response described a system of planning "work and writ[ing] goals in a special calendar," "dividing big tasks" into "small goals," enabling them to "postpone" some tasks, helping to "motivate" them and to feel "less stressed." Almost a third of the responses (13 of 41) to the UW-Madison T2 survey done in 2013 identified "goals" and "goal-setting" as strategies they continued to use in their dissertation writing. Participants described making "short-term" and "longer-term" goals; "setting small, specific goals"; and planning for "daily, weekly, and monthly goals." They also discussed setting "manageable" and "motivating" goals, several drawing on the "minimum/medium/maximum goal technique" that our DC goal-setting sheet asked for each morning. Others emphasized the motivating nature of sharing goals with others before and after writing sessions. A UW-Madison T1 participant adapted the DC

structure of goal-setting, describing their system of "planning for an A (best), B (adequate), and C (better than nothing) goal is helpful too so that I feel like I am making progress even if it isn't the perfect A-level goal each time."

Complexities

While both the initial and follow-up surveys showed powerful and lasting development of writing strategies, the follow-up surveys reflected the complexity of maintaining these habits *outside* of the camp—and, for U-Warsaw participants, in the midst of a global pandemic. As Busl et al.'s (2015) small follow-up sample of DC alumni found, writers often struggle to "negotiate the integration of such strategies into their regular routine, away from the 'artificial' environment of the writing camp" (p. 10).

Answers to the question on the UW-Madison T2 survey, "Have you found any of the writing and time-management strategies that you learned in camp hard to implement?" revealed some of the causes of this complexity. "What has hindered my efforts," said one participant, "is all the other stuff of life (family illness, death, friends' needs, eating and sleeping and exercising)." Another explained how their "teaching schedule, taking care of my one-year-old daughter, and some personal surprises have made it very difficult to keep a regular writing schedule." Another described that, though they "have made some progress," they "always wish I could be as productive as I was that one week." Another explained wanting to "recreate the camp environment" with "longer blocks of writing time," but finding their "other commitments tend to erode" that plan as they "struggle to set" achievable goals "and thus rarely feel satisfied." Another went so far as to say that time management and writing strategies are "hard to implement as much as logistically not feasible." That is, rather than ever being able to find "6 hours a day to write," including "three hours writing during my mentally alert period (in the morning) and three hours to revise when [they're] not as mentally sharp," they "have to take an hour or two to write when [they] get the chance." The DC schedule is impossible to duplicate—an ideal context in which the other "stuff of life" is temporarily held at bay. Thus,

the habits participants developed in that specific context are potentially difficult to sustain and adapt when writers return to their complex, everyday lives.

U-Warsaw participants similarly described significant difficulties maintaining goal-setting, time management, and motivational strategies outside of the camp. That adaptation was made particularly difficult by the pandemic. In addition to encountering "serious health problems," significant teaching obligations, and family commitments, U-Warsaw writers described "the difficulties" that "continue to arise from the pandemic situation" (T2). Another reflected on the all-encompassing effect of the pandemic: "All of the problems I've encountered are connected to the pandemic related stress and psychological troubles in general" (T2). An additional participant reflected on the emotional and material consequences of dealing with the isolation of the pandemic, saying they have "encountered great troubles with writing, mainly due to poor physical state . . . and some other issues that all connect to the prolonging isolation and pandemic in general" (U-Warsaw T2).

Suggestions for Camp Curricula

To support participants' development of lasting time-management and goal-setting strategies, we offer a few suggestions for camp curricula:

- Explicitly discuss—particularly in the last couple of days of camps—how to establish *postcamp* schedules and habits: asking participants to reflect on what complexities they will encounter outside of the camp, and how they might move camp strategies to postcamp contexts. Sharing some of the survey comments about these difficulties from previous camp participants might open up these discussions. Our UW-Madison camps have begun on the third of five days to ask participants to begin crafting a postcamp action/writing plan, and to share it with a DC facilitator. We've also invited participants to share their postcamp plans in closing sessions.
- Add booster camps: setting up booster camps for cohorts of camp alums may

help mitigate the common postcamp slippage in writing habits and inevitable writing challenges. Just as with writing development broadly, we should acknowledge that the camp curriculum does not fit within just a week or two. T2 responses from participants requested support for "keeping the momentum going" with "writing group meetings for camp alums" (UW-Madison T2). Another respondent suggested that a "once a month" three- to four-hour session would be valuable for "remind[ing] me to use the techniques I learned!" (UW-Madison T2). The UW-Madison camps, for instance, provided sign-up sheets for participants to propose days/times/spaces for writing sessions. Writing sessions led by DC facilitators might ensure even more uptake from and value for participants.

