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**Voicing Graduate Student Writing Experiences: A Study of Hybrid Courses at Two Master's Level, Regional Institutions**

**Introduction**

This qualitative study is underwritten by a simple premise: namely, that a significant gap exists between what graduate students know and what they are expected to know, particularly at regional, master's-granting institutions. Our goal in this project is to explore this premise as it relates to something we regard as vital—graduate writing pedagogy, and specifically, the preparedness of graduate students as *writers*.

While we cannot ignore the institutional and economic pressures that emphasize class size over pedagogy *per se* or the logistical issues involved with growing new programs, we also should not ignore the fact that the goals and needs of graduate students differ significantly from those of undergraduates. In short, we argue that although administrative expediency should never trump pedagogical concerns—for example, we maintain that graduate student writers must be conceived of as pedagogically distinct from their undergraduate colleagues—the fact is that it often does. This chapter details these challenges and creates a space for graduate students' voices to be heard and analyzed.

Our particular focus involves an institutional innovation we have come to call “hybrid” courses. In our definition, hybrid courses, which are not to be confused with courses that are offered both in online and face-to-face environments, are courses that enroll undergraduate and graduate students simultaneously. As a point of reference, we examined the graduate policies and curriculum of all eight of SIUE's peer institutions as determined by the Illinois Board of Higher Education and found that, while details varied, seven of them offer hybrid courses.<sup>1</sup> While this arrangement can be pedagogically productive and may help increase time-to-graduation when graduate programs are inadequately staffed, it also poses unique challenges; this is especially true when it comes to teaching and mentoring graduate student writers.

In our view, to teach writing at the graduate level should entail a complex, thoughtful negotiation between the mastery of disciplinary ways of knowing, on the one hand, and writing-focused pedagogical approaches tailored specifically for graduate students writing in their disciplines, on the other. A growing body of research calls attention to some of these challenges in connection to Ph.D.-level students (Bryant, 2009; Hoborek, 2002), the writing challenges of master's students more broadly (Casanave & Li, 2008), and the institutional infrastructures that can best engage graduate writers (Pinkert, 2017), but no one has focused exclusively on students in hybrid courses at the master's level.

Imagine a senior-level Advanced Composition course that also offers graduate credit. This single class might enroll senior English majors for whom this course represents the culmination of their undergraduate careers, while simultaneously enrolling first-semester graduate students, and students finishing thesis projects. Similarly, some students might be

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<sup>1</sup> These universities include East Tennessee State University, Grand Valley State University, Marshall University, Oakland University, University of Missouri-Kansas City, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and University of South Alabama. Only Western Carolina University did not appear to offer such courses.

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secondary teachers who want to teach dual-enrollment writing courses, while others might be graduate students on their way to Ph.D. programs. And while many hybrid courses are discipline-specific, we must not forget that quite a number of writing courses at this level are designed as interdisciplinary introductions to (or “refresher courses” for) scientific, technical, or some other non discipline-specific writing conventions, strategies, and so forth. Given the unique ecology of the typical hybrid course, the clash between theoretical and pragmatic questions is a constant source of tension in the curriculum, course design, and assessment of graduate student writing. Add to that the way that institutions historically carry contrasting assumptions regarding the goals of undergraduate versus graduate education—to take one example, that undergraduates should be trained more broadly while graduate students must learn how to specialize in and explore a topic or problem—and the difficult role that such courses bear in the graduate curriculum is clear.

Considering the broad array of purposes, histories, and unique institutional configurations of hybrid courses, we do not claim that our findings regarding graduate student writing experiences are representative of all hybrid courses nor even of all regional institutions. Rather, our goal is to turn the focus from the economic and institutional needs that seem to drive the creation of such courses to a reflection on student-driven pedagogical needs. Specifically, our interview-based study calls attention to the challenges and assumptions that inhere even in the most well-designed hybrid courses. By creating a space where graduate student writers can offer their own perspectives, this project highlights some of the most common themes that emerged among the fairly diverse population we interviewed. Ultimately, in this chapter we are more interested in starting conversations about the pedagogical and curricular disconnects that we observed rather than argue for any particular solution—whether ours or theirs.

### *Hybrid Courses or Cross Purposes?*

Known variously as “dual-listed,” “cross-listed,” or “concurrent” courses, a number of institutions of higher education have come to recognize the pedagogical and curricular challenges hybrid courses pose. For example, Pennsylvania State University, the University of Michigan, California State University at San Marcos (another regional campus), Marquette University, and Brandeis University have each developed specific policies and guidelines for creating, proposing, and evaluating hybrid courses, which includes any courses that concurrently offer credit to both graduate and undergraduate students. These guidelines tend to coalesce around three main concerns: (1) that finding and maintaining the right “balance” is difficult in hybrid courses—that hybrids have a tendency to become either de facto undergraduate- or graduate-level courses; (2) that rigor and an appropriate level of sophistication must be maintained simultaneously for both sets of students; and (3) that concerns over enrollment and resource allocation should not become an overriding factor in the development and approval of hybrid courses. At our own institutions, both of which are regional campuses with primarily master’s-level graduate programs, hybrid courses have become a strategy for ensuring that courses “make” or meet enrollment requirements, on the one hand, and that graduate students have enough courses available to graduate in a timely manner, on the other. At SIUE, only specially-designated 400-level courses may be taken for graduate credit, and those courses are expected to include additional assignments and/or more rigorous evaluation of the students taking them for graduate credit. And for a course to be so designated, it must go through a one-time review by both the Curriculum Council of the Faculty Senate and the Graduate Course Review Committee.

