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Graduate Writing Groups: Evidence-Based Practices for Advanced Graduate Writing Support

Wenqi Cui
Indiana University of Pennsylvania, mlnw@iup.edu

Jing Zhang
Shantou University, zhangj@stu.edu.cn

Dana Lynn Driscoll
Indiana University of Pennsylvania, ddriscol@iup.edu

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Wenqi Cui
(Indiana University of Pennsylvania)

Jing Zhang
(Shantou University)

Dana Lynn Driscoll
(Indiana University of Pennsylvania)

Abstract   Writing centers seek to expand their services beyond tutoring and develop evidence-based practices. Continuing and expanding the existing practices, the authors have adopted graduate writing groups (GWGs) to support graduate writers, especially those working on independent writing projects like a dissertation or article for publication. This article provides an effective model on how to develop and assess virtual graduate writing groups (VGWGs). This replicable, aggregable, and data-supported (RAD) research applied a mixed-methods design with pre- and postsurveys over the three semesters of running the VGWG. It found that the VGWG offered a full range of writing support that met graduate writers' needs for time-based, skill-based, draft-based, and emotion-based support. Specifically, the VGWG significantly improved students' approaches to writing in five key areas—goal setting, focusing on dissertation writing, generating plans for writing sessions, writing productivity, and writing progress. Therefore, this study contributes robust empirical validation of this model, suggesting that VGWG is an effective method to support graduate writers and expand writing center services. Also, the authors provide a useful model on how writing centers can effectively assess through pre- and postsurveys in a straightforward manner, an assessment model that has both internal and external benefits.

Keywords   replicable, aggregable, and data-supported (RAD) research, virtual graduate writing group, writing center

The question of how to best support advanced graduate writers, especially those working on independent writing projects like a dissertation or article, is a pressing one for universities and writing centers. At present, national statistics suggest that approximately 50% of students who enter doctoral programs complete their degree (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008; Lovitts, 2001), and underrepresented minorities complete their degree at even lower rates (Sowell et al., 2015). Further, the average time to earn a doctorate is seven years or longer (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008; West et al., 2011). Researchers have identified various challenges contributing to high attrition rates, including barriers within doctoral programs or departments (Golde, 2005), limited institutional-level interventions

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Zhang

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Driscoll

(e.g., academic preparation and support, diversity training) dedicated to underrepresented minorities (Sowell et al., 2015), incompatibility between students' expectations and the program's practices, challenges with advising relationships, and lack of necessary knowledge (Golde, 2005; West et al., 2011). While a myriad of factors are present, one of the most pressing issues—and one of interest to writing center practitioners—is supporting students' transition to independent writing during their dissertation phase (Gardner, 2009; Sigafus, 1998; West et al., 2011). In fact, a large majority of PhD students who do not finish their degree withdraw from their programs as "ABD" or "all but dissertation." While students can successfully complete coursework and/or candidate exams, they fail to make progress in a less structured writing environment (Golde, 2005; Sigafus, 1998). At our institution, the national attrition numbers were borne out in doctoral student attrition numbers, and most students who failed to complete their doctorate did so because of lack of progress on their dissertation.

Dissertation writing is an extraordinarily unique challenge, one unlike other challenges that students may have faced earlier in their career. First, unlike during coursework and earlier degrees, students who are at the dissertation writing stage are expected to be autonomous and independent writers, structuring their dissertation work, managing their time, knowing when to seek help, and cultivating relationships with faculty and cohort members—a condition that coursework has not prepared them for in most cases. Second, while advisors might assume that their students know how to write a rhetorically effective dissertation (Johnson et al., 2000), students are often ill-equipped to engage in the specific kinds of writing challenges they face. These challenges include developing a literature review, synthesizing a large body of sources, building arguments, making contributions to the field, engaging in specific data analysis, or interpreting and writing from data (Grav & Cayley, 2015; Kamler & Thomson, 2008). Third, dissertation writing is a long-term process that spans multiple years, during which students are juggling many other responsibilities. Many

doctoral candidates also have full-time careers as professional educators, instructors, administrators; they thus have to simultaneously balance work, family, and community commitments, handle financial stress, and manage the demands from the doctoral program. Thus, time management is another widely acknowledged challenge (Sigafus, 1998; West et al., 2011). Tied to time management and stress is what Dana Driscoll, Rebecca Leigh, and Nadia Zamin (2020) identify as isolation, pressure, and emotional challenges present in writing and in doctoral education. They note that students may experience a range of emotional challenges, including burnout, academic guilt, imposter syndrome (where they doubt their abilities and feel like a fraud), suffering from poor self-efficacy, and feeling isolated. All the above challenges are interrelated and need to be addressed to support dissertation writers.

Failing to complete a dissertation and thus, a doctoral degree, has serious financial, psychological, and social costs to students (Golde, 2005). Doctoral student attrition also has considerable economic costs at the departmental, institutional, disciplinary, state, and federal levels (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 1990; Council of Graduate Schools, 2008). Therefore, support to graduate students needs to be multidimensional and involve efforts at programmatic, departmental, and institutional levels. The high attrition rates have prompted many universities, and increasingly writing centers, to explore ways to better support students at the dissertation writing stage. These attempts include exploring different forms of graduate writing support, such as establishing supportive department culture (de Valero, 2001), graduate writing groups, graduate-level tutoring, writing workshops, dissertation boot camps, and editing services, which provide graduate writers with a large feedback ecosystem with multiple points of entry (Fladd et al., 2019; Mannon, 2016; Simpson, 2012).