- Acknowledge that there are no "one-size-fits-all" strategies. One U-Warsaw T1 participant reflected, "It didn't work for me, to be fair. For a long run, it was very exhausting." Camp facilitators would do well to account for writers' diverse needs and preferences. Reflection on one's own writing process could be integrated throughout camps, directing participants to consider which strategies work, or don't, for their own processes. As research by Tusting et al. (2019) showed, successful academic writers learn how to manage their time and habits, and they need help "thinking through explicitly how to create and manage boundaries; managing interruptions; and protecting autonomy and choice" (p. 62). DCs may help writers to do some of that important learning, building on the powerful insight from one U-Warsaw T1 participant that "learning to write is never finished; it is constant improvement."
- Build in support for the mental health and emotional components of dissertation writing, made even more salient by the pandemic. Many participants acknowledged the emotional complexities of completing a dissertation, often with uncertain job prospects. U-Warsaw T1 and T2 survey responses also reflected

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the mental health consequences of the pandemic. Even before the pandemic, UW-Madison camps added sessions on campus mental health resources. A UW-Madison T1 survey comment helpfully responded to those efforts, asking for

> *more specific strategies for reducing writing anxiety and anxieties associated with the dissertation writing process. . . . Writers need to know they are not alone in the feelings they have of isolation and how to cope with this, how to work through mental blocks, and examples of specific strategies to use and perspectives to consider.*

U-Warsaw participants also reflected on "the prolonging of isolation and the pandemic in general" (T2). Making room for sharing these challenges in a nonjudgmental space, along with potential coping strategies, is essential for participants.

Tension #2: When Camps Emphasize Community

Within their curriculum, almost all dissertation camps emphasize the power of community for writers, in part by creating a community that coalesces during the camps. DC participants simultaneously support each other through the challenge of writing intensively for hours each day *and* hold each other accountable for sustaining their writing and making progress, thereby instantiating the social elements of advanced research writing. One of our participants captured the essence of this collegial accountability, characterizing it as a "(positive) pressure to work" (UW-Madison T2). To encourage such interdependence, camp designers have students share spaces so that writers see others as they write, and they build in several small-group discussions each day of daily writing goals and of progress, full-group sharing and discussions, some sharing of drafts, and informal conversations over coffee and lunch and before and after formal sessions. This form of mutual aid within DCs taps into the deepest roots of collaborative learning and peer mentoring within writing center

theory and pedagogy, connecting powerfully to the social work theory of mutual aid within Bruffee's Brooklyn Institute (Kail, 2008; Trimbur & Kail, 2007).

From her research about the writing practices of a diverse group of 100 successful academic writers, Helen Sword (2017) described this social dimension of writing as a cornerstone of their habits: "Successful writers seldom work entirely in isolation; even in traditionally 'sole author' disciplines, they typically rely on other people . . . to provide them with support and feedback" (p. 4). Participants in Smith et al.'s study (2018) described DCs as "a social space that provided emotional support and an important change from feeling they were writing in isolation" (p. 216). As Smith et al. explain,

> *Scholarship on both writing retreats and writing groups shows that, when academics consistently work around others with a common purpose, they create bonds beyond sharing physical and temporal space (Maher, et al., 2008; Badenhorst et al., 2013; Maher, Fallucca & Halasz, 2013; Powers, 2014, as cited in Smith et al., p. 216).*

From her analysis of DC participants' self-reflections, Cayley (2020) argued that "writing amongst others can be a source of support and accountability" (p. 212) and teased out an important relationship between the two: a DC "highlights the possibility of creating a writing community, a place in which shared experience undergirds accountability" (p. 213).

Perceived Benefits
Postcamp survey responses offered impressive evidence that students indeed valued this social dimension of camps. Asked to identify what they learned, several participants highlighted that they discovered the power of community, drawing strong motivation from the mix of support, camaraderie, accountability, reduced isolation, and belief in the value of writing among others and of talking about writing in progress:

- "Writing is a sociable activity and one would not have to be alone in this process." (U-Warsaw T1)

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- "Talking about writing can be useful for the process." (U-Warsaw T1)
- "The camaraderie of writing something daunting alongside other people who are also tack[l]ing a similar challenge." (UW-Madison T1)
- "Feeling of camaraderie, knowing (and having it remembered) that there are other people working, hearing how others formulate their goals, telling ourselves how we feel, sharing some general thoughts, telling jokes and funny comments." (U-Warsaw T1)

And we have clear evidence from the T2 surveys at UW-Madison that some writers remained committed to community as a part of their dissertation writing process. What's striking are the flexible and creative ways individual students supported themselves and peers and disseminated what they had learned in a DC:

- "I now maintain morning writing blocks with friends and have integrated a 30-minute writing block with my officemates before we teach class." (UW-Madison T2)
- "Sharing [my] goals with others has helped me to hold myself accountable to meet my objectives." (UW-Madison T2)
- "[I learned] the value of writing in a group setting. I learned that I must make writing time a priority and share that with my lab mates and adviser." (UW-Madison T2)
- "I have been able to share information with my colleagues, which means they have benefited as well and used some of the strategies I learned." (UW-Madison T2)