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Similarly, at IU Kokomo, instructors in the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies (MALS) program are directed to provide graduate students in hybrid courses with a separate syllabus that addresses multidisciplinary learning outcomes specific to the MALS program, and instructors are further required to give assignments that reflect these outcomes (“Constructing,” n.d.). However, the abundance of such hybrid courses and the relative silence regarding graduate student writing suggests that at least on an institutional level, graduate student writing is thought of more as a baseline “standard” that entering students are expected to meet rather than a process or a practice to which students are habituated as they learn how to write and think in their various disciplines. One way this plays out is in the institutional command to “write a paper” without the least pedagogical attentiveness to what that might mean for master’s students in particular disciplines (Hedgcock, 2008) or for how such expectations and processes might differ between graduate and undergraduate students in the same course.

So the guiding questions of this project are simple: How do we teach our graduate students to be graduate student *writers*, whatever that might mean or might come to mean in any given context, in the increasingly-common circumstance of the hybrid course framework? And how does this differ from the ways we teach undergraduate or graduate writing in traditional courses? To begin to address these questions, we will first examine the hybrid courses as they are currently configured in two representative institutions.

### **Rise of the Regionals: Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) and Indiana University Kokomo (IU Kokomo)**

Together, we represent two regional campuses. Brian teaches at SIUE, a regional comprehensive campus in the Southern Illinois University (SIU) system. Paul teaches at IU Kokomo, a regional campus of Indiana University (IU). These campuses share a few interesting similarities. First, both schools emerged as regional campuses of large, flagship Midwestern state schools; second, each institution offers a range of master’s and professional degrees in everything from nursing, education, and business administration to liberal studies and English; third, both universities regularly rely on hybrid courses.

A relatively young university, SIUE opened its doors in 1957 in order to fulfill the increased need for college-educated employees in Illinois’ second most populated region. Over the decades, SIUE has grown to become a premier Metropolitan University (currently with an M1 Carnegie classification) serving the Metro-East area of greater St. Louis and offering a variety of undergraduate, graduate, and professional degrees to roughly 14,000 students. Economically, it is one of the largest employers in the region, and over the last decade, it has transformed itself into a traditional residential campus, while continuing to serve a large number of commuter and transfer students.

With just over 3,000 students, IU Kokomo is significantly smaller than SIUE, though as a regional commuter campus it serves a similar function (“IU Kokomo,” 2013). IU Kokomo opened its doors in 1932 as “Kokomo Junior College.” Today, it serves a fourteen-county area in north central Indiana, a region whose economy has historically depended almost exclusively on agriculture and automobile manufacturing. Within the last decade or so, as the automotive industry has gradually lost its sacrosanct status as the region’s primary economic driver, residents have turned to higher education; as a result of these and other factors, IU Kokomo has seen an unprecedented enrollment boom in recent years (Rush, 2009).

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In general, regional, master's-granting institutions like SIUE and IU Kokomo are enjoying something of an enrollment renaissance across the United States with master's granting institutions indicating an increase of 6.1% in graduate applications between Fall 2006 and Fall 2011, according to the Council of Graduate Schools "Graduate Enrollment and Degrees: 2001-2011" website ([http://issuu.com/council\\_of\\_graduate\\_schools/docs](http://issuu.com/council_of_graduate_schools/docs)), even as evidence suggests that some flagship institutions are seeking to sever their relationships with the state systems that have grown up around them (Stripling, 2011). According to the National Center for Education Statistics ([http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d11/tables/dt11\\_287.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d11/tables/dt11_287.asp)), the total number of master's degrees conferred yearly has increased from 463,185 in 1999 to 693,025 in 2009. As students have acclimated their educational priorities to the new economic realities of the decade, studying closer to home; saving on gas, food, and rent; and earning a degree from a nationally-recognized, accredited university have made regionals an attractive option for both undergraduates and graduate students, and the increased number of accelerated master's degrees and graduate certificate options have played an important role in this trend as well.

