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PhD Technical Communication Writing Fellows: A Proposal

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Abstract

New master's and doctoral graduate instructors in the English department at Utah State spend two hours each week during their first semester working in the campus Writing Center as peer tutors. This practice has many positive outcomes for new students, including building familiarity with composition theory, understanding Writing Center pedagogy, and working with student writers and their texts. These outcomes are particularly beneficial to new master's students who are entering graduate coursework and university teaching for the first time. On the other hand, new PhD students in Technical Communication & Rhetoric are typically experienced students and teachers but may be novices within the discipline of technical communication. In order to more effectively situate these PhD students within their field of study and prepare them to teach upper division technical communication courses, I propose developing a PhD Writing Fellows program that assigns new PhD students to work with student writers in assigned sections of Technical Communication courses. This Writing Fellows program will allow new PhD students to experience writing tutoring within a specific context, thereby preparing them for teaching within their field.

Keywords: writing fellows, technical communication, writing center theory and practice, graduate instructors

PhD Technical Communication Writing Fellows: A Proposal

First-semester English Graduate Instructors (GIs) at Utah State University, at both the master's and doctoral levels, spend two hours each week tutoring writing at the university's Writing Center (WC). The goals for this work encompass several objectives of the GI program. First, new GIs are also teaching English 1010, almost universally for the first time. Tutoring in the Writing Center allows students to gain exposure and experience reading and responding to various types of student writing, particularly within the composition program. New GIs also benefit from the professionalism training and sense of community offered through the Writing Center. During bimonthly staff meetings, GI tutors join with other tutors to learn about WC practices and theories, thereby helping them understand the ideas and practices that inform Writing Center work. For new GIs, particularly those at the master's level without previous Writing Center and teaching experience, Writing Center tutoring provides productive support for understanding composition studies while also reducing first semester course loads for new graduate students.

Graduate Instructor tutoring, as the program is currently enacted, has clear benefits and professional outcomes for new Master's students who, in almost every case, will be new to WC practices and university writing instruction. On the other hand, students entering Utah State's Technical Communication and Rhetoric (TCR) PhD program tend to have a deeper well of university and professional experience. New PhD students enter the program with, at minimum, two university degrees. Although their academic backgrounds vary, they typically demonstrate their preparation for advanced study in an English field through a number of measures, including transcripts, GRE performance, and writing samples. Each of these measures, perhaps especially the writing samples, underscores new PhD students' ability to read, think, and write at the

postgraduate level. While they are clearly new to doctoral coursework and research, they are also experienced students and may enter the program with years of experience in university teaching or industry settings.

What new PhD students may not have as they enter the TCR program is a background in technical communication as a field of study or site of professional practice. Of the 16 current students and alumni listed on the TCR program home page, the 32 total bachelor's and master's degrees TCR students have earned indicate that very few of them enter the program with specific training or experience in technical and professional communication (TPC). Twelve of the degrees are in English (excluding technical communication); 12 are in other fields (ranging from sociology to history to pedagogy); four are in communications; and just three are in technical/professional communication. So, of the 16 current and former students, only three came in with an academic background in TPC, yet each PhD student's end goal is to teach and research within the discipline.

While master's level GIs will teach English 1010 and 2010 for the duration of their programs, PhD students will be expected to teach upper division courses within the Technical Communication program, often as early as their second semester. Since PhD students frequently have little to no experience with the discipline before arriving at USU, their first exposure to undergraduate education in TPC may come when they step into the classroom as the instructor of record. Additionally, since very few students from TPC courses utilize the Writing Center (less than 1% of all visits over the last 18 months, according to USU Writing Center data), Writing Center tutoring will not expose PhD student writing tutors to the assignments, styles, and conventions they'll encounter while teaching tech comm.

As a way to help new PhD students gain the benefits of one-to-one tutoring within a Writing Center framework, and to more productively help them become familiar with TPC curricula and faculty, I propose creating a Writing Fellows program, adjunct to the Writing Center, where first-semester PhD students would be assigned to a specific section of a technical communication class. Working with the course instructor, they would set an agenda for tutoring students through the drafting process for major course writing assignments, thereby offering a level of writing expertise to student writers while also assisting professors and gaining for themselves an increased familiarity with disciplinary conventions and expectations within TPC.

