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Working Together to Ease the Pressure to Publish in Higher Education

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Academic Leadership Journal

Academics are under a great deal of pressure to publish. Decisions on crucial issues of hiring, tenure and promotion are largely determined by publication rates (Boice & Jones, 1984) and faculty scholarly performance has traditionally been assessed by “straight counts” of publications (Braxton & Del Favero, 2002). These publication rates are used by institutions as an indicator of the institution’s performance and are important criteria in securing external funding from government and other sources (McGrail, Rickard & Jones, 2006). Failure to publish within the expected norms established by a college or university can result in a faculty member’s termination.

Publishing is important for other reasons as well. It offers such perks as visibility, advancement in salary, course releases and a unique and important kind of self-education (Boice & Jones, 1984). Research conducted in the late 1980s and early 1990s consistently showed scholarly productivity as the strongest correlate of faculty pay (Fairweather, 2005) and findings suggest that the most successful researchers are rewarded not just by salary increases but by teaching reductions (Weinsheimer, 2004). These teaching reductions may facilitate the writing/publishing process thus enabling the perpetuity for these researchers.

Blaxter, Hughes & Tight (1998) summarize research as involving “the careful investigation of issues of interest... with the aim of exploring existing understandings and/or seeking practical solutions to existing problems or issues.” (p. 285). This summary of research encompasses three types of traditional scholarly work: scholarship of discovery, of integration and of application, but does not include Boyer’s (1990) scholarship of teaching and learning where there is a continuous examination of pedagogical practices. The scholarship of teaching and learning helps redefine the modern university by including the strong co-dependency of teaching and researching (Robertson & Bond, 2005). The relationship between research and teaching is seen to be a defining feature of a modern university and an academic identity (Clark, 1997). This suggests that research and writing are important to the continued scholarly development of faculty.

According to Henderson & Buchanan (2007), even if there wasn’t an explicit demand for scholarly activity, most academics would choose to publish as they have been socialized to appreciate the importance of scholarship as part of their professional identity as well as the importance of scholarship to the health of the academic community. They are also likely to realize that publication remains the single most important factor in attainment of status in the academic world in addition to their securing their own financial rewards.

With these compelling reasons, both on individual and institutional levels as well as the extrinsic and intrinsic motivations, why is it that publication rates among academics are very low? (Boice & Jones, 1984; McGrail, et al., 2006). Many factors play a role when dealing with academics who don’t write. Among these are distractions and lack of time, difficulty maintaining momentum, a lack of framework or structure, lack of confidence in their ability to write, and a limited understanding of the writing and publication processes.

Challenges

Distractions and Lack of Time

When academics face the burdensome decision of prioritizing their work, they often view publishing with less immediacy than other, more tangible aspects of life. Teaching, committee work, community service, and family responsibilities tend to be higher priority items. In all of those venues one is responsible to another. Grant (2006), in her interviews of participants in a writing retreat for women in higher education, found that these women were unable to find time to write because of their responsibilities for caring for a young family and/or aging parents. Participants also cited the demands of low level administrative work as keeping them from writing. The pockets of time participants in Grant's writing retreat found outside of the retreat were too brief to get anything accomplished. Elbow and Sorcinelli (2006) who write about the Faculty Writing Place found that their participants were too distracted when they wrote in their offices and too distracted by children or household chores to write at home.

In both of these studies an alternate situation was needed to combat the lack of time. Moore (2003) and Grant (2006) developed a writer's retreat to create a large block of time where academics could write without distractions and away from the usual responsibilities. Elbow and Sorcinelli (2006) found that to have a special place away from office and home motivated faculty to find time to write.

Difficulty Maintaining Momentum

According to Boice and Jones (1984), "no doubt the greatest force against writing for publication is lack of momentum" (p. 568). An inability to get started writing or a block in the writing process produces lulls which are difficult to overcome. Another setback to momentum is expressed in the findings of Gainen (1993) who, in her study of junior women faculty, found that many obstacles such as teaching and meeting with students got in the way of their momentum and their pursuit of scholarly writing.