Graduate writing groups seek to assist students with longer-term support for dissertation writing and address many of the concerns described above. While these groups take different forms, they commonly involve multiple meetings over a period of time where

Cui

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Zhang

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Driscoll

writers may set goals, develop texts, offer each other peer support, and make progress on their writing. Thus, graduate writing groups allow students who are completing a dissertation or thesis to receive long-term, extensive support that traditional tutoring does not typically offer (Mannon, 2016). However, despite the growing use and endorsement of these services in the literature, evidence-based research that explores the efficacy of these practices is very limited and not statistically validated.

Recognizing the need for long-term writing support for dissertation-writing students and the need for replicable, aggregable, and data-supported (RAD) studies that create evidence-based practices in writing center settings, we offer an overview of our virtual graduate writing groups (VGWGs) and an empirical investigation of the efficacy of these groups. With a mixed-methods design, this empirical study strives to (1) describe our virtual graduate writing group program at Indiana University of Pennsylvania; (2) offer statistical evidence of our program's effectiveness and impact on graduate writers; and (3) contribute to the field's knowledge about evidence-based best practices of graduate writing support. As such, our study is guided by three research questions:

1. What were graduate writers' expectations of virtual graduate writing groups (hereafter VGWGs)?
2. How did graduate writers perceive their experience attending a VGWG?
3. What impact did the VGWG have on graduate students' self-reported writing abilities, behaviors, mentality, and progress?

In the following sections, we first review the literature on supporting graduate writers, with particular attention to previous work on graduate writing groups. Next, we detail our VGWG service as an effective model to inform those hoping to offer or expand writing support for graduate writers. Guided by three research questions, we outline the methodology and present our empirical findings. Quantitative and qualitative analyses revealed (1) our VGWG model—one that consists of mini lessons, goal setting and check-ins, and

peer review workshops—offered a full range of writing support that met graduate writers' needs for time-based, skill-based, draft-based, and emotion-based support; and (2) after participating in the VGWG, graduate writers reported statistically significant gains in thesis/dissertation writing and being able to overcome writing challenges more effectively. We recognize the importance of providing effective, evidence-based investigations of key writing center programming, particularly in the current climate in higher education, with decreasing budgets focused on supporting only "proven" programs. Our statistical analyses demonstrate significant changes based on group participation, which helped students cultivate more positive writing behaviors and mentality and helped them become more productive writers. Therefore, our study not only presents an empirically validated, effective model of VGWG but also puts forward a powerful evidence-based argument that attests to the efficacy and importance of this work.

Literature Review

Graduate Writing Support: Writing Groups

Scholars, administrators, programs, and writing centers have been making meaningful efforts to support graduate writers (de Valero, 2001; McMurray, 2019; Phillips, 2012; Simpson, 2012; West et al., 2011). Some focused on improving the departmental environment (de Valero, 2001); some focused on the student-faculty relationship, which has been identified as integral to degree completion (de Valero, 2001; Gardner, 2009; Lindsay, 2015). Also, some scholars emphasized that, in addition to support from the faculty and department, students need other forms of support, such as workshops and writing groups (de Valero, 2001; West et al., 2011). Given the unique position of the writing center, some writing center administrators have taken initiatives to research ways to support graduate writers (e.g., Fladd et al., 2019; McMurray, 2019; Phillips, 2012; Simpson, 2012). These endeavors include exploring graduate-level tutoring strategies,

offering writing workshops, graduate writing groups, dissertation/thesis boot camps, graduate editing services, and so on. Among those, writing groups have recently received much attention because their flexible formations and activities can provide graduate students with long-term, extensive writing support.

The literature has reported the advantages of writing groups, including creating a community that helps graduate students transition from students to scholars (Phillips, 2012), helping them develop metalanguage and learn to talk about writing (Lee & Boud, 2003; Maher et al., 2008), increasing their rhetorical awareness and flexibility (Gradin et al., 2006), as well as offering emotional support (Ferguson, 2009; Gradin et al., 2006; Lindsay, 2015; Wegener et al., 2016). That is to say, both "horizontal" (student–student) and "vertical" (advisor/faculty–student) frames (Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Boud & Lee, 2005) are integral to building a constructive and encouraging learning and writing environment, which contributes to graduate completion rates. For example, Julia Lockheart (2010) remarked that students can achieve emotional and social support from peer writing groups, as well as enhance their writing abilities, when they take on the roles of writers, reviewers, and editors within a group.

Since each writing group is unique in terms of its purpose, needs, and structure, the way to assess it varies. Many studies on writing groups are theoretical, reflective, and practice oriented (e.g., Gradin et al., 2006; Lee & Boud, 2003; Phillips, 2012; Simpson, 2012). These studies described their writing group models, reflected on the benefits and challenges of writing groups, and discussed the impact of writing groups on writers and writing, but did not provide RAD-based research to support their efficacy.

To our knowledge, only a limited number of studies contained empirical data (e.g., Aitchison, 2009; Ferguson, 2009; McMurray, 2019; West et al., 2011; Wilmot, 2018). Some studies were written by writing group participants who analyzed their notes, memories, and audio recordings of their meetings to explore their own experiences, learning, and identity construction in writing groups (e.g., Maher et al., 2008; Wegener et al., 2016). Mostly, data were collected after the groups were completed, focusing on participants' experiences and evaluations through surveys (e.g., Ferguson, 2009; Wilmot, 2018), or a combination of interviews and surveys (e.g., Aitchison, 2009; McMurray, 2019). However, none of the above studies examined the change over time of the impact of graduate writing groups, nor used virtual groups, nor provided quantitative and statistical validation of the efficacy of these groups.