In the last fifteen years, the branch campuses of Purdue University and Indiana University (of which IU Kokomo is a part) have benefited significantly from the establishment of Ivy Tech, a statewide community college system in which students can earn inexpensive associate degrees and then transfer to any four-year institution in the state ("Enrollment Soars," 2001). This growth in higher education in Indiana has fueled enrollments at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

Similarly, SIUE has seen record numbers of undergraduates in recent years, even as other universities in the state are suffering from decreased enrollments at the undergraduate level. And SIUE continues to position itself as a regional source for a wide variety of graduate and professional degrees. In terms of the larger landscape of higher education in Illinois, public universities continue to make a strong showing in master's programs even in the face of budgetary challenges at the state level. According to the Databook on Illinois Higher Education (<http://www.ibhe.org/>), for example, in 2009-2010, public universities in Illinois granted a total of 12,887 master's degrees, an increase of 4.2% from the previous year.

For these and other reasons, regional campuses are ripe for scholarly exploration, and our decision to interview master's-level graduate students at these institutions stems from our observation of a trend towards using hybrid courses as an administrative "shortcut." For instance, if a given graduate program is thought to have too few students to justify a full slate of graduate-only course offerings, hybrid courses are a convenient cost-saving measure: rather than fill a graduate-only course with three or four students, a hybrid course with six or seven undergraduates and the same three or four graduate students seems much more palatable to administrators for purely economic reasons. Since master's-level programs at regional institutions like SIUE and IU Kokomo are more likely than flagship research universities to have fewer graduate students, this practice of hybridizing graduate course offerings has become a pervasive practice, and, in some instances, as much as half of all coursework may consist of such hybrid classes.

Second, we were intrigued by the lack of available literature that specifically examines master's-level students in higher education. In rhetoric and composition studies, for example, there is no shortage of literature geared towards helping students write theses, dissertations, article manuscripts, application letters, etc. (Clark, 2006; González, 2007; Nielsen & Rocco, 2002; Rudestam & Newton, 2007)), but very little of this material has examined the hybrid

phenomenon we propose to study in this chapter, particularly as it relates to students who do not plan to pursue a Ph.D. or other terminal degree.

### **Methodology**

The data for this study was collected during the summer of 2013. Participants were recruited in two ways: (1) through a formal “call for participants” sent out via email to students in SIUE’s and IU Kokomo’s MALS, MBA, MA, and other graduate programs and (2) through more informal channels, such as contacts with former students who expressed interest in participating in the interview process. All interviews were recorded using a digital audio recording device; they were then uploaded to password-protected cloud data storage to ensure privacy. All participants were assigned gender-specific pseudonyms. To qualify for the study, participants had to be current or former graduate students at SIUE or IU Kokomo, and they had to have taken one or more hybrid courses before the summer of 2013.

Other than two interviews conducted by phone, all interviews took place either on the campus of SIUE or IU Kokomo. Each participant took part in a single open-ended interview that lasted on average between 20 and 35 minutes. Participants were provided with a copy of the planned interview questions in advance to help them prepare, as some participants drew on hybrid course experiences that were several years old. Once all interviews were completed and transcribed, we analyzed the data qualitatively, focusing on patterns of response that could offer unique pedagogical, disciplinary, or institutional insights about the teaching and learning of writing from the graduate student perspective. In total, we interviewed nine participants from seven different degree programs.

We consider our study to be both descriptive and exploratory. It is descriptive in the sense that one of our primary methodological goals is to provide a sample of student descriptions *in their own words* of their experiences with writing and writing instruction, primarily in terms of specific pedagogical practices and implications. The questions were open-ended and emphasized hybrid coursework experiences, although they allowed room for students to discuss other graduate (and even undergraduate) experiences. (See Appendix A for our list of questions.)

We also consider our methodology to be exploratory: besides our initial questions, we did not attempt to impose artificial parameters on our participants’ responses. Rather, we decided to allow our participants to follow out their own narrative itineraries more or less at will. So if a response meandered over to another topic or blurred into another line of questioning, we did not attempt to stop or limit the response. Although we certainly framed the initial questions, we wanted our findings to emerge from the graduate student experiences and perspectives to the fullest extent possible. (See Appendix B for a detailed breakdown of study participants in terms of institution, participant’s pseudonym, and specific degree program.)

### **Discussion: “Who Counts?”**

The results of this study suggest that our two initial premises were correct. First, respondents persistently noted gaps between what they knew and what they felt they were expected to know as graduate student writers. Second, respondents described various ways in which the goals and needs of graduate students conflicted with the goals and needs of undergraduate writers in the hybrid course format. As to the latter, we wish to make it clear that

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respondents tended to see a value in such courses—however, that value was seen primarily as one that benefited undergraduates, pedagogically speaking. (As a credentialing practice, it may well have been appreciated by graduate students seeking timely graduation.) One finding we did not expect was the perceived lack of mentoring or sufficient feedback on writing reported by respondents. In order to better explore the pedagogical and curricular implications, we framed our discussion around two key themes: 1) the ambiguous nature of graduate student writing expectations and 2) the performance of graduate student identity.

