FWI Funding Statement

Name: Dr. Nathan J. Cooper, C.Psych.
Faculty/Area: Student Wellness Centre
Project title: Graduate Writing Circles

Project summary:

Graduate Writing Circles has been an excellent pilot project and learning experience. The project has lead to a number of key collaborations with students and staff. The key staff collaboration has been the very generous support of the School of Graduate Studies including the Dean Dr. Allison Sekuler and more specifically Peter Self, Associate Dean of Graduate Student Life. The support of the School of Graduate Studies was realized most tangibly in the very capable ideas and administration of Andrea Cole. I can certainly say that without Andrea Cole the Graduate Writing Circles project would not have been the same. Student collaboration has also been a key facet of the project as student volunteers Jennifer Fazzari, Amy Hector, Savitri Jetoo, and Caroline Shang have come forward from a variety of faculties to assist with organizing and implementing writing circles for their peers. A group that began with 10-15 now has a consistent attendance of six students that meet bi-weekly to spend time encouraging, problem solving, and writing together. This group is so bonded and committed that I am certain they will continue beyond the pilot project. The group counts among their successes attrition due to graduation of two members.

The Graduate Writing Circles pilot was not designed with research in mind. As such students have not encountered a research opportunity apart from the quantitative and qualitative data that we have received as feedback from students who have participated in the workshop series and in the peer lead writing circles. Serving in a leadership role for their peers has provided a unique professional development opportunity for the graduate students that have taken part in the project. I believe they have gained skills in facilitation and a greater understanding of how to manage and motivate a group. They all noted that they have benefited in their own writing as well because they have had opportunity to practice what they teach.

As Graduate Writing Circles has developed and continued over the past 12 months it is evident that there is a need for a graduate writing centre. All other research institutions of our size or larger are equipped with a physical location and dedicated staff person to coordinate workshops and provide one on one coaching for graduate student writing. While this is not a project that has taken shape as yet it is a recommendation of our group that McMaster consider a writing centre, and possibly a writing centre specifically for graduate students, as an important goal for future development.

The future of Graduate Writing Circles lies with the School of Graduate Studies and will be dependent on funding. I believe there is interest in continuing the project as it is consistent with some of the directions that were underway already. The School of Graduate Studies collaborated with MIETL who had contacted Marcia Johnson from New Zealand to speak on the topic of writing circles. Andrea Cole
was continuing that work as a follow up to the informal needs assessment at the time that the Graduate Writing Circles grant was awarded. It would be excellent to see Graduate Writing Circles develop into a Graduate Writing Centre with a mission for continued workshop series, peer facilitated writing circles, and one on one writing support.

With every project there are challenges. The most significant challenge in this case was generating buy in and interest among graduate students. While there was a good showing for the speaker series events with an average of 20-30 individuals at each monthly workshop, it was difficult to cultivate more regular participation in the writing circles. If there were no restrictions on time or funds I would have spent more time cultivating relationships with Graduate Chairs on an individual or group basis to generate more buy in from individuals who would be absolutely key in promoting writing circles.

Graduate Writing Circles has been a tremendous opportunity for collaboration. The relationship with Student Success Centre will not be ongoing due to the fact that future volunteers will not be recruited, selected, or trained via the Student Success Leader program. As a program our greatest response to volunteer recruitment came from contacting students directly via the School of Graduate Studies weekly email communication. The collaboration between the Student Wellness Centre and the School of Graduate Studies is likely to be ongoing though in a more informal fashion. Andrea Cole did an excellent job of generating additional collaborators from MIETL and the Library to serve as part of the monthly workshop series. More information about the workshop titles, facilitators, and attendance is included as an appendix to this submission.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to participate in the Forward With Integrity process. I have very much appreciated the opportunity to take up a leadership role and collaborate with dedicated colleagues and students to bring about opportunities to advance scholarship at this institution.

Sincerely,

Dr. Nathan J. Cooper
Assistant Professor (Part Time)
Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Neurosciences
Psychologist
Student Wellness Centre
McMaster University, MUSC B 106
Hamilton, Ontario  L8S 4S4

905-525-9140 ext. 23034
905-546-1663 (Fax)
ncooper@mcmaster.ca
Grad Writing Workshops Delivered June 2013– Feb 2014

Jan 29, 2014 Grad Writing for Non-Native Speakers of English
Attendees: 24

Feb 28, 2014 Planning For Effective Writing
Attendees: 23

Jan 22, 2014 Overview of Library Archives
Attendees: 2 (not so much demand for this topic, as it turns out)

Jan 20, 2014 Intro to McMaster Libraries for New Graduate Students
Attendees: 9 (note: 5 were January starts)

Jan 20, 2014 Intro to Citation Management for Graduate Students
Attendees: 18

Nov 27, 2013 Preventing Procrastination
Attendees: 26

Nov 13, 2013 Advanced Library Research Skills & Citation Management for Graduate Students in Science and Engineering
Attendees: 17

Nov 6, 2013 Advanced Library Research Skills & Citation Management for Graduate Students in the Social Sciences and Humanities
Attendees: 18

Oct 23, 2013 Kickstarting Your Grad Writing Project
Cancelled due to facilitator unforeseen circumstance (26 students had registered)

July 25, 2013 Planning for Effective Grad Writing
Attendees: 17

June 27, 2013 Finding Flow
Attendees: 28

Total = 154 (not analyzed for unique individuals)