Complexities

No matter how cherished they are by DC organizers and by most participants, these social dimensions did not resonate with all participants. We want to keep this in perspective—the vast majority valued community, but a few did not. In some cases, particular group dynamics were to blame, as one writer shared: "Maybe it was the matter of my group, but I did not feel comfortable" (U-Warsaw T1). In other

cases, the source was more general resistance to or lack of interest in the social dimension of the DC curriculum:

> In my opinion, talking to others about my goals and motivating each other is a form of coaching that I do not like very much. I think that if it was optional and not mandatory it would bring better results, because people who need this kind of support would take part in it, while the others could write. (U-Warsaw T1)

And one blamed their own habits for interfering with being a responsible member of a group:

> I never really found a writing group, nor was I particularly motivated to do so. I don't know how this could have been helped, as it seems to be a personal problem of mine; I am just lousy at writing with other people, and tend to keep my own timelines. I know it would be beneficial to be in a writing group, but I have been unable and unwilling to put in effort to find and maintain one. (UW-Madison T2)

Even though most participants said they learned about the value of writing among others during the camps, it's clear that many struggled to sustain such a community beyond the scaffolded, ready-made community in camp and without the DC resources. Busl et al. (2015) reported similar findings from their follow-up surveys. As one of our respondents explained,

> One of the hardest aspects of the dissertation for me has been the massive amounts of time spent alone. The camp was very heartening just to be in a room working alone, but together. We tried to carry this on for a bit after the camp, but fell away pretty soon without having an organizing structure for meeting regularly. (UW-Madison T2)

In fact, within the follow-up surveys, that's a familiar story for some participants: "We [a group of writers who met at a DC] tried to get

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a Facebook group going, but it fizzled" (UW-Madison T2). And that can be true even when a specialized group formed within a camp: "The writing group of dissertators that also work full-time had some success at first, but it's been very difficult to maintain. It's very hard to maintain the commitment to meet when work commitments trump writing group" (UW-Madison T2). For some participants, when life circumstances changed, participating in writing communities became more difficult. As one writer explained, "For a few weeks I did in fact sit and write in the library with fellow students I met at boot camp. But . . . once my baby was born in July getting that kind of social support became trickier" (UW-Madison T2). Several writers moved out of state: "I wish I could have gotten some help connecting with the colleges and dissertators here in Denver [1,000 miles away]" (UW-Madison T2). And not just any members will do. Writing partners and groups must involve the right group of other writers to achieve the delicate balance of understanding, trust, support, and accountability: "It's difficult for me to be productive in spaces where I don't feel connected to people and I have struggled to find fellow writers whose dissertation challenges resonate with mine" (UW-Madison T2).

On the score of community, the DC for the interdisciplinary PhD program at the University of Warsaw illustrated more complexities. Although participants rated the camp highly, expressed widespread appreciation, reported learning a great deal, and produced substantial amounts of new writing, the morning and afternoon small-group discussions of goals, so popular in the UW-Madison camps, drew mixed reviews in this camp. Participants were asked a week after this camp concluded, "What are the three most important things you learned from participating in the [camp]?" Of the 48 things they reported learning, only three were about community. And in the T2 survey responses seven months later, as the pandemic dragged on, references to community were virtually nonexistent. Only one of the 16 participants mentioned working "in tandem with my friend . . . the best support in terms of working regularly." But no one else mentioned forming a writing group or sharing drafts with peers, getting together with others to write,

or talking with others about writing goals and ideas.

Why did this particular camp not leave stronger imprints about community? The likely reasons alert us to important complications when camps are taught exclusively online and when all of the participants come from a cohort PhD program and faculty require participation in the camp. Compounding these challenges, the students and facilitators were crossing cultures, on different continents in vastly different time zones, and because of the pandemic the students were locked down in their homes, suffering from Zoom fatigue. So, lost were the informal conversations and fun shared over days at an in-person camp, during meals and coffee and breaks and campus walks and yoga that had been planned. As everyone who's experienced teaching online knows, creating social relationships and trust online takes an extra kind of intentionality. And because within this cohort PhD program, all of the participants already knew each other fairly well, some already may have normalized habits of sharing writing with peers, so perhaps there was plenty of community around writing both before and seven months after the camp but that was not worth mentioning as something they had learned in camp.

Suggestions for Camp Curricula

Of course, no programming or curriculum will ever solve all of these challenges with community. But from identifying these problems and listening to suggestions offered in follow-up surveys by camp participants themselves, we propose that camp facilitators consider these suggestions:

- Move the argument for community more into the explicit curriculum rather than leaving it in the assumed or hidden curriculum, and complicate discussions about the benefits of community. DC facilitators can discuss research on writing groups, including different kinds of groups (for example, Haas's [2014] taxonomy and Sword's [2017] "Writing Among Others" (pp. 135–146); share results from follow-up surveys about the difficulties of sustaining community; explore why some

writers do not need or choose to participate in a community of writers, affirming Sword's point that there is no single approach to successful academic writing; create opportunities for critical reflection (Cayley, 2020) about community; and tap into the creative intelligence of participants to address challenges around community.