### *Ambiguities and Contradictions: What “Counts” as Graduate Student Writing?*

Across disciplines, all interviewees agreed that graduate student writing should be different from that of undergraduates. But when it came to the site of the hybrid course itself, a host of vagaries, miscues, and contradictions emerged. The most fruitful comments in this regard appeared in answer to the question of whether they were ever explicitly told what to expect or what “counts” as graduate student writing. Students who answered this question in the affirmative inevitably linked their answer to a particular (non-hybrid) course that operated along the lines of an introduction to graduate studies, and, in fact, those students were notably silent about such explicit discussion when it came to other courses. On the other hand, other students offered comments to the effect that in some important ways, they never felt they adequately understood what it meant to be a graduate student writer, even after they had successfully completed their degrees. Of course, even the students with less confidence in themselves as graduate student writers had strategies that they used to navigate their various courses. And student self-expectations, and even self-doubt, seemed to play a primary role in their perception of themselves as writers, suggesting that the pedagogical and curricular disconnects noted across the interviews have much to do with the unarticulated expectations of graduate faculty in both hybrid and graduate-only courses.

When asked to what extent they were explicitly told what counts as graduate student writing, the majority of responses we received included answers like Angela’s “probably never” or Neal’s “it’s not really talked about—it’s understood.” Amy said, “I would honestly say not at all. I think it has been assumed that we applied [to the graduate program] and therefore we can do it.” Later, Amy reiterated the point, “There was no higher instruction—‘this is what you’ll do the whole time you are a graduate student,’ ‘this is what is expected.’ You start with the class and then you do each assignment.” Similarly, Angela stated, “I don’t recall that any of the . . . instructors in the graduate courses said as an example, ‘here’s what one looks like, here’s what a scholarly paper looks like and should be.’” In Tracy’s experience “Only one professor took the time to share that with us.” Interestingly, Cynthia, who said she was told “very clearly” that graduate work carried high expectations, had great difficulty articulating any specific expectations and ended up focusing on APA style and the length of the assigned papers (rather than any kind of disciplinary knowledge, methodological approach, scholarly tone, etc.). She went on to say that the “largest stumbling block” for new master’s students in her field (Nursing) was APA and she thought all such students should take “an APA class,” which suggests that, for her, APA style is an external set of stylistic markers one “adds” to a paper rather than an academic style imbricated within certain kinds of disciplinary thinking.

Debbie stated that she was not told what counts as graduate student writing “overall,” but that the instructor of her hybrid course “was very helpful to tell us what she expected for this graduate paper for this particular class.” Danny offered an answer that pointed to a common strategy for figuring out what graduate student writing should do: “There was a set of

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requirements that you'd have to have this, this, this, and this, had to be a certain style, had to have all the proper citations . . . . But it was mostly, in my experience, . . . write the paper, get the feedback from the instructor, and correct that the next time around—you know, iteratively getting better each time you did it.”

On the other hand, those who were given explicit expectations for their graduate work seemed to have taken either a specific writing class, as Beth did, or an introduction to graduate studies course, like Nancy. Nancy probably gave the clearest example of what graduate student writers should be able to do when she said, “The expectation of graduate level writing was that it could be presented at a conference.” Then she elaborated as follows in her attempt to distinguish graduate from undergraduate writing expectations:

There was a higher expectation for grad students, but these were not as clearly outlined, but professors expected higher caliber [work]. . . . I thought they did a good job in communicating to us the expectations for the program, the caliber of work that we would be doing, and those sorts of things. I would say that as a teacher of undergraduates, we do a better job providing written material to undergraduates about what is expected in terms of outcomes . . . . When I was there, it seemed like there was a greater expectation that we learn about the discourse community, but there was not explicit instruction beyond MLA style.

Beth also described a particular course that helped prepare her for graduate writing, but she described it more as a course designed to “weed out” un(der)prepared students rather than teach them to be effective graduate student writers as such:

Coming into the graduate program, we had the introductory writing class . . . or the introductory class to the masters in liberal studies class, and in that class we were given a lot of . . . specific instructions about what our writing was supposed to be, and we were pushed to the max on that as well, that was hardcore, it was make it or break it moment, so, it was definitely “this is what you should be doing at the graduate level.”

Neal had a different experience in that he was not told explicit expectations for graduate writing, which he suggested might account for the inconsistent understanding that graduate students seemed to have about writing expectations. However, rather than pointing to a gap in disciplinary or genre knowledge or to confusion regarding MLA or APA style, Neal locates the problem in terms of what might be called an unsuccessful “professional” ethos. Specifically, he points to a lack of appropriate editorial care:

It seems to me like some students don't realize the level of professionalism that is expected. With the team project I worked on, it didn't seem that some of the other students took notice of the high standards that were expected. Some of them didn't go back and make sure that every “i” was dotted and every “t” was crossed *per se*. I guess part of it might be, like what I said before, [faculty] don't really come out and say [what the expectations are]. They

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just expect you to know that, hey, you are a graduate student now and a lot more will be expected of you.

