Guest Column: See What a Faculty Writing Group Can Do For You

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Multiple studies have pointed to benefits of faculty writing groups, with at least one study finding that faculty members' publication rates doubled after they began participating in writing groups.

These groups tend to be evaluated positively by participants, and they often offer additional benefits, such as promoting work-life balance.

Given this research, I organized our first faculty writing group launch at the UA last spring to facilitate the formation of writing accountability groups. Here are a couple of comments from anonymous evaluations by faculty participants:

- "This program made a big difference for me. It was instrumental in the final stage of completing my manuscript, keeping me on track, focused and productive."
- "I enjoyed and continue to enjoy the experience — it was a good kick start to continuous rather than binge writing for me. I made more progress this past semester than the three previous semesters combined."

I hope you can join us for the fall faculty writing group launch on Sept. 11 from 12-1:30 p.m. at the Henry Koffler Building, Room 216. An RSVP [1] is required.

Writing accountability groups and why they work

Accountability groups are not your traditional writing groups. In traditional writing groups, people read each other’s work and provide substantive feedback. These can be great if you primarily need feedback, but they also can be time consuming.

Accountability groups do not provide substantive feedback, but rather use principles of motivation, goal setting and social support to help faculty maintain good writing habits and make consistent progress.

Accountability groups are time-efficient and advocated by experts. The expectation is for groups to meet one hour every other week, during which time members set goals and commit to completing them before the next meeting. They also report to the group on their progress on previously set goals.
One reason writing accountability groups are effective is because of their focus on goal-setting. Setting goals for a two-week period inherently breaks down larger project goals such as completing a journal manuscript or grant proposal into smaller achievable goals like running statistical analysis or creating a budget. This process is called proximal goal setting.

Research finds that proximal goal setting enhances motivation, perceptions of self-efficacy, self-satisfaction and task persistence. When all the sequential components of a project seem doable, we are more likely to undertake a project and stick with it.

Writing a grant proposal, for example, may seem too daunting, which can lead to procrastination. But creating a budget for the proposal seems much more manageable and easier to start and complete. Proximal goal setting promotes continual incremental progress, and the goals don't even have to include writing per se just something that moves you toward a finished project.

Another reason accountability groups work: We are more likely to achieve goals and stick to deadlines if we tell others.

An accountability group provides a constructive source of social pressure. If goals are not met, the group gives you a venue to discuss your challenges and seek advice. You will also get others' insights about writing challenges and behaviors that hinder productivity, as well as ideas to address these issues.

The faculty writing group launch on Sept. 11

While there is considerable evidence that writing accountability groups work, there is far less scholarship on how to effectively facilitate the formation of faculty writing groups.

The spring 2015 launch was a learning experience for me as well as the participants. Over 40 faculty RSVP'd to the writing group launch, and after the semester ended, I sent those who RSVP'd an anonymous evaluation, which 30 people completed.

Of those, 24, or 80 percent, sustained participation throughout the spring semester. Those who didn't sustain participation most commonly cited difficulty finding a time that worked for everyone and lack of sustained participation from other group members as challenges. Of the 24 who participated regularly, 21, or 88 percent, felt the writing group was worth their time.

There are two major improvements planned for the fall launch based on the evaluations. First, I ask for availability times in the RSVP and will consider these during the matching process. Common availability times for group members will be provided to each group to streamline the process of finding a time that works for everyone.

Second, I will assign more people to each group in case some people drop out, so that the remaining group will still be large enough to sustain.

In the spring launch, participants were grouped with faculty outside of their department, but ideally in related fields, and this will remain the same for the fall launch. Several evaluators said they appreciated not being grouped with others from their own department as it made it easier to talk candidly about challenges.
However, problems sometimes arose when people were matched with colleagues too far outside their positions or disciplines. Therefore, I hope to get a larger turnout at the fall launch in order to have a larger pool from which to draw matches.

I am grateful to everyone who provided feedback about the spring launch. The feedback gave important insights on how these groups could be more effective.

As a final note, this year, another type of writing group – a Proposal Writing Group – is being offered to a limited number of participants and will be facilitated by Research Development Services[2]. Learn more about the Writing Accountability Group and Proposal Writing Group here[3].

RSVP here[4] for the fall faculty writing group launch on Friday, Sept. 11 at 12 p.m. Also, don’t forget to join us for Publish, Not Perish[5] on Sept. 3 at 3:30 p.m. for research-based tips to increase your productivity.

Please email me at lahunter@email.arizona.edu[6] if you have any questions, concerns or additional feedback.

Laura Hunter is the program and research manager in the Office of the Provost.

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