

Title: Writing Mentorship for First-Generation Latina/o Master's Students

Author/Participants: Magdalena L. Barrera, Associate Professor, Mexican American Studies

Date: October 30, 2014

Project abstract: First-generation Latina/o graduate students grapple with significant academic writing anxieties. In order to foster a positive writing culture for graduate students in my department, I will design and lead monthly workshops and weekly clinics to improve technical writing skills and help students overcome psychological barriers to productive writing.

Project Background/Significance: At SJSU, more than half of our diverse student population constitutes the first in their families to pursue degrees in higher education. In the department of Mexican American Studies (MAS)—the oldest Chicano Studies master's program in the country—this number is 100%. Latina/o students embark on the M.A. in MAS with a great deal of enthusiasm and personal commitment to completing the degree; yet, at the same time, they carry within an educational legacy of feeling disempowered and marginalized as students of color, which often impedes their abilities to come into their own as scholarly writers who have new and important perspectives to share.

Although the needs of first-generation students of color are becoming all the more critical for faculty to address in the classroom, the demands of full-time course load and the pace of the semester often make it a challenge to sharpen writing skills and address deep anxieties in a hands-on way during class. As a result, my MAS colleagues and I have sought opportunities outside of the classroom to foster graduate student success. For example, in August, I organized new graduate student workshops that covered several critical areas in which past and current students repeatedly have asked for guidance, including: how to find one's intellectual focus; strategies for time management and keeping up with assignments; how to read effectively and prepare for class discussion at the master's level; using library resources and research databases; and the process of completing a thesis or project in our program.

The orientation sessions I assembled were inspired in part by the work of a former department colleague, Dr. Genevieve Negron-Gonzales, who facilitated three intensive writing workshops for MAS graduate students in the summer of 2012; when I returned to SJSU from a research fellowship in Fall 2012, she and I offered continued writing mentorship through biweekly drop-in clinics for those who needed support for their in-progress writings. The workshops and clinics were a great success; students were excited to not only receive nuts-and-bolts writing support, but also to have a space where they could acknowledge the psychological barriers that arise during the writing process. I now would like to reestablish this writing mentorship during the academic year in order to develop a positive writing culture among MAS graduate students.

Goals of the Grant: (Circle all that apply.)

- a. Assess and reorganize the existing writing support services at SJSU;
- b. Enable more data-based decision-making about student retention and graduation at SJSU;
- c. **Develop, implement, and integrate proactive writing strategies;** or
- d. **Change the SJSU writing culture from a policy-driven approach to an action-oriented approach.**

Literature Review: I am in the initial stages of a research project that explores the experiences of first-generation graduate students of color. I have been surprised to discover that within the scholarship of teaching and pedagogy, very little has been written about working with first-generation students of color enrolled in Master's programs (most articles focus on doctoral students). The single publication that addresses writing mentorship for Master's students is one authored by my above-mentioned colleague Negron-Gonzales, in which she outlines the writing workshops she facilitated for MAS in 2012. She discovered that "grounding writing *skills* in an honest conversation about writing *anxieties* allowed students to identify these insecurities as such—anxieties that can be managed" ("The Power of the Pen," *Journal of Latinos and Education* 13:1, 66; emphasis in the original).

In addition to Negron-Gonzales' work, I plan to draw insights and adapt activities from several guides intended to help advanced doctoral students and junior faculty confront psychological writing barriers. These include Patricia Goodson's *Becoming an Academic Writer* (2013), Wendy Belcher's *Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks* (2009), Paul Silvia's *How to Write A Lot* (2007), and Robert Boice's *Professors as Writers* (1990). I also will use technical guides such as John Swales' *Academic Writing for Graduate Students* (2012), Nigel Caplan's *Grammar Choices for Graduate and Professional Writers* (2012), and Claire Cook's *Line by Line: How to Edit Your Own Writing* (1985).

Project Description: My project revives a three-part writing workshop, held once in Summer 2012; integrates them into the fabric of the semester (Spring 2015); and adds simultaneous weekly writing clinics. The goal is to foster a stronger, more positive writing culture for MAS graduate students and to provide writing mentorship and modeling from a faculty member.

In this project, I will lead three focused monthly workshops on the following topics: crafting an analytical argument; using secondary sources; and a review of basic grammar and style. Each workshop will feature time for students to discuss how they feel about writing; by acknowledging their anxieties, students will be in a better position to absorb the practical and technical writing advice shared in each workshop.

I also will host weekly writing clinics to complement the three monthly workshops. The clinics will have open, drop-in hours; students can bring a work in-progress for hands-on guidance and feedback from me. Moreover, the clinics will function as a department-wide writing "salon"; students will be encouraged to simply come by and make writing progress as a community. In other words, students do not need to have a writing problem to benefit from the clinics; they will view writing not as something they should struggle with in isolation, but instead as a social activity that becomes less intimidating when it is regularly scheduled.

Project Method/Design: My project will begin in January 2015. During week one of the semester, I will convene a brief meeting with interested students to get their ideas and feedback for topics they hope to see addressed during the monthly workshops. During the initial weeks of the semester, I also will review the literature listed above, assembling best practices and activities to be integrated into each workshop.

The monthly workshops will each be approximately a half-day long. I will assign to students a one or two readings related to each workshop theme, as well as questions that will help them

prepare for the workshops. Each workshop will be a mix of discussion, in-person writing and editing activities, and brief lectures/talks on various aspects of writing. Although each workshop will build on the previous one(s), students can attend individual sessions. Nevertheless, the general idea is that by May, when students are writing final essays in their courses and/or preparing to begin thesis work over the summer, they will feel more empowered as writers and have sharper technical writing skills.

Meanwhile, the weekly clinics will not have an agenda; rather, students can drop in to receive support with a current piece of writing. Students (and faculty colleagues) will be welcome to simply bring their laptops and research materials for a communal writing atmosphere.

All workshops and clinics will be held in our department’s conference room, which seats ~10 people and features a large white board and the ability to project from a laptop.

Project Timeline:

<i>Date</i>	<i>Activity</i>
Late January – Early February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Check in with students on themes and issues of upcoming workshops ▪ Collect readings and materials to be shared with the group
February 13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Workshop 1, “Crafting an Analytical Argument”
March 13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Workshop 2, “Using Secondary Sources and Strengthening Structure”
April 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Workshop 3, “Grammar and Style 101”
Fridays (ongoing throughout Spring 2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Weekly writing clinics

Necessary Expenses: Expenses for this project are minimal. I estimate that \$200 will cover photocopied readings and workshop materials/handouts.

Potential Contribution for Improvement of Student Success: This project will provide SJSU with a model for supporting a critical segment of our graduate student population (first-generation master’s students of color). As Negron-Gonzalez powerfully explains, “They have, despite all odds, emerged from an educational system that was not intended to support their development as thinkers, scholars, and intellectuals. Not only do many lack formal training in writing, but they are picking up the pen after years of being systematically silenced, told that they are not smart, that they have nothing to contribute, that they are not bound for success” (69). My proposal not only challenges this harmful legacy, but also expands the writing help currently available to students, which primarily targets undergraduates. Further, through openly acknowledging the impact of writing anxieties, it provides an opportunity for students to develop a nuanced understanding of they may have internalized negative messages throughout their educational journeys to SJSU. I have no doubt that it will strengthen the graduation and retention rates of students in my department.