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Heather F. Ball
St. John's University

Caroline Fuchs
St. John's University

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Dissertation Deep Dive: Taking the Plunge to Support Graduate Students

By Heather F. Ball and Caroline Fuchs

Abstract

This paper will explicate the process and lessons learned of creating a week-long research and writing graduate-student “Dissertation Deep Dive” (DDD) program, and how collaboration across university units was integral to its success. It will also walk the audience through the thought process and steps taken to achieve this week-long research- and writing-intensive program, as well as challenges, opportunities and lessons learned.

Keywords

Graduate studies, doctoral students, research, dissertations, library outreach, library resources, library services

Author Biography

Heather F. Ball is assistant professor and Student Success Librarian at St. John’s University in Queens, NY. Her research focuses on increasing student success metrics through multi-session information literacy workshops with specific student populations on campus. Associate Dean Caroline Fuchs is associate professor and Learning Design Librarian at St. John’s University Libraries in Queens, NY. Her research focuses on the development of visual, digital and informational literacy skills, as well as effective pedagogical practices for effective face-to-face and online instruction.

Dissertation Deep Dive Program

Academic libraries often dedicate much of their resources and services to undergraduates. As a result, graduate students, more specifically doctoral students, who need different research services, tend to be underserved or overlooked. The research, formulation, and writing of dissertations are work intensive, and at the time of this project’s inception, the St. John’s University Libraries did not provide a formalized suite of services for this student population. After conducting an informal needs assessment with the graduate students of St. John’s College, the Student Success Librarian (SSL) and the Learning Design Librarian (LDL) collaborated with the assistant deans of the liberal arts college to design and implement a “Dissertation Deep Dive” (DDD) pilot program. The program “sold out” within the first few days, and a wait list was created. Participants consisted of 15 graduate students across five Ph.D. liberal arts programs. During the week-long

spring break, doctoral students were given the opportunity to quietly write, work, and reflect in a community setting in the Queens campus library from 8:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M., during which librarians were on-call for intensive one-on-one research consultations. A separate space was set aside for participants for socialization, networking, and snacking. The librarians had prepared several research-based informational workshops as well motivational/inspirational sessions selected by the student attendees through a pre-event survey.

St. John’s University was founded in 1870 with its Vincentian mission of providing the youth of New York City with the opportunity of an intellectual and moral education. Today, its number one strategic priority is to ensure student success, which is currently measured by retention, persistence, and graduation rates. Its Queens campus is comprised of 21,643 students, including 16,884 undergraduates and 4,759 graduate students. The total student population is 59% female and 41% male, 44% Roman Catholic, 43% non-Caucasian, and 38% of freshman are Pell-eligible (with 98% of students receiving financial aid). Of the 4,759 graduate students at St. John’s, doctoral students currently number 1,435 across the four doctoral-granting colleges.

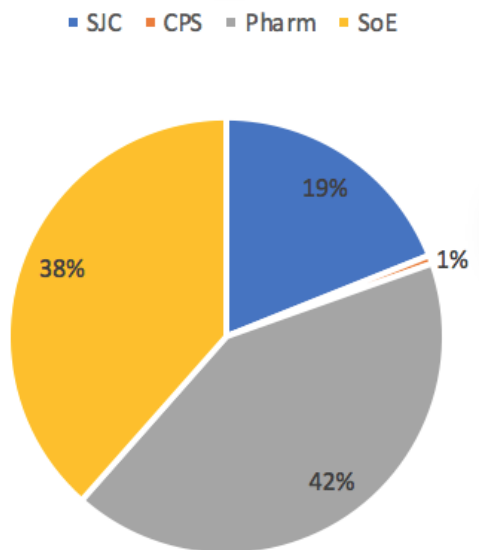


Figure 1. Breakdown by college, excluding Law School.