Establishing momentum can be achieved by such techniques as free-writing or automatic writing (Morss & Murray, 2001) while maintaining momentum can come from replacing "habits of writing frantically for major deadlines with moderate habits of writing regularly" (Boice & Jones, 1984, p. 570). Gainen (1993) found that writers were more successful when writing regularly and indulging less often in "binge writing". Support, encouragement and/or motivation have often been found to be enough to start the momentum for writing. (McGrail, Rickard, & Jones, 2006, Hale & Pruitt, 1989).

Lack of Framework or Structure

Lack of framework or structure is also a challenge to academic writing. Professors in general are talkers, not writers. They teach, present, discuss, and argue. They don't see themselves as writers. Elbow and Sorcinelli (2006) describe academics as people who are writing as if someone was going to break down the door and rip the manuscript out of their hands. They view writing as something challenging to them, something they often hide. Moore (2003) warns about writing out of anxiety, not desire, such as academics who write because someone told them they had to in order to earn tenure. There is no framework or structure for writing that is done under these circumstances.

Writing groups as part of a retreat or support group often function to build participants' confidence.

Developing a plan and sticking to it were the keys to success for a writing group discussed by Alonso (2007). These writing communities also help build momentum and provide structure to the writing process. Participants seem to learn faster about the writing process and the conventions and challenges of writing. Participants share in each other's work and, thus, demystify success and failure (Moore, 2003). June (2008) suggests a private job coach to help with success in higher education and recommends writing everyday if only for fifteen minutes. Elbow and Sorcinelli (2006) discuss the use of free writing, sitting down and silently writing about a topic without thought to the reader, reviewer or editor, as a method for improving confidence and breaking block. It also reminds the writer of the pleasures of writing.

Lack of Confidence in Their Writing Ability

Many academics lack confidence in their writing ability (Moore, 2003; Morss & Murray, 2001). They may feel that the quality of their work is not worthy of publication or they may believe that they have nothing new or insightful to say. One study indicated that writing actually generated fear and anxiety for a significant number of academics (Lee & Boud, 2003). A perceived lack of skill was a barrier to publication writing as reported by McGrail, et al., (2006). Many academics fail to recognize that writing is not a mechanical skills but rather it is a process that clarifies and explores relationships between ideas (Boice & Jones, 1984) and can be improved by watching others, collecting pointers from colleagues about better ways to write and by practicing writing (Kitson, 1984).

Results from Morss & Murray (2001) indicate that "confidence grows through a combination of a number of quite different activities: goal setting and deadlines, peer support, structured approach to writing, strategies for regular writing, strategies for making time and protecting it" (p. 49). While writing for publication is an expectation for academics, it is often a solitary act and therefore lacks the incentive of another's expectations. There is often a sense that writing is not as legitimate an activity as teaching and service. It also appears that confidence and motivation grow through the sense of achievement. Elbow and Sorcinelli (2006) found that having a "special" place to write established legitimacy for writers because, even while working solitarily, they were surrounded by others also pursuing the goal of writing. This environment gave the sense that writing contributes to one's role as a teacher, learner, and serious writer.

Limited Understanding of the Writing and Publication Processes

There are many articles on how to navigate the writing and publishing process, often with conflicting information. This creates a limited understanding of the writing and publishing process. The process is also changing and relatively quickly because of the growth of the internet, both online journals and books, and changes in the financing of academic presses (Thompson, 2005). Publishing often is a goal of academics and ultimately universities. So how then does one develop an understanding of the writing and publishing process in an ever changing world?

Purpose of this Paper

While experiencing any one of these factors may seem onerous, a combination of the factors can be overwhelming. Knowing that others have the same kinds of anxieties when it comes to writing for publication may offer comfort and help academics in their pursuit of scholarly writing. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine how writing programs established at two colleges supported

participants in their scholarly writing pursuits.

College Developed Programs

The B State College Writing, Mentoring, and Retreat Program

B State College opened its doors in 1871, first just as a school to train teachers and later as a professional and liberal arts institution with a large number of students pursuing degrees in education. It has been accredited by NCATE since 1954. It is the largest comprehensive college in the State University of New York (SUNY) system. There are approximately 9,000 students currently pursuing undergraduate degrees and another 1,400 pursuing graduate degrees. Fifty nine percent of the student body is female. Sixty-six percent are white and fourteen percent are Black/ African American. Class sizes can range, but 90% of the classes have fewer than 50 students. There are over 400 faculty of which 80% have the terminal degree in their field. The college is located on a 125 acre campus within the city limits of B, New York.

