

Writing Fellows Program

2012-2013 Annual Report

Prepared by

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Executive Summary

The Writing Fellows Program at Boston College began in 2004 as an initiative to enhance the effectiveness of writing and writing instruction in undergraduate courses across the curriculum. In the program, trained graduate student writing fellows are paired with faculty and work closely throughout the semester with students and student writing. The benefits of this program are three-tiered: first, students benefit from conferencing, mentorship, and direct writing instruction with their writing fellow. Second, faculty benefit from direct interaction with the fellows and learn what types of writing instruction are most effective for achieving the learning goals set for their students. Third, the writing fellows benefit, honing their teaching and conferencing skills as they prepare to teach in the First-Year Writing Seminar (FWS) program. Since 2004, over 2000 students have been a part of a writing-fellowed course at Boston College. For a more detailed history of the program, please see the “Program Description and History” document.

Partners: The program is interdisciplinary in nature. While the majority of the graduate fellows are MA students from the BC English department, in recent years we have employed MA students from both Philosophy and Romance Languages. We have partnered with faculty in all four of the undergraduate schools (A&S, LSOE, CSON, CSOM) in a range of disciplines. The response has been overwhelmingly positive; on average 94% of students agree or strongly agree that conferring with writing fellows has improved their writing. Faculty have noted that student writing has been better organized and that their own ability to write effective assignments improved as a direct result of the program. Since the summer of 2008, the program has also partnered with the Office of AHANA Student Programs, pairing writing fellows with the 45 incoming freshman who attend OASP’s Options Through Education (OTE) summer program.

Technology: Beginning in 2009, with an ATIG grant, the program integrated a series of new technologies to enhance the interactions between fellows, students and faculty. These technologies include a MacBook for each fellow, audio recording software for student meetings, a Blackboard component to enable collaboration between faculty, student, and writing fellows; and finally an MS Word electronic paper-free comment system allowing for clear and direct writing feedback. These components have been gradually honed since their initial integration and enable students to receive clear and timely feedback as well as regular access to these resources.

2012–2013: In its ninth year the writing fellows program partnered with faculty and students in Education, Accounting, Nursing, Perspectives, Psychology, Sociology, Theology, and the OTE program. During the fall, spring and summer semesters the program served approximately 350 students. The program employed its largest and most diverse cohort to date with fellows from English and Philosophy as well as three returning fellows. Over 90% of students in the fall and 98% of students in the spring believed the program improved their writing. 95% of students surveyed said they would take another writing-fellowed class and recommend their roommate or friend to do the same.

All the faculty members interviewed found the program to be a tremendously helpful resource and one which will influence how they write and communicate assignments in their respective disciplines in the future. In April we presented a paper at the Northeast Writing Centers Association Conference entitled "Helping Faculty Make Disciplinary Writing Expectations Explicit: Writing Fellows as Mediators between Students and Faculty Members."

2012-2013 Report on the Writing Fellows Program

Fellows and Faculty Partners in 2012-2013

In 2012-2013 the Writing Fellows Program employed its largest and most diverse cohort to date. The team was composed of twelve fellows and included fellows from both English and Philosophy as well as three returning fellows. The increasing interdisciplinary constitution of the program is a sign of its strength, the value of its training program, and an element we hope to develop in the future.

The program's funding from the Office of the Dean of Arts & Sciences was also expanded. A part-time Associate Director was hired, we expanded the number of writing fellows from eight to twelve, and we purchased four additional MacBook computers—all promising indicators that the program is considered a worthwhile investment by the university. Additionally, fellows, faculty and students used the various technological components with greater facility. The percentages of students using the audio recordings and electronic comments were up significantly from the previous year.

In fall 2012 the Writing Fellows Program renewed its partnerships with Professor Rita Owens (Business Writing) and Professor Lisa Goodman (Abnormal Psychology), while working for the first time with Professor Gustavo Morello partnering with his two Sociology courses (Introduction to Latin American Societies and Religion and Social Change in Latin American Societies.) We also worked for the first time with Professor Marilee Ogren (Topics in Abnormal Psychology.) Over 90% of students surveyed in the fall reported that the purpose of the program was clear, that the feedback was helpful, and that it improved their written work.

