

Southern Discourse in the Center

A Journal of Multiliteracy and Innovation

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Back to the Center

A Centerless Center: The Doctoral Support Center for Writing & Research Excellence at the College of Education, Texas Tech University

AMBER LANCASTER

The coffee cup sits on the warmer, as a colored ring forms on the surface and clings to the edges of the cup. "I'll drink it soon," I think, as I'm engrossed reading a manuscript. A knock at the door, a phone call coming in, an instant message pops up on my screen, an email alert notifies me a new message is waiting, a notice appears to inform me a new draft was submitted and someone is waiting for a writing coach to respond.

I pause and think, "Writing coaches are busy people. It's nice to be busy and in-demand." I smile and finally sip my coffee.

I am a dissertation specialist and writing coach. I am one of four full-time professional staff who works in the Doctoral Support Center for Writing & Research Excellence and serve about 700 doctoral students in the College of Education at Texas Tech University. My team includes two writing specialists (I with a PhD and another with a Masters in English fields) and two

subject-matter specialists and methodologists (both with PhDs in Education fields). We are a small Center, but we are mighty in how we serve.

On average, the writing coaches in our Center read and respond to between 265 and 300 pages a week—with over 500 drafts last year (nearly doubling the number from the year before). We hold writing consultations daily on a variety of documents. We guide students with research proposals, research design, and methodologies, among other research-related tasks. We host several workshops and writing and research events each semester. We serve on university committees, help administer our Center's operations, participate in service projects, conduct research, and represent our university at academic conferences and in publications. Some of us also teach courses. Indeed, we are busy people.

Location of the Center

Located in the College of Education, an entire three-story building, the Doctoral Support Center for Writing & Research Excellence is comprised of four individual offices spread out in the building, an online submission portal, and, when needed for staff meetings or special events, conference meeting rooms that are shared with other College of Education programs. Our "space" is unique, to say the least, in that our Center has no physical center—rather we meet our students for consultations in our personal offices and online.

Our Clients & Services

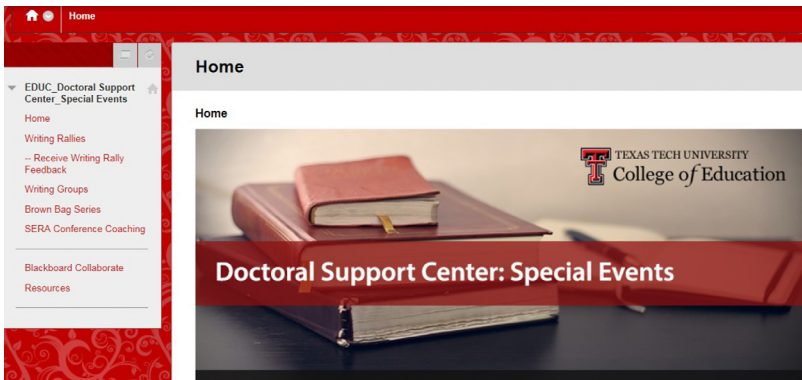
Opened in the fall semester of 2014, our Center was developed to address the growing demands of academic writing and research support for our doctoral students. Our student population fluctuates each semester and consists of approximately 30% onsite and 70% distance students, creating a high demand for delivering services in virtual spaces.

Our Center offers doctoral students comprehensive support with academic writing and research-related tasks that include assignments for coursework, professional writing (CVs, resumes, cover letters, teaching philosophy statements, research agendas, etc.), conference proposals and presentations, publications in journals, IRB proposals, dissertation proposals, dissertations, and defense presentations.

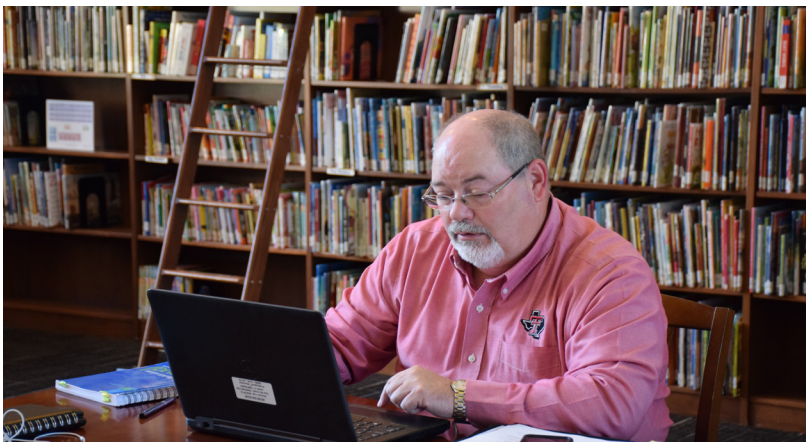
Our Center also provides motivational support for students through activities such as writing and research intensive events (we call these writing & data rallies), writing groups, write-ins, an annual writer's retreat, and a monthly lecture series. Some of these events are held in entirely virtual spaces, both asynchronously and synchronously in Blackboard. For example, past writing and data rallies and writing groups were offered as discussion forums in Blackboard with live small-group activities facilitated in Blackboard Collaborate. We created groups in Blackboard for students to engage in peer review activities (i.e., file exchange, discussion posts, and synchronous meetings).

