
Time to Write

Letters & Science Program in Writing Across the Curriculum
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The Undergraduate Writing Fellows: Teaching Writing And Much More

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Excellence Project

What is a Writing Fellow? Simply put, she or he is an undergraduate with unusually fine writing skills, selected through a competitive process from a large pool of applicants.

During their first semester as Writing Fellows, students take a special course on techniques for improving the prose of other undergraduates. At the same time, they are assigned to work with a faculty member who is teaching a writing-intensive or Communications-B writing course. The Writing Fellow works closely with this professor in reading student drafts for assignments in the course, offering comments and meeting with class members to suggest ways to improve their written work.

After the initial semester of training, Writing Fellows continue to work in this capacity, earning an honorarium of \$700 each time they do so.

The results of the 1997-98 Writing Fellows Program have surpassed even our most optimistic expectations. We were delighted from the outset by the enthusiastic support the program has received.

Dean Phillip Certain was extraordinarily generous in provid-

ing funds to launch the program as part of the L&S Pathways to Excellence Project. Brad Hughes of the L&S Writing Center devoted an incredible number of hours to planning and managing the program, aided by Jean Lutes, who did much of the day-to-day work needed to make this dream a reality. A dozen faculty members offered to

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work with Writing Fellows even though neither they nor the students knew quite what would be involved.

Most strikingly, in our very first year of trying to recruit Writing Fellows, we received nearly 60 applications from undergraduates eager to take on this unusual challenge, and from this pool we selected 14 very talented students as our first class of Writing Fellows.

Two semesters later, we could not be more pleased with the results. Our hope was that the Writing Fellows would benefit everyone involved: faculty members would gain important assistance in

teaching writing; undergraduates in writing-intensive classes would gain an extra pair of eyes to read and evaluate their work; and the Writing Fellows would gain a unique opportunity to learn by teaching. All these hopes were realized.

Professor Roberta Hill of American Indian Studies was typical in reporting that papers in her class were "much better . . . far more focused, supported with evidence, and expressive."

Undergraduates in courses with Writing Fellows expressed great enthusiasm for what they learned. A typical comment was that the Writing Fellow "dealt specifically with what I needed help with in my paper. In conference, he went into more detail and together we exchanged fantastic ideas."

And the Writing Fellows themselves unanimously declared that the program had changed the whole way they approached UW-Madison. Trevon Logan, an Economics major, wrote that "Being a Writing Fellow has allowed me to shrink the campus by making

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connections with faculty I otherwise would not have known. I feel that I am finally able to make a significant contribution to the academic life here at the UW. It is important to let undergraduates assume positions of leadership on campus; I have developed a new respect for the art of teaching. I can truly say that being a Writing Fellow has been the major factor in my decision to attend graduate school."

As Logan's comments suggest, the Writing Fellows Program in fact serves much larger goals than just improving the instruction of writing. No less important is the program's ability to demonstrate to faculty and students alike that undergraduates are capable of playing much more significant, more fully empowered roles in the educational mission of the university.

The program is as much about teaching leadership as it is about teaching writing. Undergraduates who work with the Writing Fellows learn what students are capable of accomplishing when they take themselves seriously.

Professors who work with Writing Fellows learn that undergraduates can be genuine partners in the teaching enterprise in ways we might not otherwise imagine.

Like the other Pathways to Excellence programs with which it is allied, the Writing Fellows Program is ultimately about changing the culture of undergraduate education at UW-Madison.

Comments from Faculty and Students about the Fall 1997 Writing Fellows Program

"In a writing-intensive course with thirty students writing every week, I could never have found the time to read drafts with the care that my Writing Fellows did. Their written responses to student writing were always encouraging and constructively critical. I am confident that the enrolled students benefited substantially from all the time and hard work the Writing Fellows put in on their behalf. And the Fellows themselves -- bright, conscientious, eager to learn, and anxious to perform well -- were a delight to work with."

-- Prof. Lynn Keller, English 633

"I really liked working with my Writing Fellow. Knowing that my draft wasn't my final draft gave me the confidence to really write what I wanted to. Her help gave me the ability to refine my own ideas."

-- Sophomore, History 200

"The Writing Fellows program has been the most rewarding and challenging experience of my college career. I have explored new capacities within myself for analyzing and thinking about writing as well as tutoring. ... I have received resounding praise for the program from all my students. I think it has impressed upon them and me the importance of excellent writing."

-- Erin Hanusa, Writing Fellow

Do you want to learn more about--

- ◆ requesting Writing Fellows for your course?
- ◆ recommending students to be Writing Fellows?
- ◆ working for the long-term growth of the WF Program?

Contact-- Brad Hughes, Director, Writing Fellows Program
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Look at our Website-- www.wisc.edu/writing
click on "Writing Fellows Program"

Time to Write

- Time to Write is the newsletter of the College of Letters & Science Program in Writing
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Redesigning *Survey of Sociology* as a Comm-B Course

Gerald Marwell, *Sociology*

To help the Sociology department meet the new Communications-B requirement, I offered to turn our required *Survey of Sociology* (Sociology 210), which I had been teaching, into a lecture-discussion course with intensive writing. I signed on because I believe that the more students do actively, including writing, the more they learn.