- Help DC graduates find and sustain community beyond camps, through repeated invitations and in varied formats. In their responses on the T2 survey, the participants from UW-Madison proposed all kinds of wishes involving community, some of which the Writing Center there subsequently developed—weekly writing groups, drop-in Saturday writing retreats, DC booster shots, reunion retreats, and help in forming independent writing groups. In a follow-up survey, one writer confirmed how well these can work: "I did a writer's retreat through the Writing Center last month and it was great; it put me right back into the camp headspace." Of course, generating a catalog of possible new instructional programs like these is fairly easy to do; deciding whose responsibility it is to plan and lead them and finding ways to fund them amid competing priorities for writing centers is not.

- Focus even more attention on community within online camps by adapting proven methods for interaction and collaboration from successful online courses to the specialized learning situation of a DC. In the T2 surveys from the University of Warsaw's camp, multiple respondents said, wistfully, some version of, "I regret very much that the workshop could not take place in real life." One respondent reinforced the power of sharing physical spaces and conversations with other writers, explaining, "I . . . would have liked to sit with my peers and write, spend the breaks together, talk about what we write." And of course the pandemic affected community within this camp beyond having to meet online—undoubtedly exacerbating existing problems with isolation for graduate writers.

But we shouldn't just assume that these are transient pandemic problems. There will always be online DCs, which have the great benefit of providing greater access for more dissertation writers. Noticing what's difficult online can also help us look more critically at learning goals and methods for onsite and online camps.

Tension #3: When Camps Emphasize the Drafting Stage of the Writing Process

At the same time that DCs foreground helping writers strengthen their goal-setting and scheduling for writing and tap into the power of a supportive community, most DCs focus almost exclusively on the drafting stage of the writing process—that is, participants producing new text—rather than feedback and revision stages. There are, of course, exceptions—in some camps, writers regularly share drafts in small groups and give each other critical feedback; and during other camps, including the ones in our study, a few participants seek feedback on their drafts from writing center consultants. But in the curriculum and structure of many camps, organizers choose to prioritize the drafting stage of the writing process. If we think about DCs as a form of scholarly writing group, we can use Haas's (2014) valuable typology of groups to see that, in their choice of in-meeting and between-meeting activities, DC organizers have chosen to create a group that values production of new text over receiving critical feedback from other readers. This common DC focus responds well to the concerns that many of the UW-Madison participants expressed in their DC applications: they often felt stuck and struggled to get anything on the page or to gain any momentum. Emphasizing productivity counters the perfectionist tendencies of many dissertation writers, bred from the hyper-critical approaches graduate students often take to all readings and to their own writing. In response, DCs often help writers experiment with "good-enough" drafting and urge them to postpone too much criticism and revision. Reflecting on what they had learned from participating in the DC, one of the respondents captured just

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what most camp designers would want participants to take from a drafting-focused camp: "I learned to write first and worry about editing later during revisions" (UW-Madison T2). Focusing camps on the drafting phase of the writing process undeniably benefits the vast majority of participants.

Perceived Benefits

As we have demonstrated in previous sections, DC participants consistently expressed detailed, persuasive appreciation not only for what they had learned in the camp but also for the words, pages, and chapters they drafted and revised and for the progress they made toward writing goals. These representative comments convey what some very productive writers accomplished during the camps:

- "I made a lot [of] progress. I wrote my chapter 2. Of course, now I have to add more information and edit; but without the camp it would have taken me the whole semester to write those 23 pages." (UW-Madison T1)
- From a science student: "I wrote a draft of 1 of 3 manuscripts that will make up my dissertation." (UW-Madison T1)
- "I've written the full draft of an article 24 pages. . . . It's still really rough but I haven't thought I'll be able to finish it." (U-Warsaw T1)
- "I wrote 22+ pages of my dissertation. This is about half of a new chapter. I also planned the remainder of the chapter and feel more confident going forward with the chapter. I was able to send this new writing to my adviser for feedback." (UW-Madison T1)

Complexities

The benefits of prioritizing the drafting phase of the writing process during the camp are undeniable and powerful. But as we looked more closely within the survey responses in our data, we were fascinated by the occasional tensions a few writers identified about the camps focusing primarily on producing new text. We want to be clear—these are only whispers in the data, and we have to listen closely to notice them. The careful way that

one writer described their progress, for example, signaled how difficult it is to measure productivity with a complex scholarly task—an important awareness of the different degrees of challenge inherent in particular writing tasks and the sense that productivity matters more when it's quality work on a complex task: "[During the camp] I wrote an important subsection of Chapter 2. I am happy about it, since it dealt with a topic which is relatively well-researched and I was anxious that I would be unable to write anything meaningful about it. But I think I did :)" (U-Warsaw T1).

