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Great Expectations: The Amazing Adventures of a New Graduate Assistant

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Great Expectations:
The Amazing Adventures of a New Graduate Assistant

Andrew Johnson
And
Mary Arnold Schwartz
Introductions

• Andrew
  – Hired while taking class as grad student
  – Working on master’s degree in English with a concentration in writing studies
  – Experience as a graphic designer and Web developer
• Mary
  – Coordinator of the Writing Center—overworked, underpaid
  – Consulted in the WC as an undergraduate and graduate student—would have killed for a GA position, but no funds available
Why a Grad Aide?

• Andy
  – Administrative background appealing on resume/cv
  – Plan to become a professor, consulting work would help in my development as a teacher
  – My main goal was to increase numbers of all sorts, especially increasing numbers of students using WC and, thereby, overall student retention

• Mary
  – Help!
    • The university was unwilling to fund creation of clerical position, which I’m not sure I wanted (have other consultants doing clerical/administrative work)
    • Wanted the Grad Aide grounded in WC Theory and Practice
    • Least costly addition to our budget

  – See position as site for professional development and educational growth
Creating the Grad Aide Position

• Recipe:
  – Talk the one grad student in the Writing Center into presenting at the ECWCA conference
  – Hang out at the hotel bar and romanticize the possibilities over Rusty Nails and Gin & Tonics (multiples optional . . .)

• But really . . .
  – We had a process . . .
Step 1: Identifying the tasks

- Determining the institutional process for how a department obtains a grad aide
- Identify key players to forwarding (hindering) the process—and their agendas
- Identify key documents about GAs in the WC field
- Identifying opportunities in the budget
- Defining the position
Determining the institutional process

• Talk to my chain of command—permission to pursue the idea
• Talk to the Associate Vice Chancellor in charge of the Graduate School
  — Find out the rankings available (grad aide v. grad teaching assistant)
  — Find out how much and the types of funding available for position from the Grad School
• Talk to other departments who have graduate aides
Identify key players

• Promoting the value of the position
  – Writing Center embedded within a Learning Center, the Center for Academic Support and Advancement (CASA), reporting to the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs
    • My hierarchy and department members—how will shifting budgetary priorities benefit or cost them?

• Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs
  – How does this position fit within the division’s or university’s mission and strategic plan?

• Assistant Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, Director of the Graduate Program
  – How does the position fit within their goals for graduate student retention and development?
Identify key documents about Graduate Assistants in the WC field

• IWCA Position Statement on Graduate Student Writing Center Administration
  – www.writingcenters.org

• Other IWCA resources
  – IWCA site: Resources > Writing Center Directors > Graduate Student Writing Center Administrators

• Article
Identifying opportunities in the budget
"The director and [Graduate Assistant Director] GAD should discuss whether the GAD would like a formal job description as the [IWCA] statement suggests, or a more fluid, emergent job design" (Dvorak and Rafoth 181).

Mary’s experience as an Assistant Director: Job description was too vague and indistinguishable from the director description—and resulted in more friction than smooth relations.
Definition of position—Andy’s experience

• Writing a description with responsibilities distinct from those of the director
• Note that the genre cannot describe the everyday tasks or how they will look in practice
• These seem more like goals or eventual accomplishments to a new Graduate Assistant
Defining Authority

• Expectations about the position and the construction of authority
  – Director
    • Am I willing to share/delegate?
    • Did I really share/delegate?
  – Director’s reporting line authorities (Learning Center Administrator/Academic Success Director, English Department chair, Graduate program chair, Deans, Chief Academic Officer)
Step 2. Hiring

• Qualifications in the job descriptions
• Ours was a default hiring: Andy was the only grad student
  – Made the first year easier
  – No regrets
  – NOW—Challenge: Articulating how to choose the best candidate
Step 3. Baptism by fire

- Go forth and don’t piss anyone off
- Going with opportunities and strengths
Faculty Liaison

• Set Orientations
  – Improve relations with faculty instructors
  – Increase foot traffic in the WC
  – Increase WC prominence
  – Increase overall student retention and performance

• Distribute promotional materials, talk about assignments
  – Improve relations with faculty instructors
  – Improve WC image throughout IPFW
  – Improve consultant skill by previewing major or difficult faculty instructor assignments
Consultant Mentor

• Increase overall skill level and comfort among the body of consultants.
  – Provide individual database training
  – Be present as a “go-to guy” who could help with specific questions during a consultation
  – Initiate and maintain personal, comfortable relationships with new consultants
  – Check back with consultants often to see how they are doing, and
  – Observe consultations and then, in conversation, reflect back on what was observed.
Recruitment Work

• Create documents/flyers for general distribution
• Engage in correspondence and follow-up on the application process for each new applicant.
  – Many times, I offered to help/speed things along for the applicant, by giving tips or advice
• Actively participate in the interview process
Document Production

• Create several types of documents, including
  – Artwork/posters which served as both an excuse to make contact with faculty instructors, and to increase our image among faculty
  – Recruitment flyers
  – Video/commercial ads for Student housing
  – Databases, spreadsheets, and reports
  – Ongoing work on Re:Write!, an IPFW Writing Center newsletter
Step 4. Reflection and Assessment

- Disconnects between conception and execution
- Write up a Guidebook for the Grad Asst Director
- Wcenter Listserv feedback
Thank you for coming!

• Suggestions for Further Reading: