

WORKSHOPS FOR HISPANIC GRADUATE STUDENTS

DEVELOPING GRADUATE STUDENT WORKSHOPS AT A PREDOMINANTLY HISPANIC SERVING INSTITUTION

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Abstract

This study examines the pre-test and post-test outcomes of newly developed graduate student workshops covering topics in the area of writing and research. A total of two (2) workshops were completed by 102 graduate students at a predominantly Hispanic serving institution in the southeastern United States. T-test analyses indicated that there was a combined significant difference between pre-test and post-test outcomes, $t(101) = -9.63, p < .001$, suggesting that both workshops were effective in increasing graduate students' knowledge base.

Keywords: Graduate Students, Hispanic Serving Institutions, Student Support

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Educational attainment remains markedly low for the population of Hispanic students, with only 5.3% of Hispanic residents earning postbaccalaureate degrees compared to 11.8% for all residents (United States Census, 2017). In addition, Hispanic students are one of the minority groups least likely to complete graduate degrees (Trent et al., 2020). It is well documented that institutions of higher education in the United States face challenges related to graduate student recruitment, retention, persistence, and attrition (Gardner, 2009; Terrell et al., 2012). Universities that serve graduate students from predominantly Hispanic backgrounds face additional challenges to meet the unique needs of the student body. These universities are tasked with providing support for learners whose English is their second language, finding strategies to offset the lack of family support or knowledge, and offering additional academic support services (Flink, 2018).

According to Quarterman (2008), the most prevalent themes in the retention of culturally and linguistically diverse graduate students center around strategies to ensure that graduate students attain mastery of rudimentary subject matter. Providing targeted services and supports to graduate students to ensure student success has been found effective, especially in institutions that serve culturally and linguistically diverse students. Services such as writing and research assistance via workshops and seminars are methods to assist graduate students in successfully completing their program of study (Quarterman, 2008), and lead to higher graduate degree completion rates. Research has identified that best practices in graduate student services include intensive writing and research support; a conducive and reliable place for graduate students to work; access to digital tools that facilitate collaboration and discussion; and centralizing and exposing students to new services, programs, and content (Dabbagh & Fake, 2017; Kinzie & Hurtado, 2017).

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To address the retention and persistence issues at a predominantly Hispanic serving institution in the southeastern region of the United States, a series of workshops were developed in alignment with best practices (e.g., focus specifically on research and writing as rudimentary skills), as well as the needs reported by graduate students and faculty. The purpose of this study was to test the pre-test and post-test outcomes of these newly developed graduate student workshops covering topics in the area of writing and research.

Workshop Development and Design

The purpose of creating graduate student workshops was to increase knowledge about writing and research at the graduate level ultimately leading to higher retention, persistence, and lower attrition rates. An initial needs assessment was conducted to gather feedback from students and faculty regarding areas of need and gaps in knowledge. The results of the needs assessment identified the following topics: a) writing research papers, b) finding research opportunities, c) using APA formatting, d) navigating the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process, and e) preparing for a job after graduation. These results guided the development of a curriculum and workshop schedule for the Summer and Fall 2020 semesters.

For the purpose of this study, two workshops were examined: *Introduction to Literature Reviews* and *Professional Writing and APA Formatting*. Both workshops were created on the learning management system Blackboard and included the following: a pre-test, a recorded closed-captioned presentation using Panopto, a PowerPoint presentation in accessible PDF format, an online assignment, additional resources, and a post-test. In addition, aligning with the standards put forth by the Quality Matters Higher Education Rubric, Sixth Edition (2018), the workshop included a brief overview of the workshop, measurable learning outcomes or competencies (e.g., State the difference between systematic and narrative literature reviews), and

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directions for how to navigate the workshop (e.g., Step 1: Complete Pre-Test; Step 2: Review recording and PowerPoint slides).

The *Introduction to Literature Reviews* workshop defined literature reviews, compared and contrasted the different types of literature reviews, described how to properly cite primary sources, and outlined the steps necessary to prepare for writing a literature review. In addition, scholarly articles about the literature review process for novice students were provided for download and review. The assignment in the workshop included two questions. Each question presented three or four examples of information gathered from published work. Students were then asked to summarize the information in one or two sentences. The pre-test and the post-test in the workshop were the same, with the exception of demographic data only collected in the pre-test (i.e. age range, gender, and ethnicity). The pre-test and post-test consisted of three multiple choice questions, one true or false question, two matching questions, and two short answer questions.

The *Professional Writing and APA Formatting* workshop discussed the basic tenants of professional writing, briefly described the APA guidelines, differentiated between primary and secondary sources, gave examples of how to create in-text citations and references, and outlined the formatting procedures for professional papers. In addition, sample formatting examples were provided for professional papers as well as dissertations. There was a total of three assignments in this workshop: APA citation practice, primary versus secondary sources practice, and professional writing practice. In the APA citation assignment, students were given an article in accessible PDF format and asked to create an in-text citation as well as a full reference. In the primary versus secondary sources assignment, students were provided with four examples and asked to identify each as a primary or secondary source. Then, the students were given an in-text

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example of summarizing results from a primary source and asked to explain their answer. The professional writing assignment included a short writing sample, which students were asked to revise using concise, objective language. The pre-test and post-test consisted of three multiple choice questions, two true or false questions, one matching question, and one short answer question.

The students participating in the pilot testing were given access to the workshops on Blackboard at the beginning of the semester and were able to complete them at their own pace. Students were not required to complete the workshop in one sitting.