In spring 2013 we continued working with Professor Owens and added partnerships with Professor Douglas Finn (Perspectives I), Professor Susan DeSanto-Madeya (Professional Nursing Seminar), and Professor Shatina Williams (Abnormal Psychology). Over 95% of the students surveyed reported that the purpose of the program was clear, that the conferences were long enough and frequent enough, and 98.5% found the fellows' comments to be helpful to their writing.

In the summer of 2013, the Writing Fellows Program partnered for the sixth consecutive year with BC's Options Through Education (OTE) Summer Transitional Program for incoming students. Fellows worked with the four sections of English offered through the OTE summer program.

One of our ongoing goals is to share our experiences with other universities and learn from other programs. To that end we attended the Northeast Writing Centers Association Conference in April of 2013. At the conference Marla De Rosa and writing fellows CharLee Toth and Caitlin Wilson delivered a presentation at entitled "Helping Faculty Make Disciplinary Writing Expectations Explicit: Writing Fellows as Mediators between Students and Faculty Members."

Since 2004, over 2000 students have been part of a writing-fellowed course. We currently reach about 3-5% of the student body each year, but hope to increase this percentage as our program continues to grow and become a permanent fixture on the Boston College campus.

Accomplishments in 2012-2013

Since its inception in 2004 the Writing Fellows Program at Boston College has sought to achieve three goals:

- (1) To help students develop their writing ability over their undergraduate years and to write confidently across the curriculum.
- (2) To provide faculty with a helpful teaching aid and pedagogical reinforcement tools.
- (3) To provide the writing fellows, by frequent interaction with faculty and students, with valuable experience in teaching, tutoring, and mentoring thereby making them better Teaching Fellows in the FWS and other programs.

Over the past seven years the program has consistently met – and exceeded – these objectives:

1. Students have become more adept and confident writers, encountering greater continuity between their First-Year Writing Seminar and discipline-specific core courses.

- 82% of students surveyed felt the program as a whole was a helpful resource
- 89% of students surveyed found their writing fellow a helpful resource for their writing
- 91% found their Fellow's feedback clear.
- 87% of students reported that the program improved the quality of their finished work.
- 94% of students reported that they would take another course with a fellow or recommend that a friend do so.

Many students added additional comments, which clustered around four main themes:

(1) Students were very satisfied with their particular writing fellow:

- *She was a great resource for me. She didn't just offer advice or suggestions; she was always willing to take the time to listen to what I had to say.*
- *I thought [my writing fellow] did such a good job helping me with this paper that I sought him out for additional help on another assignment*
- *[My writing fellow] was an excellent resource that I really enjoyed working with.*
- *Yes I really benefited from the writing fellow to improve my writing.*

(2) Students came away with a sense of pride and accomplishment in their writing:

- *[My writing fellow] did a great job. I think my final product was great*
- *My grammar skills and sentence structure has never been great and with [my writing fellow's] help and comments, I think fixing those little mistakes made my paper much more effective.*
- *I feel much prouder of my work after working with [my writing fellow].*

(3) When asked if they would take another writing-fellowed course the students responded:

- *Absolutely*
- *I'm a huge procrastinator and this process forced me to get my paper done early, which I really appreciated toward the end of the semester. [My writing fellow] was very helpful throughout the entire process. So yes, I would recommend a writing fellow to a friend.*
- *Yes, I think it was a good way of keeping me on track with my writing so that I finished everything in a timely manner. It lessened the stress of writing a long paper.*

- *Yes, I found the writing fellow to be an indispensable tool which I believe I could most certainly benefit from in my other classes.*
- *I would take another course with a writing fellow and I would recommend one to a friend.*

(4) A number of students expressed a desire to see the program expand:

- *People should know more about it especially freshman!!!!*
- *Great program! I had never heard about it until my professor told me that we would be working with them.*
- *I am very glad I had the help. Thank you. I wish all my classes had this requirement.*
- *Writing has always been my weakness and I loved having an outside set of eyes read over my paper and see what I could improve on. She answered all of my questions and I am so grateful for her help! I wish all of my courses had this program integrated in it!!*

2. Faculty have found the WF Program a helpful teaching aid and pedagogical reinforcement tool as they teach students what are often tacit assumptions about what constitutes successful writing in their disciplines.