Other events are held in blended "spaces," where onsite Center

staff and doctoral students gather in physical meeting rooms that offer webinar and teleconference capabilities for online students to also attend. For instance, past writer's retreat events were hosted on campus where students lodged at the campus dorms and used the Reading Room, small meeting rooms, and classrooms in the College of Education for individual writing and small-group activities.



A past writer's retreat event also included an online synchronous dissertation workshop delivered in Blackboard Collaborate led by a guest speaker from a university in California. The online dissertation workshop was open to all graduate students on Texas



Tech's campus, extending our Center's services to a broader audience. Additionally, our monthly lecture series takes place in a blended "space" (the Learning Resource Center Conference Room) that we share with other College of Education programs.



The holistic nature of our Center supports students' writing and research development but also provides supplemental guidance to many distance students on the tacit knowledge of graduate studies typically learned through traditional graduate residency. Our Center provides an academic safety net for students who often struggle to persist in doctoral programs due to poor writing skills, lack of acclimating to the demands and rigor of the academy, and feelings of isolation—common graduate student struggles identified in existing scholarship (Autry and Carter; Jimenez and Gokalp).

Best Practices Learned: Successes and Challenges

Our first-year efforts focused largely on building infrastructure. Mostly, we promoted and built up our one-on-one coaching services by developing a Center website, brand logo brochures,

mission and vision statements, and a Center handbook for students seeking services. We met with faculty and students to promote our services and gather input about students' writing and research needs. We also piloted two writing enrichment events: our summer writer's retreat and a hybrid writing rally (both took place over an extended weekend).

Initially, we learned that events held between 8 am and 5 pm were poorly attended because many students work full-time jobs during the day and then take evening classes, so small-group special events had to be offered from 5:30 to 6:30 pm (before evening classes) or on the weekends.

We also learned that students were eager and excited about the writer's retreat and writing rally, but that a four-day weekend was not enough time for them to truly accomplish solid progress on their writing. We knew that our future enrichment activities needed to be longer in duration, provide more individual writing time, yet accommodate those who work full-time hours.

In our second year, we developed even more diverse offerings of writing and research enrichment activities. Additionally, these second-year activities included a monthly Brown Bag lunch lecture series offered exclusively virtually at first (which transformed into a hybrid format at the request of onsite students). We also developed a virtual writing group, a virtual week-long writing rally (both of which also later became a hybrid format), and a hybrid data rally. We also piloted off-site coaching services by sending a coach to a regional Education conference that many of our students attend. This off-site coaching offered

students an opportunity to meet with a writing coach in person but also to receive feedback on their presentation at the conference.

Our efforts to engage more with students (and faculty) proved successful in expanding our roles and coaching services. We learned that providing all-virtual activities, though it leveled the playing field for all attendees, was not as well received by our onsite residence students. Our big take-away from this second year was that we needed to meet the needs of two unique types of students (those who were distance and accustomed to virtual platforms and spaces and those who were onsite and accustomed to physical spaces). We also learned that extending the duration of writing and data rallies and offering a variety of scheduled times for sessions, workshops, and one-on-one coaching worked well for meeting more students' schedules.

Completing our third year now, we have continued offering our core one-on-one coaching services and, once again, offering the monthly Brown Bag lecture series (which now regularly hosts faculty talks), hybrid writing groups, hybrid writing rallies, an annual writer's retreat, and off-site coaching. We also added write-ins: first as part of the writing groups and then as part of the International Write-In event with writing centers across the globe.

What we have learned from these activities and student feedback surveys is that one-on-one coaching continues to be students' most popular service but that diverse sub-groups of students have also appreciated the supplemental writing and research enrichment activities to boost their productivity.

Looking to the Future & Concluding Thoughts

Our first few years have been highly productive, and our services have been extremely well-received. The number of drafts submitted and consultations requested continues to rapidly grow. We are developing better and more diverse services to support our students. We also have started formal conversations with administration to create research assistant positions in our Center for program assessment and to hire additional writing coaches to meet the growing demands of our Center.

We face what many successful “starts-ups” do—our growth and demand for services is fast outpacing our available resources. “It is nice to be busy and in-demand,” I reflect.

CENTER inSIGHT

The Doctoral Support Center for Writing & Research Excellence, founded in 2014, currently serves a population of about 700 doctoral students in the College of Education at Texas Tech University.

- Center Started: Fall semester of 2014
- Director: Dr. Mellinee Lesley, Associate Dean for Graduate Education & Research
- Dissertation Specialists & Writing Coaches: 3 full-time, non-tenure track, exempt professional staff with Doctorate degrees
- Senior Editor & Writing Coach: 1 full-time, non-tenure track, non-exempt professional staff with Masters degree
- Location: College of Education, main campus
- Hours Open Per Week: Each coach works 40+ hours a week, 8 am to 5 pm and after hours by appointment (160+ hours each week of Center resources to our clients)