This nuanced assessment of the value of producing new text appeared in a few participants' mixed feelings of both accomplishment from having produced text and discomfort at the lack of polish in those pages. One comment from the UW-Madison T2 survey captured the wonderful overall success of the camp while getting at the crux of the problem when we use quantitative production as a proxy measure for progress: "Camp was a great and inspiring week! . . . [but] for some people the relevant question isn't how many pages are done but how close to the final version are those pages." Likewise, when asked in T1 surveys, "During our dissertation [camp], how much progress did you make?" two U-Warsaw participants expressed a similar discomfort with a focus on production:

- "I met my goal—I drafted all the points that I expected to and even surpassed my word goal. *However, in terms of the quality of the text, I was not satisfied* [emphasis added]."
- "I made an outline of the chapter of the dissertation, but it is more raw than I expected at the begginning [*sic*]."

Participants' reflections on the "rawness" or "unfinished" nature of the writing they drafted in the camps revealed that even as they're immersed in drafting, they're thinking about revision. In one UW-Madison T2 survey, a participant noted their struggles with the get-it-down, just-write, production-based model in general: "I am a slow and perfectionistic writer, and still find it hard to 'free-write' or just write quickly and without self-editing." Other

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participants specifically expressed a desire to move to editing or revising stages of the dissertation writing process. In response to a question about suggestions for the camp model, a respondent to the U-Warsaw T1 survey said, "I would be interested to hear more about the process of revising and rewriting one's texts—how many drafts it can take to reach a dissertation, how to not get lost in them, how to keep strong with constant changes etc. For now I know that I can sit down and write, but not sure how to get to the great finish line of the ready dissertation." More questions lingered for this participant around succeeding in the revising part of the writing process, moving from producing text to getting to the finish line with a product: a completed dissertation.

Even knowing what or where the finish line is, though, is a challenge in the never-ending, always evolving process of advanced research writing. A UW-Madison T2 respondent reflected on that complexity, saying, "The progress I've made doesn't seem like much but I know it's only because writing is recursive and can sometimes include false starts, wrong turns, etc." The writing process, particularly for advanced research writers, is, of course, anything but linear. Another participant responding to the UW-Madison T2 survey similarly clarified how complex writing a dissertation can be, noting the challenge of a dissertation's "sheer size" and of "organizing it into a logical flow." Even after completing their dissertation, a writer in the life sciences explained that they had to complete a range of other experiments to make the work of the dissertation "publication-ready. They were good enough for a thesis," they explained, "but not for a peer-reviewed publication." These writer's reflections highlight how a production-based DC supports a part, but far from all parts, of the advanced research writing process—leaving out an emphasis on recursiveness and revision.

Suggestions for Camp Curricula

When DCs emphasize the drafting phase of the writing process, postponing, for many good reasons, editing, revising, or critique—and when they do *not* include sustained consultations with writing center consultants or peer-review groups throughout the camp—tensions around the emphasis on productivity seem almost inevitable. In response to an open-ended request for suggestions for future camps, one participant's incisive comment captured perfectly what's missing in drafting-focused camps that might strengthen the quality of dissertation writing: "The focus of the camp is to write. Therefore, I believe that that is covered. However, *if the focus is to improve writing and argument quality, something else has to be done* [emphasis added]" (UW-Madison T1). That participant went on to acknowledge that there simply isn't room for both within a single camp: "Being fair, I should say that quality should be done in other kind of camp or series of workshops, since there is not physical time for more during a one-week writing camp."

We are strongly in favor of DCs continuing to emphasize the drafting stage. But given the responses we've described here, we can imagine ways to broaden the curriculum in order to address some of these important interests raised by camp participants. Camps could better acknowledge, account for, and support recursiveness within the writing process.

- A broader curriculum might include more time for future camps, with a drafting-focused first week to help establish habits and generate the momentum and motivation that come with a burst of text production and productivity, and *then* build in regular peer sharing and critiquing *and* advisor feedback.
- For camp participants who want feedback on newly drafted material from advisors *during the camp*, pilot ways to make that possible, as Simpson (2013) described. Many camp participants made it clear that they were eager to have sustained writing time away from conversations with and judgments from their advisors, with some even seeing a separation as necessary in order to be productive. But one participant described their need for feedback from an advisor:

> I was able to write down a substantial structure of two important chapters of my dissertation. I was able to track my tempo of writing and productive habits.

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I could improve the quality though if I could discuss my daily work with my supervisors which wasn't possible (and wasn't even the purpose of the workshop). (U-Warsaw T1)

Another U-Warsaw student noted in the T2 survey, "Various comments [feedback on my drafts] would be important to me. I need close reading of my dissertation." Any writing center tutor who has been lucky enough to work on a long-term basis with dissertation writers knows how invaluable dissertation advisors' feedback about drafts is to writers and how that feedback influences, in essential ways, the agenda for writing center sessions.