The above studies shed light on participants' experiences and expectations, but since the data were collected after the groups were completed, those results did not clearly indicate the exact effect of graduate writing groups. A systematic research and assessment approach using a pre- and posttest model can provide those who run, facilitate, or manage writing groups with insights into the efficacy of this practice. Specifically, replicable, aggregable, and data-supported (RAD) research is needed to validate, extend, and sustain our practices (Driscoll & Wynn-Perdue, 2012; Özer & Zhang, 2021). In the next section, we describe the contextual information and the formation of our VGWG; then we offer RAD research to indicate the effectiveness of our VGWG model.

Virtual Graduate Writing Groups at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP)

Consistent with the broader trends nationally, our university had identified the early dissertation writing stage as one of the key points where we failed to retain graduate students. That is, many students successfully made it through their two years of coursework but then would not complete a dissertation, often due to "timing out" and not making writing progress. Our university has a unique population of graduate students: we have a large number of international multilingual writers and traditional doctoral students (mostly enrolled in traditional academic year programs), in addition to many who enroll in low-residency doctoral programs geared toward working professionals, with summer-only, evening, online, or weekend classes. Thus, students often

Cui

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Zhang

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Driscoll

are on campus only for coursework (2 years or more for evening/weekend/summer programs) and then return to jobs or move away while writing their dissertation. Thus, any services that we provide must meet the needs of these very distinct groups. Given the unique needs of this population, the three co-authors began researching existing graduate writing support programs to develop a comprehensive writing center program that would support advanced graduate writers at a distance. We modeled our program on the needs of our graduate writers, the existing literature on writing groups, as well as longitudinal research supporting the development of writing expertise in professional academic writers (Driscoll & Yacoub, 2022; Kellogg, 2006). We will note that while our services have been designed primarily with dissertation writers in mind, we also welcome master's thesis writers to the groups. We have much less participation at the MA level because MA students often have built-in thesis writing support in coursework and remain in coursework until the conclusion of their degree.

Because of this, we developed two virtual-only services to reach our student population. Our first service is a Dissertation and Thesis Writing Boot Camp, held on a Saturday once a semester (outside of the scope of this article to discuss). Our second service, and the focus of this article, is our Virtual Graduate Writing Groups, which are structured[1] as follows.

- **Time, length, frequency of group meeting:** Groups meet for 90 minutes[2] virtually and synchronously every two weeks with an advanced tutor facilitator (a graduate student nearing the end of their own dissertation writing journey). During the regular semester or summer, groups meet six times over 12 weeks.
- **Duration of groups:** Groups run for one semester. Students may sign up for a new group the following semester if they choose. We run groups in fall, spring, and summer terms.
- **Leadership:** Advanced tutor facilitators lead the group in 20-minute mini lessons on a variety of topics of relevance to graduate students. We have a series of lessons

that facilitators choose from based on the needs of the group. Tutor facilitators also lead discussions and facilitate peer review workshops.
- **In-meeting activities:** Members of the group will all engage in goal setting and check-ins, discussions about writing and feedback, as well as peer review activities at each meeting.
- **Membership:** At present, group membership is based on the availability and schedules of graduate students. Thus, groups are all cross disciplinary. While we see potential benefit in discipline-specific groups, at present we do not have the funding structure to allow for these kinds of groups (as we have over 60 distinct graduate programs in approximately 25 different departments).

VGWGs were advertised to students through the graduate listserv, student-related news features, and graduate program directors and faculty. Because IUP is classified as an R2 school with higher teaching loads than an R1 school (3/3 or 3/3/1 for many faculty), the additional supports have been welcomed by graduate faculty and program directors. Since summer 2020, we have run 14 groups and served more than 100 graduate writers from 16 programs. Each group meets every two weeks for three months, which is roughly one semester. In total, we offer 3 mini lessons, 3 goal setting and check-in activities, and 5 peer review workshops in each group. Figure 1 describes the model of our VGWG.

Figure 2 illustrates the features of our VGWG model. We offer three types of activities to support these graduate writers' needs, including writing skills, rhetorical awareness and flexibility, as well as emotional and social support. Particularly, we drew on Claire McMurray's (2019) four dimensions—skill-based, draft-based, time-based, and emotion-based—to design our VGWG activities and analyze collected data. Our skill-based activities are related to improving writing skills and rhetorical awareness. Draft-based activities allow students to receive/give feedback and ensure writing progress. Time-based activities improve students' skills of managing time

Figure 1. VGWG model.

Figure 2. VGWG features.

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Zhang

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Driscoll

and meeting their writing goals. Emotion-based activities mean to offer emotional support and self-care strategies. Thus, our featured writing activities entail goal setting and goal check-ins, mini lessons, and peer review workshops.

The first is our goal setting and goal check-in feature, helping students to manage their writing time, stay on track, make regular progress, and strengthen their accountability. This feature aims to meet graduate writers' time-based needs for writing support. At the first group meeting, we offer students the strategies of setting SMART (i.e., Specific, Measurable, Action-oriented, Realistic/Reachable, Time-bound) goals, and then demonstrate and assist them in setting three types of goals: big goals, milestone goals, and action goals. Big goals are for a semester, while milestones are for each month, marking their progress, like landmarks in their writing journey. Action goals are for each day/week. At the third and sixth meetings, we have goal check-ins for the purpose of celebrating students' progress and motivating them to continue making progress. When checking in, students can identify what

they have achieved so far and measure how much more time/effort is needed to reach their goals, based on which, they make changes or adaptations, as well as find out how to adjust their daily/weekly writing activities to meet these goals.