Indeed, few of us receive much explicit guidance on what it means to “be” a graduate student professional. Rather, we tend to pick up on these cues to varying degrees as part of our graduate training. In the next section, we explore the connections between graduate writing pedagogy, curricular expectations, and our students’ burgeoning identities as graduate-level scholars and learners.

### *Shoring up Identities: Struggling to Distinguish Graduate Expectations*

Throughout the interviews, participants provided responses that suggest the importance of developing and maintaining their identities as “authentic” or fully-professionalized graduate students, an emergent theme in the research that has been noted in two recent studies (Talinn, 2016; Lawrence, Tetreault, & Deans, 2017).<sup>2</sup> This theme was most noticeable in our research when students provided responses in three broad, interrelated areas: (1) when detailing their expectations of how their graduate coursework would be more professionalized and their matter-of-fact assumptions about the increased rigor of graduate-level coursework; (2) when expressing the need for a greater emphasis on drafting and revising practical documents related to the job search (CVs, cover letters, course syllabi, and even emails); and (3) when hoping for (and at times even longing for) a course that focuses on the specifics of developing a scholarly writing style and demystifies documentation formats (APA, MLA, Chicago, and so forth).

Angela, a master’s student whose program was Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) at SIUE, compares her expectations of graduate-level coursework to her undergraduate experiences: “I would say that there is more of an applied expectation . . . that you are able to read this . . . article from a journal and extract some information and kind of analyze it or criticize it or use it, try to interpret it and how it would be used in particular contexts, specifically since my classes were teaching classes.” She then links her discussion almost immediately back to her *personal* perception of “standards.” Discussing her “Senior Assignment” experience, she distinguishes her project regarding “religious syncretism in a particular group of indigenous people from Mexico” from the projects of fellow students who wrote on topics like Salsa dancing.

Her point wasn’t to critique her classmates so much as to demonstrate the way that personal expectations significantly affected the kind of writing that was produced. She then moves back to a discussion of graduate student writing: “You can start with a question and . . . come to a new idea as long as you [support] it with other people’s ideas, you can make connections. And I think that does happen on some level in undergraduate work, but I think it’s more supported and desired . . . in graduate work.”

Here, Angela struggles to come up with concrete examples of precisely how her graduate-level work compares to her undergraduate projects; it’s almost as if she knows there is a difference, and certainly she implicitly recognizes that there is *supposed* to be a significant difference, but she has difficulty articulating what some of these differences might be. Compare this passage to Tracy’s response to a similar question about her expectations of graduate-level coursework before beginning her Master of Public Management (MPM) degree at IU Kokomo:

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the unique challenges facing L2 graduate students in adapting the identity of graduate writers, see Jennifer Douglas’ chapter in this collection.

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So my expectation of grad school was that things were going to be higher and harder than undergrad. . . . I had a lot of reticence about my abilities. Okay. So, when I got there, I discovered there is a higher expectation, the material is deeper, in that there's a lot more material to cover in such a short time, and the critical reviews and analysis, and instruction is just deeper, okay, than undergrad. . . . So the *rigor* of grad school is so much higher than undergrad. Unless you have done your research or been told about it, then you may be in for a little shock. . . . I read a few things . . . and noticed the fine difference between the works, you know, and I'm quite sure . . . well, I can't assume, I don't *want* to assume that doctoral-level work is that much different from grad school-level because I don't want it to be that much harder if I decided to go!

She then attempts to concretize her perceived expectations about graduate writing. In the process she says graduate writing must be succinct, must "connect the dots," and must be "cogent and coherent." But she moves back to more ambiguous language by asserting that "your whole structure has to be, just simply, a higher level." She then states that her key term for this kind of writing is "analysis." Ultimately, she claims that the ability to analyze means "the difference between an 'A' and a 'C'" in graduate classes. But, as she continues her line of thought, the difference between students and professors is knowledge of "their material." And writing plays a key role in that because it is through assessing graduate student writing that professors use their knowledge of "material" to distinguish students who are "parroting something" from those who demonstrate "real creative thought on a subject . . . not *repeating* something verbatim, but you know, really putting some thought into it."

Danny's response to the same question indicates a similar dynamic at work in terms of how graduate students perceive the professionalization process vis-à-vis writing projects and curricular rigor, as well as how they feel about their preparedness and their general resolve to embark on a graduate program:

Upon entering the graduate program that I am pursuing [the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies program at IU Kokomo], I had no idea of what a scholarly paper was. Now I had seen papers in journals and stuff like that before, but I had not linked the term to that. So I had had some experience of what a journal article would look like, but I had no idea what was expected [of] me. You know, I was walking into this blind and I had made up my mind that, hey, "I'm going to tackle this all the way through."