- Incorporate some substantial discussion about the process of revising a long project. DCs could introduce participants to the value of identifying and analyzing models and planning ways to apply those principles as they revise their own chapters. DCs could also prepare participants to work with critical feedback from advisors, other committee members, and journal editors; to retain agency when choosing what to do with that feedback; to manage substantial revisions; to learn from a feedback cycle on one chapter about how to improve the next chapter or article; and to cultivate the resilience necessary to persist.

Tension #4: When Camps Emphasize Cross-Disciplinary Participation

Most DCs in North American universities are intentionally cross-disciplinary or, put differently, essentially discipline-free, with participants in any one camp coming from a dizzying array of disciplines all across a university—in the case of UW-Madison, from biomedical engineering to art history to economics to educational psychology to literary studies to computer science. Camps aim to create a learning community that fosters discussion, support, and learning *across* rigid departmental and disciplinary boundaries and that lessens risks of intradepartmental competition. Beyond

signaling that the DC curriculum applies to dissertation writing in all disciplines, such cross-disciplinary conversations also have important learning goals. DC participants in Smith et al.'s (2018) study, for example, noted that they clarified complex ideas in their drafts when they discussed them with colleagues who were *not* in their discipline—a perspective familiar to writing center scholars and practitioners from arguments in favor of generalist tutors. Sparking discussions across disciplines also holds the potential to reduce "'pluralistic ignorance' (Lovitts, 2001, as cited in Fladd et al., 2019), or a writer's belief that they are the only graduate student to face challenges in completing the dissertation" (Fladd et al., p. 196). Within our survey responses, many participants characterized camp interactions with colleagues from other disciplines as beneficial. But a closer look reveals that some participants found limited value in cross-disciplinary conversations, and a few wanted more discipline-specific DCs. We want to be sure to keep this point in perspective—comments from participants about tensions in the cross-curricular curriculum were few and far between, really just a susurrus—but we are convinced that they are worth exploring as we develop curricula for future camps and as the field frames future research questions about DCs.

Perceived Benefits

Anyone who has participated in or led a DC has seen how in every camp writers from different disciplines, who had not known each other before, enjoy and benefit from talking about their projects and their writing processes in small-group conversations with interested and supportive listeners who are fellow writers. However, despite this clear appreciation for cross-disciplinarity, when they were asked in T1 surveys how valuable it was to interact during camps with dissertation-writers from other academic divisions, DC participants from UW-Madison offered an array of responses that was both affirming and perplexing (see Table 2).

Because our survey did not happen to ask participants to explain their responses to this question (even though we did ask for comments with most of the other quantitative

Table 2. Benefit of Interaction with Students from Other Academic Divisions, from T1 Surveys, UW–Madison

Q: How important was it for you to have the opportunity at Dissertation Writing Camp to engage with other dissertators from different divisions about the challenges facing dissertators, the writing process, and/or your dissertation experience more generally?

	2012–2015 Compilation	January 2016	January 2019	May 2019
Very important	39.9% (*n* = 73)	0% (*n* = 0)	50.0% (*n* = 7)	78.6% (*n* = 11)
Somewhat important	28.4% (*n* = 52)	26% (*n* = 5)	42.9% (*n* = 6)	21.4% (*n* = 3)
Not important	31.1% (*n* = 57)	74% (*n* = 14)	7.1% (*n* = 1)	0% (*n* = 0)

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questions), this range of responses is challenging to interpret. (In the T1 survey at U-Warsaw, we did not ask about cross-disciplinary conversations because that camp was exclusively for students in a program that was already interdisciplinary.) But certain conclusions are clear from the UW-Madison data. With the exception of the seemingly anomalous January 2016 cohort (discussed below in the complexities section), the vast majority of participants felt that the opportunity to engage with dissertation writers from across academic divisions was important, seeming to confirm the curricular goals and the benefits noted above: an impressive 72.4% of the 2012–15, January 2019, and May 2019 camp participants described the opportunities to engage across disciplines as somewhat or very important. A further endorsement of cross-disciplinary conversations appeared in the UW-Madison T1 survey. A respondent suggested that in future camps "it would be useful to have time to bounce ideas off of others *and communicate with those outside of one's field*" (emphasis added). One of the participants in the U-Warsaw camp also noted the value of cross-disciplinary conversations: "It was quite interesting to see what challenges are present in different fields in the context of writing. I did not learn anything new but this conversations [*sic*] are very important in my opinion" (T1).

Complexities
It's clear, however, that a few—or sometimes more than a few—participants found the intentionally cross-disciplinary dimensions of the DCs not important. Although in the three-year compilation from 2012–15, close to 70% of the

respondents found the cross-disciplinary conversations very or somewhat important, 31.1% over those years said that dimension of the camp was *not* important. The responses from the January 2016 UW-Madison DC participants obviously mark an extreme position from a small number of participants, but it's striking to see 74% finding the cross-disciplinary conversations not important. Without narrative responses or interviews, we can't definitively know why these participants responded in this way. These varying reactions inevitably make us think about the degree to which camp facilitators talk directly with participants about the value of a cross-disciplinary camp: some facilitators continually reinforce cross-disciplinary conversations, while others barely mention them. There may, then, be a good opportunity within the camp curriculum to include more discussion about the benefits of having readers from a variety of disciplines.