St. John’s College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (SJC): 272; College of Professional Studies (CPS): 9; College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences (Pharm): 602; The School of Education (SoE): 552

Total: 1,435

At St. John’s University, the SSL and the LDL partnered with administrators in one college to create a research- and writing-intensive sustainable program that

included a value-added social component in order to help foster a research- and writing-community of graduate-student scholars. There is little in the literature that focuses specifically on research- and writing-intensive boot camps run by librarians for graduate students. Ondrusek (2012) notes that the literature consistently cites two strategic solutions that effectively help improve graduate student writing: the formation of writing groups and the availability of personalized guidance through writing centers, with no mention in the literature of writing and research support in libraries. In their study of the academic library needs of doctoral students at Ulster University in Northern Ireland, Delaney and Bates (2018) noted that the literature is lacking in research on the information practices of graduate (e.g. Ph.D.) students as a discrete campus population.

At Penn State Harrisburg, librarians partnered with their colleagues at the University's writing center, creating a successful collaborative course-related program for undergraduates called "Write, Research, Revise" (WRR). To utilize the service, students were required to make appointments with both the librarians and the writing tutors (Mross, 2018). Similar to the work done at Penn State Harrisburg by Mross (2018), a collaborative effort between librarians and faculty in the writing center resulted in the creation of "Dissertation 101" to assist graduate students in the early writing stage of their dissertation work. "Dissertation 101" is designed on the fundamental principles of the *ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2016), which aims to guide learners along the continuum from novice to expert researchers (Switzer & Perdue, 2011).

Other academic librarians have forged similar collaborative projects. Research-writing activities, such as boot camps and "shut up and write" sessions for graduate students, are becoming increasingly common at academic institutions in the U.S. and Australia, many of which have a social component. Some have noted that these writing groups may build participants' skills and foster productivity (Aitchison & Starfield, 2015.). Using focus groups and questionnaires in their study of improving communication between postgraduate researchers and the library, Petch, Fraser, Rush, Cope, and Lowe (2016) discovered that participants articulated a need for a sense of community as being of key significance in the researcher experience. Chen (2018), a proponent of librarian/faculty collaborations for ensuring success among doctoral students, noted the need for effective qualitative measures for retaining and graduating doctoral students in the U. S. and observed that doctoral students need guidance from faculty for successfully navigating the path as well as research consultations with librarians. Rempel, Hussong-Christian, & Mellinger (2011) noted that graduate students lack faculty support in general. The fundamental question they asked was: "What role do librarians have in the development of graduate student research practices?" (Rempel et al., 2011, p. 532). They also found that graduate students reported that they rely on themselves to learn new library skills (Rempel et al., 2011).

Modeled after similar programs at Stanford and Cornell Universities, Simon Fraser University created a three-day “Thesis Boot Camp” to assist graduate students in their writing and research, the purpose of which was for students to make significant movement toward completion of their theses or dissertations (Bakker, 2014). The initiative was led by a team comprised of Research Commons and Liaison Librarians, the Writing Services Coordinator, the Research Commons assistant, and Graduate Peer Writing Facilitators (Bakker, 2014). Similar to the St. John’s University Libraries’ “Dissertation Deep Dive”, the SFU’s team aimed to provide a quiet, distraction-free research-supportive space, with snacks provided, as well as optional workshops (Bakker, 2014). With limited resources at their disposal, researchers at the University of Connecticut decided that the best way to serve their graduate students would be to create structured time and space for them to write. Some of the focused “Just Write” initiatives for graduate students at the University of Connecticut included writing retreats, writing boot camps, and a five-week academic writing seminar (Reardon, Deans & Maykel, 2016). It is important to note here, however, that this effort was based in the writing center, not in the library.

Examining ways to assist graduate students in successfully completing their dissertation work in the field of social work, researchers noted that “[o]ptimal learning is promoted when students can work alongside a more knowledgeable other such as a mentor, a teacher, a more skilled peer, or another more expert guide who is able to offer scaffolded support and direction” (Liechty, Liao, & Schull, 2009, p. 483).

Ince (2018) found that graduate students have very different information needs than their undergraduate counterparts, calling for librarians to take a more focused approach to providing library instruction and information literacy services that would ensure graduate student success. Suggestions for improving library services for this population include creating a dedicated online presence for graduate students. Other recommendations include that libraries provide dedicated study and group space for graduate students with a librarian presence, along with the availability of specialized training that supports the nature of their research (Ince, 2018). The need for librarian intervention is apparent. In their research study with ten Ph.D. students, Du, and Evans (2011) found that this user group saw librarians as key figures in helping them to develop their research skills.