The second feature of our VGWG model is our mini lessons, which cover topics that are important for graduate writers, including goal setting, time management, work-school-life balance, managing feedback, literature synthesis, revision practices, self-editing strategies, and destressing activities such as mindfulness practices. In these mini lessons, group facilitators share with group members practical strategies that not only enhance and expand students' writing strategies but also support their self-care and mental health. Interestingly, these mini lessons always invoke broader conversations such as how to write a proposal, how to handle feedback, or how to practice self-care. These practices are notably useful for building trust and comradery among participants. In this way, the second feature of our VGWG offers both skill-based and emotion-based support to graduate writers.

Cui

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Zhang

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Driscoll

The third feature of our VGWG is a peer review workshop, which allows students to keep motivated, write productively, receive feedback, and develop their rhetorical awareness. This feature meets students' draft-based needs. Every two weeks, students bring to the workshop a 5–8-page writing sample, mostly their chapter drafts. Since students are from various programs with different writing conventions, they are prompted to share their understanding of good academic writing in their field or program and identify features of academic writing that cross disciplines such as source synthesis, building argument, organizational strategies, and signaling scholarly contributions. In addition, before the workshop, students need to specify what kind of feedback they hope to receive such as rhetorical moves, arguments, or formatting. During the workshops, they work in pairs or groups of three. In the first 30 minutes, they review each other's work and give written feedback, then in another 30 minutes, they discuss the comments and feedback they gave or received. This 30-minute talk allows students to take turns to respond to the feedback they got, explain their thoughts, and reflect on their writing. In this way, students can deepen their critical understanding of writing and rhetorical knowledge through the interactions of their writing and feedback with readers from different disciplines. This kind of talk is "the fundamental vehicle [to] engage [students] in a reflexive practice that connects reading and writing for the building of meaning" (Aitchison, 2009, p. 907). Students appreciate this practice because this schedule and arrangement motivate them to keep writing productively and increase their rhetorical awareness and writing skills.

In the above featured activities, the tutor facilitator plays a key role. They model and monitor writing activities, and offer suggestions and instructions about writing strategies, academic conventions, and writing-adjacent skills. Additionally, they help build a community among group members and provide emotional support. As advanced graduate students, tutor facilitators can also share their own experiences as successful dissertation writers.

Lastly, each group is assessed using pre- and postsurveys on Qualtrics, an online survey software program. The surveys investigate group participants' experiences, expectations, writing progress, and mentality, which will be described in detail in the following sections.

Methodology

Participants

With IRB approval (Log No. 20-095), this study was conducted at IUP. Our participants were 83 graduate students ($N = 83$) who participated in our graduate writing groups in summer 2020, fall 2020, and spring 2021. They came from various disciplines such as English, education, nursing, communication, safety science, psychology, and criminology. Eighty-one of them ($N = 81$) were doctoral students and two ($N = 2$) were master's students. Sixty-one of them ($N = 61$) were domestic students from the United States, while 20 ($N = 20$) reported being international students. Sixty-three ($N = 63$) identified as female, 14 ($N = 14$) as male, and 3 ($N = 3$) as nonbinary. In addition, the majority of the doctoral participants ($N = 63$) were in the third, fourth, or fifth year of their degree program.

Data Collection

Our collected data consisted of two voluntary online Qualtrics surveys, pre- and postsurveys, in order to measure the impact and efficacy of our VGWG. These surveys were pretested prior to their use in our VGWG.

The presurvey (see Appendix A), conducted before starting the VGWG, collected participants' demographic information and asked them to respond to:

- Sixteen 5-point Likert scale statements examining participants' self-perceived writing abilities, behaviors, mentality, and writing progress
- Two open-ended questions examining participants' expectations of the VGWG and their perceived struggles with writing

Cui

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Zhang

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The postsurvey (see Appendix B) was conducted after the VGWGs were completed and asked participants to respond to:

- Sixteen 5-point Likert scale statements examining participants' self-perceived writing abilities, behaviors, mentality, and writing progress (same as the presurvey)
- Five additional 5-point Likert scale statements examining participants' perceived experience after attending the VGWG
- Two open-ended questions examining participants' gains from the VGWG and their perceived struggles with writing

We collected survey data over three semesters, including summer 2020, fall 2020, and spring 2021. In total, we received 83 participants' ($N = 83$) valid responses to the presurveys and 38 participants' ($N = 38$) valid responses to the postsurveys. Thirty-two participants ($N = 32$) completed both the pre- and postsurveys.

Data Analysis

Our surveys included 5-point Likert scale statements and open-ended questions. We utilized quantitative methods (i.e., statistical analysis) to analyze participants' responses to the Likert scale statements and qualitative methods (i.e., thematic analysis) to analyze the responses to the open-ended questions in surveys.

Specifically, quantitative analysis was conducted in Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), including (1) descriptive statistical analysis by calculating the means of the responses to Likert scale statements; and (2) inferential statistical analysis by comparing pre- and postsurvey responses to Likert scale statements. Because we consider Likert scale statement data to be ordinal data, we used the Wilcoxon signed rank test, a nonparametric test, to conduct inferential statistical analysis. We measured all statistical results at a 95% confidence level ($p \leq 0.05$), which helped us determine whether the changes before and after attending the VGWG were significantly different.

Participants' responses to the open-ended questions were coded and analyzed in NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software. After iterative reading and discussing, we coded participants' responses to the open-ended questions, drawing on the four-dimension categorization proposed by McMurray (2019): skill-based, draft-based, time-based, and emotion-based.