A few participants in their responses to survey questions did, in fact, recommend more discipline-specific approaches to the curriculum. One UW-Madison participant, for example, noted that discussions of productivity "didn't really address the fact of disciplinary difference. I also think it might be useful to have dissertation camps along more disciplinary lines (. . . which I think would be more useful than the general one)" (T2). Another participant wanted the individual consultations during the camp to be with their choice of writing center consultant based on disciplinary expertise: "I recommend including expert areas/topics for each consultant that they communicate from the start, so that students can seek out consultants based on their specialized knowledge.

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Expert areas may also serve as a starting point for the conversation or encourage pre-work for the consultation" (UW-Madison T1, January 2019). Even in the camp with all interdisciplinary students at U-Warsaw, one participant said that they wanted the daily small-group goal discussion groups to be organized by discipline: "It was nice to meet people from the programme, though I feel we should have been divided into more 'subject specific' groups to learn some techniques from each other" (T1). And one UW-Madison participant conveyed a sense of a lost opportunity by not having disciplinary colleagues participating with them: "It would have been great to have at least one other person from my program in the same camp dates" (T2). Again, while such responses may be outliers, we believe DC designers and facilitators should recognize that underneath strong support for cross-disciplinary camps, some camp participants may hold divergent views about the value of the cross-disciplinary structure of most DCs.

Suggestions for Camp Curricula

This tension regarding cross-disciplinarity strikes us as particularly complex because it bumps up against what Starke-Meyerring (2014) incisively characterizes as a paradox for doctoral student research writers. On the one hand, research in writing studies makes it clear that the discursive practices graduate student writers are expected to engage in are very discipline specific and deeply rhetorical; doctoral writing is "specific to the research culture whose work it does" (p. 67). On the other hand, as Starke-Meyerring argues, the instructional culture around writing in these students' departments is usually deeply arhetorical, with the little advice and instruction students receive about high-level graduate writing filled with "non-research-based assumptions about writing as a universal skill" (p. 68). We don't pretend that DCs can solve a problem of this scale, and the small number of voices in our study questioning the cross-disciplinary curriculum of DCs hardly calls for radical change, but we do want to suggest a few ways DCs might strengthen their curriculum by acknowledging this tension around disciplinarity more directly in camp curricula. Within our findings, we also

see the desire for discipline-specific feedback and conversations as confirmation of Starke-Meyerring's argument and an opportunity to open up more discussions with disciplinary faculty about advisors' feedback and about rhetorical instruction within graduate programs.

- Although the DC structure may be relatively consistent across years, different facilitators inevitably emphasize particular aspects of the camp over others, which can lead to participants valuing specific activities to varying degrees. In particular, the tensions expressed by camp participants around the value of cross-disciplinary activities and discussions suggest that camp facilitators should be more intentional and explicit about the value of that cross-disciplinary work. Facilitators may, for instance, discuss critically what different kinds of readers—disciplinary insiders and outsiders—can contribute. For writers who are interested in receiving some expert disciplinary feedback, facilitators might consider offering the option for some limited feedback from participants' advisors during the camp.
- Within cross-curricular camps, consider expanding the DC curriculum about advanced research writing within division-specific discourse. DCs could, for example, incorporate discussions about managing complex structural choices within scientific literature reviews, strengthening and making more memorable original claims in humanities dissertations, creating advanced figures for experimental papers, and improving style in a humanities, social-science, or STEM dissertation.
- Consider experimenting with camps that are division-specific. Evaluate how well they allow for more shared vocabulary and assumptions about the discourse of dissertations, more valuable critical feedback about ideas and arguments, and more likelihood of sustained community after a camp, while trying not to lose cross-disciplinary benefits and not to risk fragmentation into subdisciplinary cliques, and not raising expectations for too much disciplinary specialization.

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- Taking what they have learned from camp participants, DC leaders, in collaboration with graduate school deans, are in an ideal position to push beyond the curriculum of camps to initiate discussions with disciplinary faculty about how important constructive, discipline-specific feedback from advisors is to dissertation writers and about how graduate programs can strengthen their disciplinary writing curriculum for graduate students (for an example of conceptualizing DCs in conversation with graduate faculty within departments, see Simpson, 2013). Recent research offers powerful arguments for improving advisor feedback and ways to strengthen the culture of graduate-level writing instruction and support (e.g., Bommarito, 2020; Tang & Andriamanalina, 2020; and Zanzucchi & Fenstermaker, 2020).