Taking the idea of a collaborative library event a step further, Delaney and Bates (2018) found that there is a “universal and perennial” lack of awareness among doctoral students regarding library resources and services. Based on their research findings, Delaney and Bates (2018) recommend a “doctoral commons” for first-year doctoral students, which could be used also used for cross-departmental training and other research needs.

In their study of distance-learning graduate students, Cain, Marrara, Pitre, and Armour (2007) found that most online graduate students were not likely to make use of student support services (as they often did not perceive a need to do so), were more likely to depend on their peers for both academic and social support, and expected their instructors to be a resource for support with knowledge about on-campus academic resources and services. Interestingly, Cain et al. (2007) found that most of the online graduate students in their study were more likely to make use of their local library resources rather than those provided through the library of their degree-granting institutions, noting further that this student population made no mention of having worked with a librarian from any institution. It is important to note here that librarians were not included in the equation. As such, this is both an emerging opportunity and a challenge for academic librarians who seek to duplicate programs like the “Dissertation Deep Dive” for fully online students. In addition, Petch et al. (2016) noted that distance learners also need to have the opportunity to develop this sense of a research community.

While students at St. John’s have dedicated resources outside of the Libraries that contribute to their academic success (Writing Center, Learning Commons, Freshman Center), these are not necessarily geared toward graduate students, and cross-departmental collaborations between these entities and the Libraries are not formally established. It was our hope that this gap on campus might be bridged through the success of collaborative partnerships through the DDD pilot.

Based upon our review of the literature and our own informal needs assessment prior to the development of our DDD pilot program, we were aware that although graduate students at our institution had special research needs, they were often an underserved population when it came to library services. Additionally, there is no centralized office for graduate studies at the University, and the Libraries do not have a dedicated graduate services librarian. In addition to their very discipline-specific research needs, graduate students often have family obligations as well as very tight personal and professional schedules, which could limit their access to library research services during “regular” business hours. Furthermore, we felt the need to shift our focus to a more andragogical approach to student learning in this case.

The idea for the DDD came from an exploratory meeting between the SSL, the LDL, and two assistant deans from St. John’s College of Liberal Arts (SJC). In the initial meeting, the two deans had approached the librarians to see if they were able to host and participate in an event for their doctoral students that would help them to focus in on their writing and research for their dissertations. Because graduate students have different needs from undergraduates, it was important for the librarians to offer unique research services to ensure successful graduate work. Though writing-intensive dissertation programs are not unique, the Libraries included a value-added layer by providing librarians on-call for research consultations throughout the duration of the program. The project team also

decided to maximize the time and offerings we could provide, thus, the librarians settled on dedicating the whole of the University's spring break week to pilot the DDD program, which ran from 8:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M., Monday through Friday, with two librarians on-call for research consultations.

The original DDD partnership was between the University Libraries and SJC. Another program on campus had a "boot camp" for their doctoral students, but it was specifically catered toward Pharmacy graduate students, which meant the SJC students weren't able to participate. This boot camp did not have the value-added research consultation service.

Once we had met and agreed to pilot the DDD, the actual logistics of setting it up took place. First, we established a time that would be most conducive for both the students and the librarians; the DDD would take place during spring break so as not to interfere with other academic obligations. We agreed that the Libraries would provide daily refreshments (coffee, tea, water) while SJC would provide afternoon snacks. The Libraries also hosted the week-long event, so two meeting rooms were reserved: one for a quiet, communal work space, and the other for breaks, social interaction, and networking. Next, an online registration page and calendar event were posted to promote the program; this was also shared via email with doctoral students. Digital flyers were created and posted on media screens, and announcements were sent via social media. The program was slated for March, but publicity began in late October to ensure students had enough advanced notice to make arrangements for the week-long event. The event was limited to 20 registrants; registration reached capacity within the first week, resulting in the creation of a wait list.