Even when one recent graduate of the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies (MALS) program at IU Kokomo admitted that she felt the coursework lacked rigor overall, she was careful to note that she *expected* that the program would be more challenging than her undergraduate coursework: "If I'm being honest, I really thought [the program and "the writing portion"] was going to be a bit more rigorous. . . . In addition to my bachelor's in English I have a writing minor, so maybe it wasn't a challenge for me because I do have that . . . experience in writing. . . . I never stopped writing after I was teaching." The one exception to her critique of writing in her coursework was her introduction to graduate studies class, which she said "kicked my butt." Other than that, her

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courses generally and writing assignments in particular were “like smooth sailing.” She wasn’t simply commenting that the writing was not difficult, but that it *should* have been and the lack of rigor was “very frustrating” to her. She attributes this in large part to the hybrid courses she took. She says, “I wish the content courses, the hybrid courses that we’re talking about here specifically, I wish that it had been less teaching the undergrads and more learning myself. Um, and through the writing I wanted to do that.”

But her comments were more ambivalent when she began discussing her thesis:

I’m [teaching full-time] at a community college now, so I’m not expected to do the, the research element that you would at a university, but that’s something that I still am very interested in. Um, when it came to write my thesis, that’s when I got that rigor back again, that’s when I got that hardcore, but it was a topic that . . . my committee didn’t really know about. So, it was new, it was something that they hadn’t really heard about, so it was teaching them at the same time I was writing. So it wasn’t as rigorous as I expected it to be in that aspect of the thesis writing, but um that was okay, that was okay, because . . . it was a learning process, and it was time-consuming, and it was crazy and chaotic.

### *Shoring up Identities: Graduate Students as Professionals*

Since it is reasonable to assume that students who pursue advanced higher education do tend to be more ambitious on the whole, it’s not exactly surprising that these students seemed to approach their graduate studies with an attitude similar to Danny’s: “I’m going to tackle this all the way through.” This attitude is also evident in some of the students’ remarks concerning their drive and ambition, as well as their general readiness to downplay challenges or setbacks. For example, Tracy remarks at one point that she “might cheat a little bit” in answering a question about a time that she felt unprepared to successfully complete a writing project, because she has “too much experience in making something out of nothing.” (She later draws upon her career experiences in non-profit radio broadcasting to indicate how that experience had prepared her for certain kinds of writing at the graduate level. Neal makes a similar move when he comments on the way his professional experience made him aware of two distinct audiences that engineers typically need to learn how to address in their academic programs.) Danny remarks that he was never assigned something that he didn’t feel prepared to do, because “having chosen to do this program, you know, I’m going to do whatever I’m asked to do, because it’s a learning experience.” We think it significant that their confidence in their abilities doesn’t seem to translate into a *laissez-faire* attitude regarding professionalization in their graduate curriculum, particularly professionalization as achieved through improved writing abilities. In other words, graduate students on the whole may be a confident and ambitious lot, but for all that, they have a keen appreciation for being shown the ropes, for learning the “basics” of writing for graduate studies. They sense that it is different—that it is *supposed* to be different—and this seems to leave them with a craving for a more explicit articulation of these differences in order to shore up their identities as graduate students and as burgeoning professionals. Focusing on writing centers at two large public institutions, Lawrence, Tetreault, & Deans (2017) argue in a recent article that required “intake consultations” with new graduate students can help identify the needs of graduate writers and alert them to the range of services the writing centers offer.

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Almost across the board, students wanted more explicit instruction in writing professional documents for graduate studies, whether these were job search-related or research/publication-related. Beth, for instance, concluded her interview with a sort of plea for more graduate courses with an explicit focus on writing:

We did call for more writing classes. We did want more writing courses. Um, I had to take one course that I had taken as an undergrad, and it was really bad as an undergrad and it was really bad as a graduate. And it was really frustrating for me . . . um, I wish there were more options [for writing courses]. . . . And it was very frustrating because I had to take it again as a graduate student, and . . . it was really bad the second time around. Every aspect of it was really bad, we had several graduate students who dropped from that course.

Even so, she wished “there had been more options for graduate students that were writing focused.” So the prevalence of hybrid courses and the role that graduate students were expected to take in such courses as “teachers” was seen as a significant barrier in her attempt to “master” graduate writing. Interestingly, this respondent expressed a desire for any non-hybrid graduate level writing courses, covering anything from rhetoric to creative writing. Her strongest interest was in what she called graduate “research writing courses.” She says that not only were graduate students “expected to do that” but also she wanted to publish. And while she identified herself as “an English person” with a love of literature, she wanted graduate courses that helped her focus more on writing. In part this had to do with her profession as a community college teacher of writing. For example, she says, “I am confident in my teaching, I do teach the entry-level classes [in writing], but I would’ve liked to have more experience with [writing] in my graduate-level courses.”

Professionalization matters for Nancy, too. She articulates the importance to her career as a community college teacher of being shown how to draft a conference proposal. She gives the example of colleagues “who have gone on to do Ph.D. work [and] brought back information about how to write proposals—for CCCC [Conference on College Composition and Communication] and that sort of thing.” Then she says, “If it is the goal of graduate school to do research and writing and presentations and published papers then we can do like we do with our undergraduates and explain our expectations.” She then suggests a graduate course or workshop that orients students to professional organizations like CCCC and MLA (Modern Language Association) as well as their expectations regarding conference proposals.