Conclusion

With all of the well-documented successes of writing-process dissertation camps, we believe it's time to think more deeply and critically about the DC curriculum—and no better way to do that than to listen carefully to what participants say about its core elements. Based on our longitudinal data from a longstanding DC at UW-Madison and a DC at U-Warsaw, two competing stories emerge: (a) the vast majority of participants report initially and in follow-ups that they learned a great deal and that our curricula work for them, and (b) there remain some persistent tensions within the curricula and within participants' experiences of those curricula.

Our aim in this article was to identify common areas of tension among DC participants' responses and to explore what they might signify for future iterations of camps and for writing support and pedagogy in general. Paying attention to outlier responses and dissenting voices helps us better understand the complexities and tensions of graduate students' writing lives and can help us strengthen future DC curricula. Leading DCs at UW-Madison over the past decade has shown us distinct

and ongoing tensions regarding how to structure DCs for different writers, including writers from different disciplines, at different writing stages, and with different writing goals. Moreover, despite the vast difference in cultures across the UW-Madison and U-Warsaw camps, we found a great deal of similarity even in light of the U-Warsaw camp's special circumstances of the pandemic with repeated lockdowns, participation within a cohort of a required program with collegial relationships established long ago, and some participants already being very accomplished research writers. These conditions and the cross-cultural dimensions underscored and heightened the tensions we saw across the camps. In addition, facilitating a DC during the COVID-19 pandemic and offering subsequent camps online have provided us with additional insights into the affordances and limitations of the standard DC curriculum, especially with regard to participants' stress levels and camp accessibility. The tensions we saw won't be going away, nor do we need them to. We do hope, though, that identifying these occasional criticisms and complexities from DC participants proves generative for camp designers and facilitators, especially in terms of future considerations for writing strategies, time management, goal-setting, community, disciplinarity, confidence, and mental health.

Based on trends in what participants have shared about their DC experiences over the past 10+ years, we've attempted to be responsive to concerns by making adjustments to the DCs offered at UW-Madison. For example, we now invite more input from participants about what they'd like to gain from their camp experience and have increased our efforts to tailor DCs to each cohort. We've heard some participants' mixed or negative experiences with a productivity-first approach, and we've since placed far less emphasis on word and page counts. We've also built more options into the camp experience, such as more rest/recharge breaks, online options for participation, encouragement of a wider range of working hours during the camp, various options for participating in workshops and closing sessions, and preferences for sharing writing.

We invite colleagues to listen carefully to the outlier responses and to respond critically

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to those responses. At the same time, we acknowledge that some of what we're talking about goes far beyond what we in writing centers can do. But in collaboration with other campus partners, we can focus attention on and better address some of these issues through a more inclusive, accessible approach to leading and teaching these camps overall. This might include more conversation about how people's writing practices and habits vary and may shift over time or by project and normalizing that; a more intentional and explicit focus on mental health, including work-life balance; and talking frankly during the camp about how tricky it will be to apply these strategies in postcamp life and to provide opportunities and support for developing sustainable habits. We feel it's imperative to expand the curriculum of camps to include more acknowledgments and discussion with participants about these complexities.

We also believe the implications of this piece are far broader than running DCs: they can help us consider the curriculum of writing center workshops and our sustained research and work with graduate students. We hope to encourage continued conversations about writing habits, community, other readers, and confidence. These findings also contribute to our understanding of advanced research writing by focusing on the lived experiences of the writers themselves—findings that can be useful for writing center consultations, tutor education, and curriculum for workshops by helping us consider the communities of practice. As Nancy Grimm (2003) urged, drawing from New Literacy Studies, writing centers are ideal places to research how students negotiate the literacy demands of the university. More broadly, we believe our approach of listening to the outliers in student responses to what we do in writing centers is essential for thinking critically about and strengthening all areas of our work.

We're eager to learn from other new research inspired by DCs and by this work, including other takes on these data. More cross-institutional research of this sort, along with more international perspectives, is needed to gain a better understanding of the complexities of DCs and how participants

experience them. Questions remain about how the curriculum from DCs outside of North America can influence the curriculum of DCs at North American universities. There is also room to explore more deeply the impact of the pandemic on dissertation writers' attitudes and capacity for engaging in a DC, as the pandemic has forced us to rethink some of our foundational assumptions about what's most valuable about these camps. Furthermore, research methods that push beyond frequently vague surveys—methods such as interviews and focus-group discussions, which some DC researchers have used—can help probe these complexities further.

In essence, we call for more careful, deliberate, and intentional listening, especially listening to the outlier responses that are too frequently disregarded or downplayed. We would, of course, never expect any DC to adopt all of these suggestions—some are complex, time consuming, even risky; some may be bad ideas. What we want to encourage is this kind of critical thinking about the curriculum for DCs and to acknowledge the ways it sometimes does not work for some writers—and to open up more honest discussions about how participants can adapt what the camp teaches as they continue writing and learning more about writing beyond dissertation camps.

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