The first university Writing Fellows programs began at Carleton College and Brown University in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Hall & Hughes, 2011). These programs were designed to support Writing Across the Curriculum initiatives and typically involved assigning carefully selected and specifically trained undergraduate writing tutors to self-selected, writing intensive courses in disciplines typically outside English. In many programs, Fellows are seen as generalists offering outsider perspectives rather than as specialists offering discipline-specific knowledge to writers in their assigned classes (Severino & Traschel, 2008). In their discussion of their Writing Fellows program, Severino and Traschel contrast the experiences and opinions of Writing Fellows concerning the generalist/specialist debate. While most Fellows saw themselves as generalists and valued that role, some Fellows saw benefit in having some specialization within the classes to which they were Fellowed. Additionally, through their work with their assigned classes, generalist Fellows were able to involve themselves in the process of “demystifying the textual practices of specialized academic disciplines” for themselves and the students they tutored. So, even when Fellows enter a course as generalists, they work toward becoming specialists.

New PhD students in the Technical Communication and Rhetoric PhD program are uniquely positioned as both generalists and specialists in their field. Since they are acquiring specialized disciplinary knowledge through their own coursework and research, they would offer something of a specialized perspective to students in the TPC courses to which they'd be assigned. At the same time, the general lack of specialized knowledge most TCR PhD students bring into the program positions them also as generalists gaining new exposure and understanding to genres, discourses, and practices within the discipline as they work with faculty and students in their assigned courses. Both the generalist and specialist perspectives can benefit students in the courses to whom the PhD students are Fellowed. Additionally, the PhD Fellows will gain knowledge of pedagogy and practices that will benefit them immensely when they are assigned to teach TPC courses and as they prepare for their academic careers as technical communication scholars and teachers.

For this program to work most effectively, new PhD students should be Fellowed to one of the courses they are most likely to teach during their time in the TCR program, which may include English 3400: Writing for the Workplace; English 3410: Digital Writing Technologies; or English 3450: Workplace Research. Since some of these classes might be taught by more advanced PhD students rather than full-time faculty, these advanced PhD students can serve in a mentoring role as they work with the new PhD Fellows. Mentoring relationships already exist within the PhD program, and this would help solidify those relationships early on in the program, which can help new PhD students feel a deeper sense of welcome and community as they acquaint themselves with pedagogies and theories surrounding TPC curricula. Additionally, new PhD student Writing Fellows can meet regularly (perhaps once per month) with the PhD graduate student instructors of record as well as the full-time faculty course leads. These

meetings would allow for everyone involved in the success of the students within each class to collaborate on expectations and outcomes for the writers and texts produced in each class.

Since Writing Fellows work is connected to the Writing Center, PhD Writing Fellows would benefit from specialized training from Writing Center directors who could help instruct Fellows in Writing Center pedagogy and practice while also helping to direct their efforts as specialized Fellows within the TPC program. Writing Fellows might also be expected to attend the monthly Writing Center staff trainings, especially if Fellow-specific content and training could be integrated into the training meetings.

My final proposal would be to consider a pilot program of PhD Writing Fellows for Fall 2020. Current PhD GIs might work with Writing Center directors to plan a training for PhD Writing Fellows during their weeklong preservice training prior to fall semester. During the most recent GI training preceding Fall 2019, a few sessions focused specifically on master's students took place. New PhD Fellows could be excused during those times for training with more advanced PhD students about the role and practice of Writing Fellows. If the PhD Fellows program is successful in furthering the professional and disciplinary identities of new PhD students, there may also be room to expand the concept of Writing Fellows to master's students as well, and even to advanced, experienced undergraduate tutors. In an expanded Fellows program, student Fellows at all levels might be assigned to writing-intensive courses within English and in other departments, thereby working to strengthen approaches to teaching and supporting student writers throughout the university.

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