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Assessing and Serving the Workshop Needs of Graduate Students

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ABSTRACT

This study determined which workshop topics are of most interest to graduate students in the humanities, science, and social science disciplines, and what their preferences are for workshop formats, times, and communication. Topics in demand by students were evaluated against those identified as very important by graduate program directors. In addition to disciplinary differences, the needs of master's and doctoral students were compared (and contrasted). Findings were shared with multiple campus units and utilized to develop workshops and other services to more fully support graduate students with their research, grant, career, teaching, and technology training requirements.

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Introduction

Graduate students face a rapidly-changing higher education environment. As a result, a variety of their information needs – both education-related and career-related – might not all be met within a given graduate program's curriculum. Graduate students are able to learn some research, grant, technology, teaching, and/or career skills from faculty advisors or other graduate students, but there is no standard for what topics and content to include or how thorough and complete the training is in these areas. The students might consider asking for assistance from campus experts such as the Graduate School, Library, Research Office, Computing Services, Writing Center, Learning Center, and Career Services, if these groups serve graduate students. Of course, this assumes graduate students look outside their department for help and know where to go and what to ask for. Unfortunately, previous studies have shown that students do not always know what they do not know and student orientations are not sufficient to familiarize them with the available resources (Gibbs, Boettcher, Hollingsworth, & Slania, 2012; Rempel, Hussong-Christian, & Mellinger, 2011). The literature review discusses how others have attempted to learn about and provide support for their graduate students' various needs.

The current study identifies both those topics in greatest demand by graduate students and those deemed most important by their graduate directors. In addition to overall findings, disciplinary analysis was performed to determine what differences exist between the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. The divergent needs of doctoral and masters' candidates were also examined. Following this assessment, the

authors detail how they applied their findings in practice and provide a framework for future directions of their research.

Literature review

One solution for expanded learning opportunities might be for campus experts to provide workshops featuring skills that complement and supplement the graduate student curriculum. Whether under the leadership of the Graduate School, Library, or another unit, multiple groups might collaborate to offer workshops as part of the graduate student orientation, as a "Dissertation 101" seminar, or throughout the year (Hannig, 2015; Kansas State University Graduate School, 2015; Rempel et al., 2011; Switzer & Perdue, 2011; University of Wisconsin-Madison Graduate School, 2013). Many librarians teach workshops on a wide-range of research-related topics, from the more traditional literature review and use of specific resources to citation management and software to the newer data management training (Baruzzi & Calcagno, 2015). In fact, Covert-Vail and Collard (2012) recommend that libraries develop a suite of graduate student services that considers their spectrum of roles and suggest collaborating with library colleagues and campus partners. A grant writing center could teach grant funding search skills and grant proposal writing skills (Weisblat & Sell, 2012). An education center or center for teaching and learning could focus on pedagogy and course design for teaching assistants (TAs) and future faculty (Chicago Center for Teaching, 2016; Lockwood, Miller, & Cromie, 2014). A career center might teach interview skills (Behrens, 2009). Academic departments might decide to develop their own workshops or seminars focusing on writing or oral presentation skills if they notice their students are weak in those areas (Delyser, 2003; Fowler & Jones, 2015; Micciche & Carr, 2011).

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Supplementary learning could also be sponsored by external parties such as academic societies, grant funding agencies, or corporations (American Chemical Society, 2014; Bauer, Libby, Scharberg, & Reider, 2013; Rutgers University Libraries, 2015).

Before expending limited resources to develop training opportunities that graduate students may not attend, it is essential to identify first which supplementary topics graduate students would be interested in. Librarians have attempted to do this in the past, focusing primarily on student input about research-related topics. Hoffmann, Antwi-Nsiah, Feng, and Stanley (2008) asked graduate students in the sciences and health sciences about the usefulness of specific research-related workshops. Critz et al. (2012) brainstormed topic ideas for a workshop series on library research skills with officers of the Graduate Student Government Association. Roszkowski and Reynolds (2013) surveyed social science students about traditional library topics they would be interested in learning and modified their outreach methods accordingly. In their interviews with science graduate students, Johnson, Kuglitsch, and Bresnahan (2015) focused more on barriers to doing research.