- All the faculty members interviewed found the program to be a tremendously helpful resource and one which will influence how they write and communicate assignments in their respective disciplines in the future. Below are some excerpts from their end-of-term interviews. Faculty were asked to speak about the program in relation to specific features of their courses:

A. Student Writing

- Professor DeSanto-Madeya commented that, in general, the student writing in her class was more focused and “more to the point.”
- Professor Morello conducted his own informal survey and found that the high majority of students found the fellows very helpful and didn’t think, that he needed to be more involved in reading drafts, which was ideal for the size and nature his class.
- Professor Williams said the fellows “...were able to give students feedback in a way that I couldn’t. I can tell them to address issues more ‘deeply’ but you were able to give techniques and break down the writing process.”

B. Assignment Drafting

- Professor DeSanto-Madeya from the Nursing School and new to the program this year remarked: “[The writing fellows program] definitely made me think about how I’m going to write assignments. I am now going to question whether they should be slightly longer assignments. I like the diversity of the assignments but I think it may be beneficial to have it be a longer assignment in which they could work with [the writing fellows] more.”
- Professor DeSanto-Madeya felt a particular strength of the program was the Faculty-Fellow meetings, which “kept things on track and work[ed] to keep a consensus.”
- Professor Morello remarked that the program was “very helpful both as a professor new to Boston College and new to teaching in English.” He found the program helpful because he was asked “to qualify for [the writing fellows] the aims of my work, it made me more aware of the things I was asking for.”
- Professor Williams said the faculty-fellow meetings have caused her to adapt assignments

and expectations: “I think I’ll be more concrete about my expectations. [Discussing the assignment with the fellows] helped me understand that I needed to be clearer about what I wanted.”

C. Value for the Discipline

- Professor DeSanto-Madeya thought the program helped address a common deficiency in nursing, which does not ask students often enough to write profession papers: “Learning to articulate in writing and verbally is something we all need to continue to work on.”
- Commenting in a similar vein, Professor Morello remarked: “Sociology is thinking with words. You have to communicate. You must be accurate in your communication. Our tools are words... It is a science with words.... Knowing how to express your idea, how to make a sentence, how to transmit a thought that you have, an impression that you have, it’s very important. And also for reading, because we read a lot of books and people.”

D. Concluding Comments

- Many faculty expressed gratitude and a desire to see the program used more widely:
 - Professor DeSanto-Madeya: “I would like the idea of working with a writing fellow for a year; I love the program. And would love to see it extended to the graduate level. Wishful Thinking!”
 - Professor Morello: “I was just asking if there are any sociology majors doing the same, I think it would be interesting. And I also think it would be interesting for teachers like myself, foreign teachers, to have some kind of help with our writing. Some kind of service or another name or program where we can submit a paper.”
 - “How do I apply for next year?!”
 - Professor Williams: “This is such a great resource; I wish I had it as an undergraduate student. Even getting to this level and going beyond professors saying ‘there’s something off about your writing,’ I’ve never gotten feedback on my writing like that before.”
- In general, the feedback from the faculty stressed (1) their confidence in the training fellows received before and during their partnership with a course; (2) the freedom it provided them to assign in-depth writing assignments and to spend less classroom time reviewing mechanics; (3) a desire to see the program integrated into their departments.

3. Writing fellows have improved their teaching, tutoring and mentoring skills, which in turn improve the quality of teaching fellows in the FWS Program.

- Across the board the 2012-2013 writing fellows found the program to be an invaluable tool in preparing them to teach First Year Writing Seminars next year. One fellow summed up the experience well with the following:
 - “This year I worked with two very different classes as a writing fellow, with two assignments that represented vastly divergent rhetorical situations...Both classes were extremely useful in developing my pedagogical approach by presenting questions that I know will come up next year teaching FWS, and have made me more aware of how I build my own assignments. I also think the combination of these two classes was really helpful

because it gave me a chance to expand my skills and become more comfortable to working with the students in different rhetorical situations in terms of accommodating the students.