- *Skill-based writing activities*, such as improving writing skills, English proficiency, revising/editing skills, identifying writing terms, and so on
- *Draft-based writing activities*, such as making progress on thesis/dissertation writing, giving/receiving feedback on thesis/dissertation, and so on
- *Time-based activities*, such as gaining accountability for writing, improving writing productivity, setting and discussing writing goals, and so on
- *Emotion-based activities*, such as socializing with other group members, gaining motivation to write, and so on

The limitations of our study are the small sample size and single method of collecting data. Although we were able to measure the impact of our VGWG by comparing participants' self-perceptions before and after they attended the writing groups, we acknowledge that the writing group was not the only factor that caused the changes. Therefore, we encourage future research to further delve into practices of graduate writing groups, such as conducting longitudinal studies of larger scopes and diversifying data collection methods, such as including interviews and topical documents. Finally, we would have liked to have had a higher response rate of postsurveys compared to presurveys, but because they were offered at the end of the semester, response rate was a challenge.

Results

In this section, we present our findings about graduate writers' expectations of graduate writing groups, their experience of attending the VGWG, and the VGWG's impact on graduate writers. Based on quantitative and qualitative analyses, our study demonstrates that

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Zhang

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Driscoll

graduate writers expected to receive multidimensional writing support from the VGWG, spanning draft-, skill-, time-, and emotion-based aspects. In addition, participants reported benefits following their VGWG experiences, in order of highest to lowest, ranging from time- and emotion-based aspects (which both were tied for the highest), followed by draft-based (which had the second highest), and then skill-based aspects (which had the lowest). Further, our VGWG exhibits statistically significant impacts on graduate writers, including cultivating positive writing behaviors, developing a healthy mentality, and making writing progress.

Graduate Writers' Expectations before Starting the VGWG

To find out graduate writers' expectations of our virtual graduate writing groups, we coded and analyzed participants' presurvey responses to the open-ended question, "What do you hope to get out of our writing group?" Drawing on McMurray's (2019) coding scheme (i.e., skill-based, draft-based, time-based, emotion-based), we coded participants' (N = 83) responses across three semesters. Each time a participant mentioned a word, phrase, or sentence related to one of the four dimensions, we coded it. When a sentence matched more than one category of the four dimensions, we coded it into multiple categories and counted it as multiple references. For example, in one response, a participant reported, "I further hope that having someone in the group to take a look at my writing would provide me with the reader's perspective and help me improve upon my writing clarity, argument building." In this case, this participant discussed both draft-based expectation ("provide me with the reader's perspective") and skill-based expectation ("help me improve upon my writing clarity, argument building"). Thus, we coded this response twice as draft-based expectation and skill-based expectation, respectively. In this way, the coded references adequately reflect participants' responses. In total, we coded and identified 112 references in 83 (N = 83) participants' responses. These references spanned across all four dimensions in a rather balanced way:

- *Emotion-based expectations*, 29 (26%) references, including gaining support, motivation, confidence, and friendship
- *Time-based expectations,* 29 (26%) references, including accountability, time management, goal setting, and getting started with writing
- *Skill-based expectations*, 28 (25%) references, including improving writing techniques and abilities and gaining writing resources and strategies
- *Draft-based expectations*, 26 (23%) references, including making writing progress and gaining feedback on their writing

The almost equal amount of expectations in the above four aspects indicates that graduate writers looked for multidimensional and well-rounded writing support.

Graduate Writers' Experiences of Attending the VGWG

To examine graduate writers' experiences of attending the VGWG, we performed quantitative and qualitative analyses of participants' postsurvey responses. First, we conducted a descriptive statistical analysis (mean) in SPSS to analyze 38 participants' (N = 38) responses to five Likert scale statements that specifically inquired about participants' VGWG experiences. The calculation of the means of their responses showed that on a 5-point scale, the means for the first four items were above four (see Table 1), indicating participants' overall satisfaction with their VGWG experience. Expressly, they found "VGWG was supportive" (mean = 4.55), and "helped me make progress on writing" (mean = 4.24). They also thought "two weeks was a good amount of time between meetings" (mean = 4.24). Further, they would "recommend VGWG to others" (mean = 4.47). They somewhat disagreed that "75 minutes/90 minutes was a good amount of time for each meeting" (mean = 3.89) and explained in their responses to an open-ended question that they would suggest cutting the meeting time down to 60 minutes and increasing the frequency of meeting, such as meeting every week.

In addition to the statistical analysis above, we qualitatively analyzed participants' (N = 38)

Table 1. Graduate Writers' Overall Experience of Attending a VGWG

Item	Min.	Max.	Mean
VGWG was supportive	1	5	4.55
VGWG helped me make progress on writing	1	5	4.24
I would recommend VGWG to others	1	5	4.47
Two weeks was a good amount of time between meetings	1	5	4.24
75 minutes/90 minutes was a good amount of time for each meeting[2]	1	5	3.89

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Zhang

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Driscoll

postsurvey responses to an open-ended question regarding their VGWG experience: "How has the graduate writing group helped you as a writer?" Participants provided positive responses, such as "It has also helped me to set realistic goals for myself, which I was not doing prior to starting the group," "The group has kept me going, brought me confidence, and provided concrete, helpful feedback." Again, we drew on McMurray's (2019) coding scheme and identified 54 references related to the benefits that participants reported:

- *Time-based benefits*, 18 (33%) references, such as goal setting, accountability, and time management
- *Emotion-based benefits*, 18 (33%) references, such as feeling supported, gaining motivation and confidence
- *Draft-based benefits,* 11 (20%) references, such as receiving feedback
- *Skill-based benefits,* 7 (13%) references, such as writing strategies

The above quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that these graduate writers determined that they received four-dimension benefits, especially time-based and emotion-based benefits.