In 2006, B State College established a program to involve faculty in scholarship including the writing process. Applications were accepted for interested candidates to receive a mentor and participate in a 2 plus day writing retreat at a location off campus. The first year there were 12 participants, 16 in the second year of the program, and 14 in the third. Participants were both tenured and untenured faculty, while mentors were tenured faculty. Funding was provided in the first year from the Center for Excellence in Urban and Rural Education and the Center of Health and Social Research. The second year funding from these two groups was not available, but the retreat was supported by the Deans of each of the Schools at B State: School of Education, School of Arts and Humanities, School of Natural and Social Sciences, and School of the Professions.

Each participant was required to have a research study, article, or conference proposal begun before applying and attending the retreat. Mentorship was also a component of the retreat and mentors were assigned before the retreat. Mentors provided feedback and support by reading and discussing manuscripts with participants before, during and after the retreat. The retreat was held at a secluded, rural site off campus for two full days with additional writing time on arrival and departure day. Each participant had his/her own room and could choose to work alone in the room or in a common area. Meal times were common for all and provided participants with an opportunity to take a break from scholarly work and to discuss their work, if desired. An expectation of the program was that participants would not leave the retreat setting from the Tuesday evening arrival through the Friday morning departure.

The C College Writing Support Group

C College is a private comprehensive university founded by members of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) in 1870. There are approximately 4900 students currently enrolled, about 3400 are pursuing undergraduate degrees and 1500 pursuing graduate degrees. Fifty-seven percent of the student body is female. Of the 226 full-time faculty members, 93% hold a PhD or other terminal degree.

In 2007, after hearing about and intrigued by the idea of the writing retreat that B State had completed and cognizant of the struggles colleagues were having with their own writing, faculty members in the School of Education and Human Services (SEHS) at C College decided to try to secure support from

the dean for a writing retreat. This group included a component of a writing support group which met monthly during the academic year leading up to the culminating writing retreat. The first author invited five other faculty members to join the group. The six people came from two departments within the college's SEHS. Three were untenured faculty and three had received tenure within the past five years. Unfortunately, the six became five rather quickly due to one faculty member's dissertation defense being delayed.

The group of five met monthly, from September to April, and brought work to be reviewed by other members from the group. Unlike B State, there were not designated mentors; participants provided mentoring and support to each other. Participants determined goals each time they met and reported progress toward previous goals. The group members decided that they would focus primarily on scholarly writing rather than other writing such as reports or courses to be developed. They also decided that it was best to bring a sole-authored research project, though this was not a requirement. The reasoning behind this was to encourage participants to write alone but to have a support system for revising and editing.

Based on positive feedback from the group members the group was able to secure the necessary funding for the writing retreat. The retreat was held at a site off campus for two full days of intense writing and peer-mentoring. As with the B State group, each participant had her own room and could choose to write in her room or in a common area. The group met on the evening of arrival to set individual goals for the writing retreat. It was decided that the group would meet each day around meal times to share work and provide encouragement, discussion and feedback on manuscripts.

The success of this endeavor prompted C College to run the writing support group and the writing retreat again this year. However, participation this year was opened to all members of the School of Education and Human Services. Seven faculty members responded to the invitation to participate in the group and, as that number was still manageable, all were selected. Only two were returning members. One participant from last year was on maternity leave this year and the other two secured a grant (the proposal of which was written and revised in last year's group) and had to become members of that support group. Based on the success of the last group, this year's participants agreed to the same framework for monthly meetings: reviewing previous goals, providing comments and feedback for papers, and setting new goals. A writing retreat is again planned to culminate the experience.

Results

B State College

Surveys were administered in May, at the close of the retreat, and again in December as a follow up. Numbers of conference proposals submitted and accepted, papers presented, drafts worked on and papers submitted and accepted for publication were tallied. These results can be found in table 1. It is important to note that these numbers may be low because participants were not required to notify the writing retreat organizers of their scholarship endeavors and not all participants responded to the December survey. An increase in the number of papers accepted for publication is seen throughout the three years with 2 papers accepted from the first retreat, 4 from the second retreat, and 5 from the third retreat. Based on the data, all 3 retreats could be considered highly successful, perhaps more prolific in terms of scholarship than would have been achieved in the absence of a writing retreat.