- Another fellow felt that: “The Writing Fellows Program allows for a realistic understanding of who undergraduate students actually are and allows you to accordingly adapt and think through the problems and difficulties that the average student faces at the university.”
- **Pedagogical Skills.** Many fellows felt they were able to develop specific skills that would be very helpful as TA’s and Teachers next year.
 - “The Writing Fellows Program honestly prepared me to be successful in my role as a [teaching assistant] . . .I would not have adjusted to my teaching role so easily or comfortably without the WF experience. As a WF I got to know BC’s undergraduate students, their work, and their writing. I also had the opportunity to learn to work in that vital role as teacher/student liaison and practice skills, like conferencing with students, communicating concerns and questions to faculty, and evaluating writing, that I would need moving forward.”
 - “I learned to support their academic work, and was careful not to impede their personal expression/writing style/approach. This experience was a crucial component for my personal development.”
- **Technology.** The technology components are likewise well received and employed by the fellows.
 - “I think that it is extremely beneficial for them to be able to download my comments from Blackboard.”
 - “The audio recordings proved essential to holding conversations with students that felt natural. The students and I did not have to worry about forgetting the work accomplished in our conversations.”
 - The laptops also proved a valuable resource allowing fellows to meet with students at times and in areas that were mutually convenient. . All the Fellows surveyed, like their students, found the “Comment” function of MS Word incredibly helpful; they plan to use it as a primary means of providing feedback in their classes this fall.
- **Rewarding Work.** All the Fellows surveyed found the program to be a valuable experience on personal, intellectual and pedagogical levels.
 - “The writing fellows position has been one of the most rewarding aspects of my time here at BC as it has introduced me to a host of wonderful faculty and students. I know I will carry this experience forward with me and wish the program only the best as it grows.”
 - Additionally, many fellows acknowledged the able leadership of Marla De Rosa and Dr. Sue Barrett in not only administering the program, but also fostering a sense of academic community amongst the fellows which resulted in fruitful program meetings and the helpful exchange of strategies and best practices.

Goals for the Writing Fellows Program in 2013-2014

In March of 2012, with the goal of expanding the Writing Fellows Program, we submitted a proposal to the Office of the Provost and the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. We are grateful that our proposal to

expand the program was approved and that we were hire a part-time assistant director and additional writing fellows for the 2012-2013 academic year. Our long-term goal is to develop the Writing Fellows Program so that it can work annually with 10-20% of the undergraduate student population, with the hope that all undergraduate students can take at least one writing-fellowed course during their undergraduate career.

This coming year we will continue to expand the existing program while we seek to better understand the specific writing needs across the university. When asked last year what could be more effective about the Writing Fellows Program at Boston College, Professor Joe Quinn, now acting Provost, responded that his “only real concern about the WF program is that not enough professors know about it and that the budget is small.” We are grateful that Professor Quinn has provided additional resources for the 2013-2014 academic year so we can further expand our reach.

Organizationally, the Writing Fellows Program has been housed in the English Department and jointly managed between the English Department and the Connors Family Learning Center. As the program grows beyond English and the mission of the Connors Center, we feel that the near future would be the opportune time to consider the creation of a Writing Center, which would house together the writing fellows program, writing tutoring, online writing tutoring, and various graduate initiatives such as dissertation boot camp. We plan to continue our research into how other university writing fellow programs are organized and administered to make optimal use of an expanded BC program.

During the 2013-2014 academic year, we plan to continue implementing and familiarizing fellows, faculty and students with the technological advances begun in 2009-2010. The move from Blackboard to a new course management system will require development of new technology tools. Another goal will be a more formal analysis of the data and archived documents collected thus far. This research will result in, among other things, an increasingly refined collection of pedagogical techniques for fellows and faculty to use in teaching and tutoring writing across the curriculum. We will use the experiences and data collected to better assess and improve the program. With more than four years of archived documents and recordings the database will be an invaluable training tool for the incoming writing fellows and all those we reach through our conference presentations and future publications. Regarding the latter we hope to begin compiling our data into a publishable format so that our successes may be imitated in other programs.