VGWG's Significant Impact on Graduate Writers

To investigate the impact of our VGWG on graduate students, we conducted quantitative and qualitative analyses of participants' responses at both pre- and postsurveys.

Regarding the quantitative analysis, we ran Wilcoxon signed rank tests and compared the means of 32 pairs of pre- and postsurvey responses to the 16 Likert scale statements.

In this way, we measured the changes of these graduate writers' self-perceptions regarding their writing abilities, behaviors, mentality, and progress. These changes illustrate the VGWG's impact on graduate writers. Table 2 demonstrates both the descriptive and inferential statistical results.

The statistical results demonstrate positive changes in graduate writers' writing abilities, behaviors, and progress after comparing the pre- and postsurvey responses' scores. That is, a comparison of the means of items 1 to 10 at pre- and postsurveys shows that, after attending the VGWG, participants became more confident in their writing ability and felt more satisfied with their writing productivity. They also found it easier to focus, articulate ideas clearly in writing, and navigate around blockage. Moreover, they were able to effectively manage writing time, set goals, meet goals, and make progress with their thesis/dissertation.

In contrast, a comparison between the means of items 11, 13, 14, and 15 at pre- and postsurveys displays a notable decrease in graduate writers' negative mentality and writing behaviors after they attended the VGWG. That is, participants became less critical of themselves, they procrastinated less, and they had more knowledge about their thesis/dissertation journey.

Interestingly, after comparing the means of items 12 and 16, we found participants became more likely to compare their progress with others at postsurvey (M = 3.62, SD = 1.26) than presurvey (M = 3.56, SD = 1.32). Sharing work with peers could exacerbate feelings of imposter syndrome, anxiety, and competition, though our VGWGs are specially designed to reduce these feelings through activities such as goal setting, goal check-in, and mindfulness

Table 2. VGWG's Impact on Graduate Writers' Writing Abilities, Behaviors, Mentality, and Writing Progress

Item	Pretest		Posttest				
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Z	p	N
1. When I feel stuck with my thesis/ dissertation writing, I am able to easily navigate around the blockage.	2.94	1.076	3.25	.984	−1.344	.182	32
2. I feel confident in my writing ability.	3.19	1.120	3.63	.907	−1.862	.063	32
3. I can easily focus on my thesis/ dissertation writing.	2.44	1.076	3.03	1.062	−2.662	.008*	32
4. I am able to manage my thesis/ dissertation writing time effectively.	2.50	1.047	2.81	1.108	−1.267	.205	32
5. I set writing goals for myself.	3.41	1.103	4.09	.856	−3.036	.002*	32
6. I am able to meet writing goals that I set for myself.	3.06	1.162	3.53	.803	−1.798	.072	32
7. When I sit down to write, I feel like I know what I am going to do during each writing session.	2.81	1.061	3.56	1.045	−2.495	.013*	32
8. My ideas are clearly articulated in my writing.	3.28	.924	3.44	.914	−.743	.457	32
9. I am currently satisfied with my writing productivity.	2.22	1.211	2.94	1.294	−2.364	.018*	32
10. I am making good progress on my thesis/dissertation.	2.44	1.076	3.31	1.091	−3.362	.001*	32
11. I often tell myself I should be a "better" or "more effective" writer.	3.88	1.185	3.63	1.212	−.894	.371	32
12. I often compare or judge my progress by the perceived progress of others.	3.56	1.318	3.62	1.264	−.125	.901	32
13. I'm not always certain of the direction I'm taking with my thesis/ dissertation.	3.59	.946	3.16	1.081	−1.577	.115	32
14. Often when I am stuck or am not progressing as planned in my writing, I berate myself.	3.25	1.344	3.16	1.273	−.288	.774	32
15. I often procrastinate.	3.81	1.203	3.44	1.243	−1.730	.084	32
16. I feel isolated as a writer.	3.47	1.270	3.50	1.320	−.125	.901	32

*statistically significant at $p < 0.05$

exercises. In the same manner, participants reported feeling more isolated as a writer at postsurvey (M = 3.50, SD = 1.32) than presurvey (M = 3.47, SD = 1.27). This isolation might be caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Though these students received emotional support from our VGWG, they might still feel lonely and disconnected because of the long quarantine period during the pandemic.

Further, the inferential statistical results of Wilcoxon signed rank tests for the responses to the 16 Likert scale statements, measuring participants' self-perceptions of their writing ability and progress, behavior, and mentality,

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reveal significant differences in five areas (marked with asterisks in Table 2)—focus, goal setting, mindfulness, productivity, and writing progress—between pre- and postsurvey scores. Graduate writers reported:

- Elevated focus on thesis/dissertation writing at postsurvey (M = 3.03, SD = 1.06) compared to presurvey (M = 2.44, SD = 1.08), $Z = -2.66$, $p = .008$
- Expanded ability of setting goals for themselves at postsurvey (M = 4.09, SD = .86) compared to presurvey (M = 3.41, SD = 1.10), $Z = -3.04$, $p = .002$
- Greater understanding of what to do during each writing session at postsurvey (M = 3.56, SD = 1.05) compared to presurvey (M = 2.81, SD = 1.06), $Z = -2.50$, $p = .013$
- Increased satisfaction with their writing productivity at postsurvey (M = 2.94, SD = 1.30) compared to presurvey (M = 2.22, SD = 1.21), $Z = -2.36$, $p = .018$
- Augmented feeling that they are making good progress on their thesis/dissertation at postsurvey (M = 3.31, SD = 1.09) compared to presurvey (M = 2.44, SD = 1.08), $Z = -3.36$, $p = .001$

Apart from analyzing the quantitative data (Likert scale statements), we employed a qualitative approach to analyze participants' pre- and postsurvey responses to an open-ended question inquiring about their writing struggles, attempting to determine whether there were any differences in their perceptions of writing challenges before and after attending the VGWG. We found that in both pre- and postsurvey responses, participants tended to highlight two types of writing struggles: (1) *skill-based struggles*, such as challenges with employing writing techniques effectively; and (2) *time-based struggles*, such as time management challenges, procrastination, getting started, and goal-setting issues.