The course now involves one "power" lecture to 150 or 180 students per week. Ten or twelve sections of 15 students each meet for two 50-minute sessions a week, and each TA is assigned two sections. The TAs and I meet as a group after lecture every week, and I am responsible for attending some of their sections and periodically checking their grading, as well as doing the lectures and course planning. The students read six books totaling approximately 1200 pages.

The key to my alternative was making TAs the "teachers" of the writing part of the course. Fortunately for our department, we have wonderful graduate students. They are mostly excellent and enthusiastic teachers. I believe that they are at least as able to help students with their writing as most of our faculty. Moreover, the department agreed that my writing-intensive course would be given the very best TAs available, and has kept its promise. Some of my first TAs had already been lecturers. Another had won a campus-wide award.

To empower my TAs, they have total grading responsibility, they may alter many aspects of the course to fit their own tastes, and I never refer to them as TAs, but always call them the "instructors." Furthermore, I go out of my way to tell the undergraduates that the department would be happy to assign each of these instructors to teach his or her own class.

Although there are several writing components to the course, the key innovation is probably the linked "Book Summary and Critique" and "Research Report" assignments, which involve rewriting, library research and conferences with the instructor.

In consultation with me, each instructor selects five serious research monographs of about 200 pages which can be used by his or her students for the purposes of these two assignments (the book lists change every semester to prevent plagiarism). The "Summary and Critique" students write is about 7 pages long and includes:

- (1) A short summary of the book consisting of
 - a. a presentation of the major theoretical points

- b. a summary of the author's hypotheses and conclusions
 - c. a description of the author's methodology

- (2) Some attention to those questions below that are applicable
 - a. What questions is the author attempting to address?
 - b. How appropriate is the methodology?
 - c. Do the author's conclusions follow from the data? If not, why? Could other conclusions be drawn?

- (3) Lastly, each student must select a question raised by her/his research monograph, upon which the student would like to do further research. One question only should be selected.

Because students often have difficulty with this third step of the assignment, and because it is critical for the next assignment that they come up with a good question for further research, students are required to have indi-

vidual conferences with their instructors after handing in this report, and are allowed to rewrite the paper. The papers are also distributed among other members of the class for peer review.

When the students hand in the rewritten paper, they must also include an additional section in which they report the results of their

preliminary library search for their "Research Report" (at least five outside sources relevant to the student's research question). Students in each discussion section are trained at the library on the use of *Sociological Abstracts* and *Madcat*.

The "Research Report" is a 4-6 page paper in which students use their outside research (along with any other readings from the course) and relate what they have read back to the book that they have summarized and critiqued. They should answer questions such as:

- a. How have the outside researchers investigated the subject?
- b. Do you find any of the methods or theories used by the outside researchers better or worse than the original book?
- c. What conclusions do the outside researchers draw?
- d. How do the conclusions compare with the original book?
- e. What makes this question and analysis *sociological*?

Although they complain about the amount of work and reading involved, students report that they love this course and their instructors.

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FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Brownbag Workshops on Teaching with Writing

The L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum invites faculty and instructional staff to our fall 1998 brownbag workshops on teaching with writing.

“Designing and Teaching a Communications-B or Writing-Intensive Course”

Friday, September 25, 12:15 - 1:30 p.m., 7191 Helen C. White Hall.

Are you currently teaching a Communications-B or Writing-Intensive course? Preparing to teach one? Thinking about proposing one? Join us for a discussion of how to design effective Comm-B and Writing-Intensive courses-- courses that will help students learn course content and improve their writing abilities. This workshop will focus on integrating writing into course material, designing effective writing assignments, and coaching students to succeed with writing. Professors Lynn Keller, English, and Adam Gamoran, Sociology, will share wisdom they've gained from teaching recent Comm-B and Writing-Intensive courses.

“Responding to Student Writing”

Friday, October 16, 12:15 - 1:30 p.m., 7191 Helen C. White Hall.

Dreading that pile of student papers? Not sure that the time you put into grading pays off? Come to this workshop and learn new ways to respond to student writing and to help students improve as writers. Professors Chuck Cohen, History, and Linda Hunter, African Languages and Literature, will share their strategies for giving constructive feedback and for dealing with the paper load.

Although advance registration isn't required for these workshops, if you're planning to attend we'd appreciate your registering so that we can have enough handouts. For more information, or to register for either workshop, contact Brad Hughes, Director of the L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum: 263-3823 or bthughes@facstaff.wisc.edu.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

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If you would like us to add a colleague's name to our mailing list or to remove yours, just complete this sheet and send it to Kirsten Jamsen, English Dept., H.C. White Hall, 600 N. Park St., or send an email to kajamsen@facstaff.wisc.edu.

Name _____ Campus Address _____ ADD/DELETE