Acknowledgments

As in any successful educational initiative, collaboration has been essential to the program. We are especially grateful this year to Joseph Quinn, Acting Provost; David Quigley, Dean of the College of Arts and Science; and Donald Hafner, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Academic Affairs for their support in expanding the program. In this endeavor we also appreciate the support of Susanne Matson, Chair of the English Department. To this year’s instructors, Lisa Goodman, Shatina Williams, Marilee Ogren, Douglass Finn, Gustavo Morello, Susan DeSanto-Madeya, and Rita Owens we thank you for sharing your students and classes with us.

Our debt grows annually to the members of Instructional Design and eTeaching Services (IDeS) group who have provided invaluable support for the technology components of the program: Rita Owens, Helen Healy, and Tim Lindgren. Whenever we had a question or needed help with the technology, they provided timely and expert assistance.

Finally, a deep and indispensable thank you to this year's writing fellows, Gregory Floyd, Caitlin Lahey, Raven See, Fabiana Cabral, Katherine Kim, Noah Moskat, Alex Moskowitz, Jacob Reyna, Mary Crowder Spears, CharLee Toth, Caitlin Wilson, Eileen Zhang, and Noah Moskat. We appreciate your intellectual capability and commitment, dedication and wonderful work with the students and faculty.

Many other hands and minds helped shepherd the Writing Fellows Program since 2004. This initiative began from a series of conversations between Paula Mathieu, Bryan Marinelli, Paul Gray and Arts and Sciences Dean Joseph Quinn. The collaboration among Paula Mathieu, Bryan Marinelli, and Staci Shultz was key to getting the pilot off the ground, and the insights and hard work of Staci, Bryan, Sue Barrett and Diane Hotten-Somers have been essential to its continued existence and development. The faculty with whom we have cooperated were generous with their time and adaptable to this new idea as well as supportive throughout. The OTE program directors, Dr. Ines Maturana-Sendoya, Andy Petigny, and Yvonne McBarnett made possible the smooth integration of the writing fellows into the summer program beginning in 2008. Our nine years of writing fellows offered their hard work, enthusiasm, and vital feedback, which helped refine this pilot.

This project would not have been possible without the support of two BC Teaching Advising and Mentoring Grants and the Academic Technology Innovation Grant (ATIG) that enabled us to add such an innovative technology component to the program. The Offices of the Academic Vice President and of the Provost and the Arts and Sciences Deans Office have shown unwavering support and continued funding for the program. Mary Crane, Chair of the English Department, at the time the program was started has also been a strong supporter of the pilot initiative, offering advice, and encouragement. Finally, we would like to thank the students who have and will take part in the Writing Fellows Program, and who, we hope, will appreciate and understand writing a bit more because of this project; the students and their writing is what is most important to the Writing Fellows Program.

About the Report's Authors

Paula Mathieu, Director, Writing Fellows Program, is an Associate Professor in the English Department and directs the First-Year Writing Program. She is a specialist in rhetoric and writing pedagogy, with a doctorate in Language, Literacy and Rhetoric from the University of Illinois at Chicago. In 2005, she published *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition* and has co-edited two other books. In addition to writing pedagogy, her scholarship centers on public discourse and homeless writers.

Suzanne Barrett is Director of the Connors Family Learning Center. With a doctorate in English literature from Brown University, Dr. Barrett has worked at Boston College since 1992. In addition to coordinating all the services of the Connors Center she teaches a wide array of undergraduate courses and runs pedagogy and orientation workshops for Teaching Assistants and new faculty.

Marla De Rosa, Associate Director of the Writing Fellows Program is an adjunct faculty member in the English Department. In addition to teaching First-Year Writing Seminar and the Literature Core, she has a background in business and technology writing. She has worked with Paula Mathieu as a mentor for new FWS instructors. She is also a doctoral student in the Lynch School of Education Curriculum & Instruction Program where she studies the complex factors involved in student writing in different disciplinary areas.

Gregory Floyd is a doctoral candidate in Philosophy at Boston College and has been a writing fellow since 2009.