These findings indicate that our VGWG exerted a significantly beneficial impact on graduate writers, helping them increase their writing productivity, make progress, and promote a positive mentality. However, some challenges, such as skill-based and time-based

struggles, require long-term and sustainable support, which very likely exceeds what a VGWG can offer within a limited period of time.

Discussion and Implications

This study examined participants' expectations and experiences of writing groups as well as investigated the efficacy of our VGWG by analyzing the data collected before and after our VGWG with three key findings:

- Graduate writers expected to gain a full range of support from writing groups, including *time-based, skill-based, draft-based,* and *emotion-based* support.
- Graduate writers reported a generally positive experience while attending writing groups, which offered them significant gains in all four dimensions above.
- Graduate writers reported positive changes in their writing abilities, productivity, behaviors, and mentality to varying degrees. In particular, five areas—focus, goal setting, mindfulness, productivity, and progress—indicated statistically significant positive changes, demonstrating the substantial impact of the VGWG on graduate writers.

Graduate Writers: Multidimensional Need and Support

Our empirical findings confirm findings in prior literature stating that graduate writers need ongoing and multidimensional writing support. McMurray (2019) found that graduate writers engaged in four types of activities in writing groups, including skill-based, draft-based, time-based, and emotion-based activities. Our study aligns with McMurray (2019) in that our findings suggested that graduate writers reported encountering writing challenges in the four dimensions above; similarly, they reported benefiting from the writing groups by receiving support in those four dimensions.

As indicated in our study, participants' expectations of our VGWG were equally distributive on skill-based (25%), draft-based (23%), time-based (26%), and emotion-based (26%)

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aspects. These needs are interrelated and intertwined, and they work together, playing an important role in promoting students' dissertation progress. As aforementioned, we incorporated these four kinds of supports into our VGWG model. Further, our findings show these supports need to be sustainable since it takes time and effort to develop those skills. This explains why many students choose to return to our VGWG beyond one semester. Many of them continued attending our groups until they completed their dissertation. As such, we recommend our graduate writing group model—one that consists of mini lessons, goal setting and check-ins, and peer review workshops—because it is an empirically validated model that can offer a full range of writing support to meet graduate writers' needs for time-based, skill-based, draft-based, and emotion-based support.

VGWG: Positive Experience with Significant Gains

Our research compared students' responses between pre- and postsurveys and found that their expectations were satisfied. In particular, time-based (33%) and emotion-based (33%) support exceeded their expectations, draft-based (20%) support nearly lived up to their expectations, while skill-based (13%) experience fell a little short of their expectations. This suggests that overall, our VGWG model successfully provided what students needed and helped them make dissertation progress. The higher number of responses related to time-based and emotion-based benefits echoed findings in prior literature, demonstrating that writing groups are pivotal for graduate writers during their isolated dissertation writing processes, especially when they have to simultaneously balance life, work, and dissertation. In addition, this result may indicate that among the four, time-based and emotion-based challenges are comparatively easy to overcome with this particular model. For example, when our VGWG ended, most members have grasped the skill of setting SMART goals, based on which they were able to schedule regular writing times and commit to their writing. Biweekly meetings made these VGWG members

feel connected; typically, after sharing their setbacks or challenges, they always received emotional support, encouragement, and tactics to deal with those obstacles.

On the other hand, the fact that there were a relatively lower number of responses related to draft-based and skill-based benefits shows that students may need multiple kinds of writing support from different units (e.g., program, department). Prior literature (e.g., Grav & Cayley, 2015; Kamler & Thomson, 2008) has shown that many dissertators are not familiar with dissertation writing, a new genre, along with other procedural knowledge or information (e.g., handling the feedback from the committee, tackling logistic issues). In our VGWG model, we had peer reviews and mini lessons focusing on writing a literature review, handling feedback, revision, and editing. Participants' responses indicate that they benefited from these activities because they not only learned about dissertation genre conventions and were engaged in writing-related discussions, but also they could sharpen their writing abilities through feedback-based revision. However, what our VGWG offered was limited by time and was not discipline specific. Recognizing the need for more "skill-based" supports, our writing center also offers graduate-level tutoring and Dissertation and Thesis Writing Boot Camp. Our boot camp is a day-long retreat that offers five workshops, a silent writing room, and tutoring from several campus units (writing center, library, and our applied research lab). Thus, we suggest offering a range of advanced writing supports for graduate writers and encourage other writing centers to consider developing such multi-pronged services.

Goal Setting and Mentality: Key Changes for Graduate Writers

With respect to the impact of our VGWG, in addition to the above four dimensions, we found our VGWG played a crucial role in helping students make writing progress in several ways. Primarily, two aspects contribute to their progress: goal setting and mentality. First, goal setting and goal check-ins help students form new writing behaviors including understanding

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dissertation writing, breaking down their dissertation into daily/weekly writing tasks, setting up regular writing time, creating a to-do list for their dissertation project, and actively looking for feedback and support. Setting and check-in goals also guide students to focus on their writing tasks and motivate them to continue making progress—essentially creating structure where they previously had none.