The primary objectives of the DDD pilot were threefold: to offer Ph.D. students dedicated time and resources to work on their dissertation, to support their research needs with on-call consultations with library faculty, and to reinforce the opportunity for support and assistance after the event itself was over. The librarians also created five informational sessions/activities and five motivational/inspirational sessions. These were to be given during the program, with the informational sessions opening each day, and the motivational sessions given after the lunch hour to reinvigorate productivity and engagement with the students' research topics for the remainder of the afternoon. Even though times were set for 8:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M., sessions often extended until 6:00 P.M. Students were reluctant to leave, and the librarians were willing to stay after hours to accommodate the maximum time given to the program participants.

The program's success was initially measured by the swift response to the registration, the students' dedication to their work and to one another during the event, and by participants' responses to the post-event survey. Success was also measured by the students' continued daily attendance and Likert-scale post-survey questions (quantitative) as well as the open responses from the post-event survey

(qualitative). Success metrics also came as a result of word-of-mouth from the participants. After the pilot program, the librarians received several requests from across campus and departments for additional “Dissertation Deep Dive” programs. Here are some of the comments from the participants on the survey:

“I really appreciated the chance to use professional conference room space in the Library for uninterrupted dissertation writing and research. Caroline and Heather were super helpful and encouraging and were always there to help with anything we needed. I especially appreciated the two separate rooms, one with snacks and one without. We followed the rules and kept quiet work in one room, socializing in the other. It was great and very productive.”

“The camaraderie of having my fellow writers in front of me [is what I liked most about the event].”

“Just having a week of private time was enormously helpful.”

“I really liked being left alone to write in silence. Thank you for respecting that!”

Following the completion of the DDD, the coordinators held a debriefing meeting to discuss the survey results and the consensus they provided on the program’s success, the sentiment from collaborators on the program’s success, and lessons learned to improve the program going forward. Overall, the program was deemed a success based on the metrics stated above, but there were several aspects, from both an administrative and educational standpoint, that we felt could be improved upon in future iterations of the program. Overwhelmingly, the facet of the program that worked best for the participants was having dedicated communal quiet time and space to work. As they were in the final stages of writing their dissertation, what they needed most was that unadulterated time frame to work and focus on the task at hand. They also greatly appreciated having a dedicated social space with refreshments, so they were able to take a break, socialize, and commiserate with their fellow participants when needed.

Though there was a registration link that collected certain initial data points on the participants, the link and its pre-event survey were done by the assistant deans; going forward we will craft the registration link and pre-survey ourselves so that we are able to capture more specific information that will help us to customize the program to the students’ needs. For example, the original informational sessions we crafted were for students in the beginning stages of their dissertation (e.g., time management, citation software), but the participants we had were in the end-stages of their dissertation, and simply needed time and space to write. If we had known that going into the program, we could have crafted informational sessions more aligned with their needs. This would also allow us to announce the daily schedules

before the event begins, so that participants will have advance knowledge of the topics to be covered and can bring relevant questions if desired.

Communication between collaborators is another aspect we will tweak going forward, both in the planning of the event as well as the execution of it. Due to busy schedules, the collaborators did most of their correspondence and decision-making electronically; while this is understandable due to time constraints, being able to have several face-to-face pre- and post-event meetings would help to evaluate and resolve certain issues that can arise in a timely manner. As for the execution of the program, the first day of our DDD unluckily enough was canceled due to a snow closure for our school. As the librarians did not have the registered participants' contact information, we were not able to reach them directly and had to rely on emailing the assistant deans who then emailed the participants. Going forward, taking ownership of the registration link and pre-event survey will enable us to capture and easily access contact information for our participants in the need of an emergency.

Before the pilot program even ran, several other schools within the University reached out to the librarians involved requesting a DDD program for their doctoral students. The second successful DDD occurred during weekends of the summer of 2019 for English Ph.D. students, and we are in talks with other colleges for the upcoming semesters. Plans are also in the work for translating this experience to fill the needs of our students who are in fully online graduate programs.

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