

Implementing Learning Assistance for Graduate & Professional Students

Laura Heidel, Ph.D. & Melissa Thomas, J.D.

University of Houston & University of Texas at San Antonio

Introduction

This poster presentation will highlight the success of two programs (University of Houston & University of Texas at San Antonio) that have integrated graduate student learning assistance into their standard undergraduate academic support programs.

What follows is information about the current state of graduate and professional student learning assistance. We have gathered programmatic ideas from a multitude of institutions on how they address graduate and professional student needs, and in turn, have distinguished five models of services provided.

The focus then shifts to successful programs that the host institutions deliver, such as: academic coaching, a sample workshop on comprehensive exams, a Thesis/Dissertation Support Group, and a Graduate Writing Institute.

Models

Graduate and professional students around the country benefit from academic support offered in various forms from various outlets. We have attempted to group them into general models of assistance, either by whom they serve or who provides the assistance, and give one example of each.

General Learning Assistance

Rockhurst University: The Learning Center supports students on all levels, and explicitly states so, to include tutoring, writing assistance, and study strategies instruction.

Graduate Specific Learning Assistance

University of Baltimore: The Academic Resource Center provides tutoring at the graduate level, as well as professional workshops, computer skills workshops, a writing center, and peer advising for international graduate students.

Graduate School Provider

University of Georgia: The Graduate School provides a varied lineup of workshops presented by faculty/staff from around the university, taped online, with quick summaries of the workshops. Additionally, they do an Emerging Leaders Retreat each year on an invitation basis.

Writing Assistance

Texas A&M University: The Writing Center provides an online writing lab, a weekly podcast, a phone line dedicated to answering quick questions, and writing consultations.

Special Population Assistance

University of Florida: The Office of Graduate Minority Programs provides professional development workshops for **minority students**. Also, the Graduate School provides Academic Spoken English and Academic Written English courses to **international students**.

Proven Program Highlights

Academic Coaching (UTSA)/ Learning Strategies Counseling (UH)

Purpose: Individual assessment of learning strengths and weaknesses and targeted interventions to assist with weak areas (plus affirmation of strength areas.)

Specific areas of assistance:

- Thesis organization and writing
- Comprehensive exam preparation
- Time management; developing strategies to deal with increased workload and work/life balance
- Graduate school norms, communication & research skills
- Memory and concentration improvement
- Test anxiety reduction
- Reading complex material/critical thinking

How to implement:

Use existing staff to provide this service.

What criteria should you use to select someone?

- Have they been to graduate school or professional school?
- Do they have good interpersonal skills?
- Do they have experience teaching study strategies?
- Do they have the time to dedicate to this task?

Create a new position to provide this service.

Talk to learning centers that have such a position to get data to justify to your administration the need.

Talk to graduate and professional programs on your campus to identify needs and possible funding sources.

Comprehensive Exam Workshop (UH)

Purpose: To educate graduate students about how to prepare for their comprehensive exams, "demystify the process", and provide specific study tips, time management tips, and stress reduction strategies.

Specific content covered:

- What is the purpose of comps?
- Determine the format
 - Who are the readers? Who are the question writers?
- Tips for preparing for written exams
 - Form a study group, organize your materials, do practice questions, take home exams-what do to for these
- Tips for preparing for oral exams
- Making a study schedule for comps
 - Explain time grid & discuss how to allocate hours
- Dealing with procrastination
- Dealing with test anxiety: self-talk & relaxation tips
- The day of the exam

How to implement:

This is one of a series of workshops for graduate students at the University of Houston. The flyer with the workshop information is sent to graduate advisors and distributed to graduate departments with large numbers of students. The workshop was held in the learning center at night, to try and attract more people. About 20 students came from a variety of disciplines, but mostly the humanities and social sciences.

Program Highlights, Cont.

Thesis/Dissertation Support Group (UTSA)

Purpose: To provide graduate students throughout the disciplines an opportunity to congregate, share the woes of working on a thesis/dissertation, and learn concrete ways they can manage the process.

Specific content covered:

This is a six week psycho-educational group that covers one topic each week:

- Time management,
- Overcoming writing blocks,
- Stress management,
- Confidence issues,
- Effective communication, and
- Defense preparation.

How to implement:

We partnered with Counseling Services and the Graduate School to offer this series, with representatives from each office to serve as discussion leaders for the different topics. Initially, we surveyed all graduate students on what topics they would find of interest and have used subsequent evaluations to determine the direction of the group. We advertise the group each long semester and take reservations for it, as we expect members to persist through the six weeks of the group, as it builds better group cohesion.

Graduate Writing Institute (UTSA)

Purpose: This grant-funded initiative (IG Grant) targets students who are completing large writing projects, such as the thesis, dissertation, or exit paper, and encourages them to make positive progress on their project, while providing them useful instruction in academic writing techniques.

Specific content covered:

The Graduate Writing Institute consists of four days of intense writing workshops over Spring Break or the May mini-semester, from 9am-1pm.

Instruction includes overcoming writing blocks, drafting methods, punctuation, organization, logical order, citing references, grammar, peer editing, and concrete language. Additionally, lunch is served each day, so that students can work in disciplinary groups to peer edit.

How to implement:

We received funding to initiate this project, through Texas Guaranteed, but it is feasible to do this without that level of funding.

We hired an English adjunct instructor to help build the curriculum for the week.

We advertise the Institute to faculty and students, and solicited applications from the students, so that we could assess what they were working on and their progress so far. We wanted to ensure that all students were on the same page (relatively speaking) in regard to writing and language skills.

We provide *Pocket Keys for Writers* by Ann Raimes and a manual that we publish which walks the students through all the daily worksheets and activities.

We accept 30 students to each Institute (with about an 80% completion rate.)

To assess the Institute we do a pre- and post- WISP (Writing Inventory of Style & Preferences) and a post-evaluation.

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Conclusions

Our purpose in compiling this research and practical program implementation is to inspire you, the learning assistance professional, to consider adding services to your repertoire that serve the graduate and professional student. These students are in need of this assistance, are generally more aware that they need this assistance, and are intensely grateful for this assistance.

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For further information

Please contact the CRLA SIG for Graduate & Professional Student Success Co-Chairs:

Laura Heidel, Ph.D. (University of Houston)
Learning Strategies Counselor, Licensed Psychologist
Laura.heidel@uh.edu

Melissa Thomas, J.D. (UTSA)

Assistant Director of Learning Assistance melissa.thomas@utsa.edu