Second, students' improved mentality was central to their writing progress. In line with Toni Wright and Ray Cochrane (2000) and Roger Powell and Dana Driscoll (2020), mindset determines how individuals process their lives and careers, as well as shapes their emotions. Participants reported that after attending the VGWG, they became more confident in their writing and their ability to break through barriers, clearer in the direction of their dissertation/thesis writing, less anxious about their progress, and less critical of themselves. Therefore, our findings suggest that in addition to writing strategies and rhetorical skills, it is equally important to offer students opportunities or activities that allow them to develop productive writing behaviors/habits and a healthy mindset, which leads to long-term progress and success. This strategy can be applied in running a writing group as well as in a mentoring program or curriculum design.

Data Is Power: Assessment and Study of Graduate Writing Groups

Our study also provides a useful model for how writing centers can effectively assess through pre- and postsurveys in a very straightforward manner, a model that has both internal and external benefits. Internally, the pre-post surveys allowed us to better understand what students expected, their experience, what was going well, and areas to improve (such as longer time periods for groups). But just as importantly, the assessment of our service allowed us a powerful dataset that we could leverage on campus to support our writing center. After analyzing the results of our first year of VGWG, Dana reported our significant findings to the Council of Deans, a group attended by the president, provost, and senior administrators. Demonstrating significant gains for graduate students not only gained the goodwill of senior administrators, but in the weeks following, Dana received multiple invitations to meet with colleges and deans in STEM-oriented areas that were not previously interested in our services. These have led to rich and meaningful collaborations, not only for graduate support but for undergraduate programming, tutoring, and support. We've used these findings to leverage support for related graduate student initiatives, such as expanding our Dissertation and Thesis Writing Boot Camp services as well as our graduate-level tutoring.

Conclusion

We hope that the above material is useful to writing centers as they develop and refine their own models of graduate writing groups. Our study contributes robust empirical validation of this approach to the literature on graduate writing groups. We want to stress that graduate students' needs are diverse and there is no one-size-fits-all graduate writing group model. Each program must be based on the local needs, challenges, and features of an institution. We hope our VGWG model and empirical study will enrich the field and provide insights for those who are running or plan to run a graduate writing group. We also hope our research can inspire more empirical studies on writing groups and help institutions develop the model that best serves their students.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. We use Haas's (2014) typology to describe our VGWG structure. This typology includes 11 dimensions: the purpose of group, membership,

leadership, contact, time of day, place of meeting, frequency of meeting, length of meeting, duration of groups, in-meeting activities, and between-meeting activities (pp. 32–33).

2. In our first semester running the groups, these groups met every two weeks for a time frame of 75 minutes. However, the members stated that they needed a longer period of time, so we extended it to 90 minutes.

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Appendix A: Presurvey

Complete Presurvey (1 = Disagree, 2 = Somewhat Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Somewhat Agree, 5 = Agree)

Category	Statements	1 2 3 4 5
Demographics	Name: Program: Degree: ☐ International Student ☐ Domestic Student Gender: Year:	
Writing–related Perceptions	1. When I feel stuck with my thesis/dissertation writing, I am able to easily navigate around the blockage. 2. I often tell myself I should be a "better" or "more effective" writer. 3. I feel confident in my writing ability. 4. I can easily focus on my thesis/dissertation writing. 5. I often compare or judge my progress by the perceived progress of others. 6. I'm not always certain of the direction I'm taking with my thesis/dissertation. 7. I am able to manage my thesis/dissertation writing time effectively. 8. Often when I am stuck or am not progressing as planned in my writing, I berate myself. 9. I often procrastinate my writing. 10. I set writing goals for myself. 11. I am able to meet writing goals that I set for myself. 12. When I sit down to write, I feel like I know what I am going to do during each writing session. 13. I feel isolated as a writer. 14. My ideas are clearly articulated in my writing. 15. I am currently satisfied with my writing productivity. 16. I am making good progress on my thesis/dissertation.	
Open–ended Questions	1. What are you struggling with now as a writer? 2. What do you hope to get out of our writing group?	

Appendix B: Postsurvey

Complete Postsurvey (1 = Disagree, 2 = Somewhat Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Somewhat Agree, 5 = Agree)

Category	Statements	1 2 3 4 5
Demographics	Name: Program: Degree:_ ☐ International Student ☐ Domestic Student Gender: Year:_	
Writing–related Perceptions	1. When I feel stuck with my thesis/dissertation writing, I am able to easily navigate around the blockage. 2. I often tell myself I should be a "better" or "more effective" writer. 3. I feel confident in my writing ability. 4. I can easily focus on my thesis/dissertation writing. 5. I often compare or judge my progress by the perceived progress of others. 6. I'm not always certain of the direction I'm taking with my thesis/dissertation. 7. I am able to manage my thesis/dissertation writing time effectively. 8. Often when I am stuck or am not progressing as planned in my writing, I berate myself. 9. I often procrastinate my writing. 10. I set writing goals for myself. 11. I am able to meet writing goals that I set for myself. 12. When I sit down to write, I feel like I know what I am going to do during each writing session. 13. I feel isolated as a writer. 14. My ideas are clearly articulated in my writing. 15. I am currently satisfied with my writing productivity. 16. I am making good progress on my thesis/dissertation.	
Perceptions of GWG Experience	17. The graduate writing group was supportive. 18. The graduate writing group helped me make progress on my thesis/dissertation. 19. I would recommend the graduate writing group to others. 20. Two weeks was a good amount of time between meeting sessions. 21. 75/90 minutes was the right length of time for each group meeting.	
Open–ended Questions	1. How has the Graduate Writing Group helped you as a writer? 2. What are you struggling with as a writer?	

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