For Neal, who is pursuing a Master of Science degree in Engineering at SIUE, “sound[ing] professional” is key, but developing this professionalization remains largely implicit: “As far as the engineering classes go, it’s not really talked about. It’s understood.” Later, Neal expresses an awareness of the rhetorical and stylistic subtleties of practical, everyday documents like professional emails:

Yeah, I would say a lot of it was in regards to how I communicate. I guess a good example is email etiquette. I didn’t really use email in my undergraduate career because I lived on campus and I would usually just go talk to [my instructors]. But in my career, obviously email is a big part of our business and therefore I was able to learn

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a lot from the professional engineers I work under about what you are supposed to say in an email and what you are not. For example, if we are trying to sell a product or trying to give some information, we may not want to give all of our information at one time because we may not want the person [to whom] we are giving the information to share it with our competitors with whom they might have a relationship. [I also learned] email etiquette, knowing how to express yourself in an email so that you do not come across as brash or aggressive.

Amy also highlights the need for explicit instruction in some rather specific genres and styles. Like other respondents she wants more explicit focus on scholarly writing: “[She wanted to know] not just the form but how to write a research project, not that it has to have an abstract or annotated bibliography or whatever it may be, *but actually how to write for a research project*. That was far more technical than anything I had ever written before” (emphasis added). But she adds another genre to the mix. She specifically mentions the importance of learning “how to design a syllabus” and says “I think . . . more time [should be] spent on the language of writing these documents, portfolios.”

Cynthia and Debbie, both second-year students in the Master of Nursing Administration program at IU Kokomo, expressed a similar need for explicit instruction in specific genres and documentation and style guides that they feel their program has lacked. Interestingly, whereas this instruction was lacking in their coursework, both students found the Writing Center tutors to be a significant help. Cynthia describes a recent paper “where the APA [was] really stressed and really counted” and her feeling that she was unprepared “to just sit down and be able put it all in the computer and get it to come out right. So [she] spent three days in the Writing Lab,” which she described as a “wonderful” resource. Debbie offers a somewhat more candid assessment:

I really felt lost when I started at IUPUI [Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis], it was like, “well I’ll turn this in and see how it works.” And you know, I don’t like feeling that way. . . . There’s this one gal that I did this paper with, she said, “here, I don’t know how to do APA format, here you take this to [the Writing Center] and make sure it’s okay.” But . . . if I’m going to write something, then I want to know why I’m doing what I’m doing. To me [using APA] seems like an exercise in stupidity. And I know that you have to reference stuff, but gosh, you know, and there’s so many different formats out there to reference things in. . . . I want things, when I look at them, or when somebody explains them, . . . to make sense, in order for it to not be a barrier. And I think that’s part of the problem, no matter what I look at—no matter what I purchase or what I look at—it’s still confusing to me . . . . And until I have a better understanding, it’s going to be a barrier to writing papers.

Taken together, these passages suggest that graduate students in these programs are receiving messages—from professors, other students, even perhaps the larger culture—that the expectations for writing in graduate studies will be higher, more intense, and more challenging

and “professional.” But these messages tend to be blurry and vague. When it comes to explicit instruction in writing, whether specific genres or even scholarly research papers, students feel that they should receive more explicit instruction—through a required course or in their subject-matter coursework—in how to write at the graduate level. The process that emerges from these interviews is one of continuously groping towards an unclear target: students implicitly know that “something else” will be expected of them as graduate student writers; what that is, however, too often remains unclear. We think this situation can be particularly problematic in regional, master’s institutions like SIUE and IU Kokomo, where there often seems to be a greater degree of isolation between students than occurs in traditional doctoral programs where students are more likely to work with each other and with faculty more extensively.

### **Conclusion: Hybrid Courses/Hybrid Students?**

A crucial assumption we bring to this study, and one generally responsible for all the institutional policies that have emerged regarding hybrid courses, is that undergraduate pedagogy is and should be different in some fundamental ways from graduate pedagogy. The first and most far-reaching implication of this study is that hybrid courses writ large should be given careful reconsideration at both the pedagogical and institutional level. In a variety of ways, respondents indicated that hybrid courses are not always effective environments for graduate student pedagogy. For example, even in cases where there was undoubtedly more work required of graduate students, which was not always the interviewee experience, it was unclear the degree to which such assignments typically differed from undergraduate assignments in purpose or in evaluative criteria. For example, does adding ten pages inherently transform an undergraduate assignment into graduate-level work? Does the addition of “research” to a reflection automatically constitute a scholarly genre? Similarly, interview subjects often commented on the limitations that undergraduates inherently brought into both the scope and style of class discussion, even more so when students from different fields were taking the course as an elective. In fact, it was notable that while some interview subjects spoke extremely favorably of various hybrid courses, the majority of positive comments regarding hybrid courses were framed around the benefits of such courses for undergraduates.

