

Investigating the Sweetland / Rackham Dissertation Writing Institute: Changing Writing Behavior for Effective Dissertation Writing

Louis Cicciarelli, Paul Barron, and Ben Gunsberg, Sweetland Center for Writing



Introduction

This study examines students' perceptions of the Dissertation Writing Institute (DWI) from 2009-2011. The DWI was developed to provide time, space, and writing consultation to assist graduate students through the dissertation writing phase. Since 2003, the DWI has supported 144 graduate students from disciplines across the humanities, social, and natural sciences. The eight-week writing intensive program combines one-on-one sessions, accountability meetings, and interdisciplinary workshops aimed at instilling successful writing practice and speeding time-to-completion. The program includes:

- Individual offices / required hours
- \$3000 stipend
- Weekly accountability meetings
- Weekly interdisciplinary workshops
- Individual writing consultation

Methods

We analyzed 2009-2011 pre- and post-program surveys completed by 72 DWI participants. We further focused our analysis on student perceptions of the influence of SCW faculty consultants. We coded student survey responses for references to:

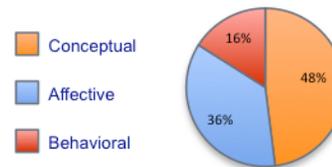
- affective** changes (*confidence, security enthusiasm, motivation, validation*)
- behavioral** changes (*momentum, changes in practice*)
- conceptual** changes (*understanding, clarity, perception of dissertation writing*)

Results

DWI Program Features Rated Very Important 2009-2011



Role of Writing Consultant: Types of Positive Change Reported by Fellows



Other Key Findings

- 94% set productivity goals post-DWI
- 81% defend within two years post-DWI
- 85% found interdisciplinary workshops effective
- 86% reported increased motivation after meeting with writing consultant

Acknowledgments

The Investigating Student Learning (ISL) Program was funded by the University of Michigan Office of the Provost and the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching. The DWI is funded by the Sweetland Center for Writing and Rackham Graduate School. Office space is in part provided by the Department of English Language and Literature.

Student Reports

- *It really motivated me. Having the opportunity to work with a faculty consultant was extremely useful and it was nice to know that we could just schedule an appointment and have one quickly. When I felt stuck or frustrated, it gave me an opportunity to work through that with someone and always made me go back to my office more motivated.*
- *This institute helped remind me that my project is significant and useful and that I can and should make my own research/writing a priority over competing demands.*
- *Devoted writing support, mandatory weekly hours, and regular accountability meetings. I thought the writing workshops in particular were fantastic, and gave me important insights into my own writing - as well as giving some 'relief' from the day-to-day constraints of my own project - by experiencing the work in progress of other students.*
- *I wanted to carry Paul's big picture comments into the material I brought to the institute, and then ended up reshaping my entire project (restructuring my outline) because of the implications of these changes. I was thrilled to get down to work on a dissertation model I could believe in!*
- *After meeting with Louis, my murky thoughts would be quite clear and I felt confident and excited to put them down on paper. He helped me both to see the forest for the trees and to remember how fun and interesting my subject matter is.*

Conclusion

This exploratory study focused its examination on the role of Sweetland faculty support in the DWI. Our findings suggest that students value their interactions with writing consultants because those interactions support the affective, conceptual, and behavioral facets of dissertation writing. Student responses show that interactions with writing consultants helped them conceptualize their dissertation. This finding indicates that non-expert but experienced writing center faculty can effectively promote positive change in dissertation writers.