Method

Setting

This study took place in a predominantly Hispanic serving private, non-profit institution in the southeastern region of the United States. The institution serves approximately 657 graduate students, of which 81% report as Hispanic and low-income. Furthermore, the institution has identified the following gaps and needs specifically related to graduate student education: a) high poverty/low income; b) low educational attainment; c) financial burden of graduate education and limited financial literacy; d) limited research skills; e) restrictive schedules, balancing full-time employment, family responsibilities, and academics; and f) limited English language skills.

Population

The population examined in this study included graduate level students, both master's and doctoral level, currently enrolled at the institution. Originally, the sample was intended to be recruited by hosting in-person workshops during times when graduate students were generally on campus. Due to the effects of COVID-19, the sample was recruited by embedding the online

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workshops into a course as an assignment. This method of recruitment was used to maximize the number of students participating in the workshops in an online atmosphere. The pre-test and the post-test needed to be completed to compare the data, so even attending a synchronous online workshop, students may have missed the beginning or end, leading to missing data.

Sample

A total of 102 participants completed the workshop, of which 97 (95%) were female and 5 (5%) were male. The demographic breakdown of the participants included 74 (73%) Hispanic, 15 (15%) Caucasian, 11 (11%) African American, and two (1%) Asian. Refer to Table 1 for the age distribution of the sample.

Table 1

Age Distribution of Sample

| Age Range | Frequency |
|-----------|-----------|
| 18-24 | 17 |
| 25-29 | 54 |
| 30-34 | 25 |
| 35-39 | 2 |
| 40-44 | 2 |
| 45-49 | 2 |

Data Collection

Data were collected through a pre-test and post-test design. Students were instructed to complete the pre-test prior to beginning the workshop and complete the post-test after the workshop was concluded. Both the pre-test and post-test had the same questions, except for demographic questions (i.e. gender, age, and ethnicity) which were only present on the pre-test. Because the workshop was an assignment and required proof of completion, some students were prompted via e-mail if parts of the workshop were incomplete (e.g., pre-test). Initial data were

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collected through Blackboard and then transferred to the Smartsheet interface to remove identifiers and create student codes.

Data Analysis

The data were examined first for any missing points. Out of the 102 participants, only one did not complete both tests (pre- and post-), leaving a total of 101 data points to be analyzed. Then, a box plot was created using descriptive statistics in the SPSS v 23.0 program to test for outliers. Next, normality of the data distribution was reviewed by creating histograms for each group. Upon determining there were no outliers in the dataset and the assumption of normality was not violated, an initial paired samples t-test was run on 101 data points. Using a paired-samples t-test allowed the researchers to examine whether there were mean differences between the matched pairs of test scores. Follow up paired samples t-test analyses were then conducted on each set of workshop data separately to determine if there were specific mean differences in each group.

Results

The results of the combined pre-tests ($M = 62.35$, $SD = 19.5$) and post-tests ($M = 75.35$, $SD = 13$) indicated that there was a significant increase in knowledge about the two workshop topics, $t(101) = -9.63$, $p < .001$. Further analysis of the results of the *Introduction to Literature Reviews* pre-test ($M = 50$, $SD = 14.6$) and post-test ($M = 65.98$, $SD = 9.5$) demonstrated a significant difference in means, $t(55) = -8.6$, $p < .001$. Similarly, the results of the *Professional Writing and APA Style* pre-test ($M = 78.13$, $SD = 12.5$) and post-test ($M = 86.93$, $SD = 4.7$) indicated a significant difference in means, $t(43) = -4.89$, $p < .001$. The results of the t-tests demonstrated that both workshops were effective in increasing graduate students' knowledge base.

Discussion

This study focused on designing and piloting two workshops that assisted graduate students with attaining mastery of topics related to research and writing skills. Like previous literature on best practices suggested (e.g., Quarterman, 2008), the workshops demonstrated effectiveness in increasing knowledge for the participants in the study. However, there were several limitations to this study, beginning with the small sample size. Follow up studies should aim to gather data from the entire population at the university ($n = 657$) to provide further insight. In addition to small sample size, all graduate students (master's and doctoral) were aggregated in this study. It is possible that doctoral level students receive more research training, therefore, results with just the doctoral population may differ from those results found with master's level students. Another limitation in this study was that, due to the effects of COVID-19, all workshops were only offered online as a course assignment. Upon return to campus, future research could examine the online workshops data versus face-to-face workshops data to check for any significant differences. The final limitation was that the post-test was only given at one checkpoint. Follow up studies to see if knowledge on the subjects were retained and generalized could provide more insight on where further instruction is needed.

Though this was a preliminary study as graduate student workshops were being piloted, the results assisted with exploring what strategies should be used for future implementation. The use of a workshop as a course assignment was beneficial to both the faculty and graduate students as the topics supplemented the course content and materials. Moving forward, the researchers will continue to work closely with faculty to develop workshops that align with the knowledge learned in the course. The original concept of the workshops was to make them voluntary, however, utilizing them as a mandatory assignment allowed students to participate in

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an activity they otherwise would have overlooked. Some students reported having a knowledge gap of which they were unaware, and the workshop filled that gap. This was especially prevalent in deciphering the difference between primary and secondary sources in research. The role of the graduate level students in their education typically includes seeking out the information necessary to succeed, however, research has demonstrated that having a mentor or guide benefits Hispanic graduate students (Castro Samayoa, 2018). Utilizing mentors in the future to encourage students to attend workshops could be a more feasible and sustainable option for the university.

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