So at the level of class discussion and in terms of writing assignments, respondents offered comments that suggested hybrid courses as they are commonly conceived may not adequately respond to graduate student pedagogical needs. In fact, this perceived conflict in pedagogical goals may be impossible to avoid in the confines of the traditional course. If this is the case, then institutions interested in building or maintaining effective master’s-level programs should certainly consider ways to frame hybrid courses that include assignment sequences and readings typical of other graduate course offerings, but they should also be aware that due to their pedagogically-conflicted design, hybrid courses may not be as amenable to graduate pedagogy as their prevalence suggests, such as when the only tangible distinction from an undergraduate course is an additional assignment or an individual’s (or an institutional policy’s) often vague notion of rigor. More explicitly, faculty (and programs) should carefully consider the ways that writing gets taught (not merely assigned) in hybrid courses. It leaves us with a provocative question: are hybrid courses primarily the result of, and hence driven by, economic/logistical factors or disciplinary/pedagogical ones?

The second implication suggested by our study is that graduate students across disciplines would like more explicit discussion about the process of becoming a scholar/professional writer

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in their different fields. Some reported anxieties at the point of coursework in terms of specific academic genres or conventions; others commented on the gap they saw in their graduate studies in terms of preparing them to publish or present at academic conferences. Of course, not everyone reported this experience. The primary difference between students who expressed anxiety about their writing and those who did not seemed to center on the degree to which students perceived they had been told explicitly what was expected of their writing. Further, the students who knew what was expected also had something else in common—a graduate writing course or an introduction to graduate studies seminar. Of course, as potentially useful as such a course might be, such arrangements do carry the potential to lead graduate students (and others) to the conclusion that writing can be taught and “inoculated” in a single course. Anyone familiar with WAC/WID research or writing studies in general will readily recognize the dubiousness of this claim.

But the other component of the discussion about how students learn to become scholars and professionals centers on the role of feedback and mentorship.<sup>3</sup> We were surprised in particular at how often subjects noted a lack of feedback from faculty on major writing projects. And one respondent stands out for his comment that no writing was required in one of his hybrid courses. This is doubly troublesome because students across the board implicitly described how they became successful graduate student writers in terms of a process. It is encouraging to note that some researchers have begun to investigate ways that faculty can productively mentor graduate students in specific discipline-specific genres (Eriksson & Makitalo, 2015). In our study, more than one participant discussed the role of instructor feedback, both written and spoken, as a key means for calibrating themselves to what was expected of them as writers and presenters. If it is indeed the case that successful scholarship and professional writing emerge via an iterative process rather than from, say, an attribute students supposedly already possess upon acceptance to a program, then faculty feedback is a crucial part of the graduate student socializing process. Taken together, these implications both point to the need for more focused institutional and pedagogical reflection about (1) how we teach writing at the master’s level and (2) how and why we offer hybrid courses in our various programs.

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<sup>3</sup> For an interesting take on the role of mentoring in extracurricular writing, see Adams et al.’s chapter in this collection.

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### Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What kinds of writing projects were assigned in your “hybrid” graduate-level coursework? How do these projects compare to the types of writing projects you’ve been assigned in your undergraduate coursework in terms of length, complexity, sophistication of research, etc.?
2. To what extent have you been explicitly shown or told what “counts” as graduate-level writing?
3. When it comes to writing projects in your graduate coursework, can you describe what is expected of you as a graduate student? How do these compare to what was expected of you when you were an undergraduate student?
4. To what extent would you say you were aware of these expectations of your writing before coming into the program? How were these expectations communicated to you once you began completing coursework in your program?
5. What kinds of comments, margin notes, edits, or emendations do instructors or advisors make on your writing projects?
6. Have you ever been assigned a writing project that you felt unprepared to complete successfully? What are some specific challenges that you have faced as a writer in your graduate coursework?
7. Are there any types or genres of writing projects that you wish would be covered in your graduate coursework?
8. How have your experiences with hybrid coursework compared to other graduate-level courses? Is there anything else you would like to add about hybrid coursework?

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*Appendix B: Participant Overview*

<b>Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE)</b>		<b>Indiana University Kokomo (IUK)</b>	
<b>Participant's Pseudonym</b>	<b>Degree Program</b>	<b>Participant's Pseudonym</b>	<b>Degree Program</b>
Angela	Master of Arts in English, specializing in Teaching English as a Second Language (MAE--TESL)	Danny	Master of Arts in Liberal Studies (MALS)
Nancy	Post-Baccalaureate Certificate in English, specializing in Teaching of Writing (PB--TOW)	Beth	Master of Arts in Liberal Studies (MALS)
Neal	Master of Science in Civil Engineering (MSCE)	Tracy	Master of Public Management (MPM)
Amy	Master of Arts in English, specializing in Teaching of Writing (MAE--TOW)	Cynthia	Master of Science in Nursing Administration (MSN)
		Debbie	Master of Science in Nursing Administration (MSN)