It was not unusual for researchers to encounter students surprised by what the library could do to assist them (Madden, 2014). Some graduate students, however, were reluctant to seek help from their library. They expressed concern that librarians may not possess adequate subject knowledge to be able to deal with their research (Fleming-May & Yuro, 2009). Others seemed willing to try a library workshop anyway since nobody else was providing support for the topic (Hoffmann et al., 2008). Focus group discussions with graduate students have revealed that they want to learn dissertation formatting, statistical software, programming languages, career-related skills, and teaching skills, which reflect the multiple roles they often play (Rempel et al., 2011). When examining how science graduate students used library services and resources, Tomaszewski (2012) discovered students were interested in workshops about software and how to effectively write and communicate science – not just traditional library offerings such as how to use database and bibliographic management tools. Similarly, Gibbs et al. (2012) asked graduate students across the disciplines open-ended questions about their research needs and saw a desire for help with note-taking, writing, and editing/proofreading. It is clear that graduate students have research needs that go beyond typical library training but are not certain where to turn. To be fair, there may simply be gaps in support services for some of these topics and skills. In the current study, it was acknowledged that the library did not have the expertise on staff to provide training for all topics; however, the hope was that crucial service gaps might be filled by the Graduate School, academic departments, and/or other supporting units on campus.

Methodology

In Fall 2013, graduate students at Rutgers University-Newark were sent an e-mail inviting them to complete an online survey (see Appendix A) about workshop topics they were interested in, their preferences for workshop formats and times, and how they would like to be informed of such offerings. The range of topics is considered more comprehensive than that in any single study previously performed because they encompass the many topics graduate students might need to know as they switch from student to researcher, data manager, techie, author, teacher, grant seeker, or job seeker. The topics list was divided into five categories – Research Support, Grant Support, Teaching Support, Career Support, and Technology Support. Within Research Support were four sub-categories (i.e., information literacy (finding, using, & managing information); data collection, analysis, & management and digital humanities; thesis research & writing; and scholarly communication) and within Technology Support were two sub-categories (i.e., desktop applications and research technology). For each of the 58 topics listed, students were asked if they *would attend*, *might attend*, or *would not attend* training on that topic. This was expected to be a truer gauge of workshop attendance.

At the same time, graduate program directors at Rutgers University-Newark were sent an e-mail inviting them to participate in a 15–20 min interview with one of the authors. The directors were provided with the same list of workshop topics as the students, but were instead asked which topics they felt were *very important*, *somewhat important*, or *not important* for graduate students in their department to know. Directors were also asked which topics their department already offered support for, in what format(s) the support was offered, and whether there was interest in integrating any of the topics into courses or department activities. Since students lack the advantages of hindsight that their graduate program directors have, the comparison of student and director perspectives is a unique aspect of this study and extremely helpful in informing service priorities.

This study also examines disciplinary differences and compares and contrasts the needs of master's and doctoral students. There does not appear to be any recent studies of this size that do this. Given how varied student needs are and their disinterest for attending workshops and other activities they do not perceive as being relevant (Fleming-May & Yuro, 2009), it is vital to understand these differences and use that knowledge to customize training accordingly. Promotion of training opportunities can also make use of this knowledge to be more effective. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained prior to study commencement and study subjects were provided with the appropriate informed consent form before participating. As an incentive to participation, all study subjects were given the opportunity to participate in a random drawing for a chance to win one of ten \$50 gift cards. These gift cards were sponsored by the Graduate School. In fact, when the authors shared their intention for this study, they found very supportive colleagues at the Graduate School.

Findings

Overall findings

Student survey

A total of 233 (out of 3476) graduate students participated in the online survey. These study subjects came primarily from the social sciences (58%), followed by the sciences (19%), then humanities (13%), with another 10% failing to identify with a particular discipline. Most were in their first two years of graduate school (34% in their first year, 36% in their second, 12% in their third, 6% in their fourth, 6% in their fifth, 3% in their sixth, and 3% beyond that). There were more full-time students (56%) than part-time students (44%), and more master's students (61%) than doctoral students (38%). These demographics may have influenced the results for when graduate students prefer to attend workshops because Monday–Friday evenings were surprisingly the most popular, whereas those same mornings were least appealing (see Table 1). In-person workshops were in greatest demand (68%), but online training in the form of videos or tutorials (52%), information portals (43%), and webinars (42%) were not far behind (see Fig. 1). Students overwhelmingly preferred e-mail (99%) to any other forms of communication, with smaller groups expressing interest in learning about training opportunities on the Graduate School Web site (15%) and Facebook (15%).

A complete summary of responses concerning topics of interest to respondents can be found on Table 2. Those that at least 40% of all

Table 1
Student respondents' preferred training times.

	Morning	Mid-day	Afternoon	Evening	None
Monday	16%	23%	26%	50%	14%
Tuesday	17%	23%	26%	49%	13%
Wednesday	17%	21%	22%	51%	13%
Thursday	15%	20%	26%	50%	14%
Friday	18%	25%	27%	41%	24%

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