C College

The writing support group was quite successful during the academic year. Qualitative data suggest that all members agreed that the writing support group improved confidence and momentum in scholarly writing. Aspects of the writing support group prior to the retreat that participants felt were most useful included: modeling commitment for each other, appreciating advice and support, accountability to the group for each of the monthly sharing sessions, and the quality of the feedback other members of the group provided. Some comments collected about the writing support group include: “I thought the motivation to prepare work on a manuscript was most useful. If I had been on my own, I would not have accomplished as much”, and “we modeled commitment for each other.”

Table 2 shows the writing accomplishments (the “straight counts”) in the areas of conference proposals submitted and accepted, grant proposals submitted, drafts for publications worked on, and papers submitted and accepted for publication, of the five members throughout the year, before embarking on the writing retreat.

At the conclusion of the retreat, members reported positive responses to all areas of the experience. Results from the two day retreat mirrored the year long results from the writing support group both quantitatively (see Table 3), and qualitatively. Comments collected at the end of the retreat indicated that participants enjoyed the time away from other responsibilities in order to focus on uninterrupted writing as well as time to collaborate with colleagues:

Participant 1: Time to really focus uninterrupted. Also, it was ideal for working on a collaborative project. I also appreciated having experienced members to give advice when we needed it.

Participant 2: Just time away from students, household duties and responsibilities for 3 days straight. Time to collaborate with colleague for several hours straight uninterrupted

The added component of the monthly meetings of the writing support group worked well for the members from C College as they shared a common academic background and were able to read and respond to colleague’s work. This helped the participants to see what colleagues were doing and offer encouragement, support and ideas to help in the development of their work. This sharing also helped participants to see how others worked at the processes of writing and publishing. Many of the participants appreciated the accountability that the group format provided. Although there was no external pressure from the group, the thought of not being prepared provided intrinsic motivation and helped the members remain on task.

Discussion

The two models presented here are very different, but with similar goals and encouraging outcomes. B State’s model was a top-down approach where administration solicited participants, assigned mentors and opened the program up to all schools in the College. C College’s model was a bottom-up approach where the members of the faculty from only one school in the College requested support from their dean. In both cases, the realization that faculty members need collegial support to increase scholarly productivity and overcome factors impeding writing was evident at both the faculty and the administrative level. Both Colleges were willing to invest in helping the writing process and received a great return on a modest monetary investment.

As participants in writing retreats and support groups the authors appreciated the opportunities to address the challenges of lack of time, lack of momentum, and lack of framework or structure. The experience of uninterrupted time devoted to scholarly writing when on retreat is extremely valuable. We have more confidence in our abilities as writers, see writing as a worthwhile endeavor and have made writing for publication a regular part of academic life since participating in the support groups, mentoring, and writing retreats.

Feedback from other participants was positive as well and the number of scholarly works produced was notable. It is interesting to note that the number of scholarly works produced at the C retreat is similar to the number of scholarly works produced during the academic year by the support group.

The B State College writing retreat is not being offered in 2009 due to financial constraints; however the success of the retreat has caused B State to realize the importance of continuing the culture of writing and scholarship. Writing support groups have been established through a faculty development initiative and relationships established through mentoring are also continuing. Perhaps the writing retreat will return in the future. There is a movement under way to reestablish the writing retreat in a different format or location in order to work within the current financial constraints. It would be interesting to uncover the success of the B State participants in absence of the writing retreat.

Although no control group was established it is illustrated here that the writing support group, mentoring, and writing retreats assisted in scholarly development of faculty. It would be interesting to compare the scholarly production of faculty at institutions that do not have support groups, mentoring, or writing retreats. Future studies could be done to determine the most productive and cost effective methods of support for faculty.

Conclusions

Publish or perish is the mantra in higher education yet finding time, staying motivated, and being successful as a writer are challenges to academic publishing. The responsibilities of teaching and service along with personal responsibilities make research and publication difficult for many faculty members in higher education. Writing support groups, mentoring and follow up writing retreats are successful ways to meet the challenges and make scholarship a vibrant piece of an academic career. It would seem to be positive policy on the part of an institute of higher education to offer such support. The importance of faculty and administration recognizing the problem and committing to work towards solutions is noteworthy. Working together, in whatever form, helps to establish a learning community with a common goal and helps ease the pressure to publish in higher education.

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