



BOSTON COLLEGE

# Writing Fellows Program

## Pilot Project



## Year-Two Progress Report 2005-2006

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## Executive Summary

In 2004, Dr. Paula Mathieu and the Writing Fellows Team (WF Team) created a pilot Writing Fellows Program at Boston College to create and test out a prototype for a fully realized Writing Fellows Program at Boston College. A Writing Fellows Program makes trained student-writing fellows available to faculty members from any department who want to focus more attention on student writing in a course. Throughout the semester, fellows meet individually with students to offer feedback on paper drafts before they are submitted to faculty. The writing fellows receive training in responding to student writing and in the rhetorical expectations of the specific discipline, and they discuss with faculty their expectations for the writing assignments. This initiative responds to a broadly perceived need among administrators, faculty and students to make writing more central to all fields of study in higher education.

**The Year One Pilot**, supported by a Boston College Teaching and Mentoring Grant (TAM), focused on one course with which to partner: Dr. Paul Gray's Comparative Social Change, a core Sociology course with 60 students. Four Writing Fellows, incoming English MA students, went through training in reading and responding to student writing, sat in on Dr. Gray's course and met regularly with the Writing Fellows Team to discuss better ways to serve the students. The WF Team followed up the pilot with visits to two large, successful writing fellows programs at Brown and Tufts universities, and assessed the value of the one-course pilot. Research into the effectiveness of the Year-One Pilot was anecdotal, but strongly positive. Dr. Gray felt there were "more A's and fewer C" papers than in previous semesters of the course. Seventy-two percent of the students in the course responded that the program provided a useful resource; the majority of the remaining students admitted they did not take full advantage of the resource.

**The Year Two Pilot**, which received a second year of TAM funding, tested a slightly revised Writing Fellows pilot in three new disciplines: History, Political Science and Geology. In the Year-Two pilot, all "fellowed" courses included at least three writing assignments, sequenced throughout the semester, which allowed for more discussion of writing and revision spread throughout the term. Writing Fellows no longer sat in on the "fellowed" course, but instead attended a weekly seminar in writing pedagogy, run by Dr. Mathieu, Dr. Barrett, and Diane Hotten-Somers. The cooperating faculty members periodically attended this seminar, during which time they worked with the WF Team to improve their assignment handouts and clearly delineate their writing expectations to the Fellows. The feedback to Year Two was unanimously positive. All three participating faculty commented on the higher level of writing in their courses overall, and particularly from students who seriously committed themselves to the program. Two of the three also noted that they found the program helped their own design of assignment handouts. In a survey of the 80 students who participated in the program, 80% found the program a useful resource.

For the 2006-2007 year, the Writing Fellow Initiative received a third year of funding from the College of Arts and Sciences and will fellow courses in Music and Perspectives for the fall. The future of the Writing Fellows Program beyond the 2006-2007 academic year is uncertain. There is great potential to create a fully realized program that works with students and faculty on writing throughout the university and serve as a model to other institutions. To make this happen, however, core funding, staffing and commitment by the BC faculty and administration are essential.

## The Need

In a survey of the BC graduating class of 2003, only 41% of students stated that they felt their writing skills had been “greatly enhanced” during their four years at Boston College.<sup>1</sup> The First-Year Writing Seminar, which students typically take in their first semester—or may not even take at all because of high AP test scores—is the only core course in which the development of students’ writing is the primary concern. Many BC faculty express a desire to incorporate more attention to writing in their classes but lack the time or resources to work individually with all students.

Many national groups advocate that writing should become more integral to a college education. In a 2003 report, “The Neglected ‘R’: The Need for a Writing Revolution,” the National Commission on Writing for America’s Families, Schools, and Colleges recommends that “Colleges and universities have an obligation to make writing more central to their own programs of study. The teaching of writing at the college level should be infused across the curriculum” (27).

College writing can be difficult for students because there is no one uniform set of rules that encompass “good writing.” Disciplines, genres, and individual writing tasks vary in the type of approach, research, style and documentation necessary. According to the English scholar Wayne Booth, the earmark of a successful writer is an ability to “discover and maintain in any writing situation a proper balance among . . . the available arguments about the subject, the interests and particularities of the audience, and the voice of the speaker” (172). In other words, an adept writer is one who can accurately assess a rhetorical situation and call on a range of writing skills to respond to it; a novice writer, on the other hand, often generalizes rules for “good writing.” For example, student writers may encounter difficulty when they apply techniques that worked well in a theology essay to a sociology research report, getting less-than-positive results. Rather than understanding that differing rules of genre, evidence and citation are at work, students often feel frustrated and mystified, stating that they didn’t know what their individual teacher “wanted.”

BC’s First-Year Writing Seminar (FWS) offers first-year students intensive practice and one-on-one faculty feedback to help them develop skills for drafting and revising effective prose. FWS also helps students understand that each act of writing is a unique rhetorical situation. Beyond FWS, discipline-specific writing instruction is currently not visible in the BC curriculum. The University Core purports to offer writing-intensive courses, but large class sizes inhibit close attention to student writing.

Other than significantly lowering class sizes university-wide or adding a host of writing-intensive courses to the undergraduate curriculum, are there ways to encourage BC undergraduates to write more and to write better? Several universities (such as Brown, Tufts, Wisconsin, and Colorado State, etc.) have found that a Writing Fellow Program can efficiently and effectively enhance the quality and visibility of writing throughout the curriculum.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: BC Department of Enrollment Management. (For internal circulation only.)

In 2004-2005, with the support of a \$14,860 BC Teaching, Advising, and Mentoring Grant, a Writing Fellows Pilot was implemented to test whether a Writing Fellows Program could enhance the quality and amount of writing and writing instruction within the existing undergraduate curriculum at Boston College.

## What is a Writing Fellows Program?

Simply defined, a Writing Fellows Program is one in which faculty can apply to have a course designated a Writing Fellows class, meaning that it will have trained peer writing fellows attached to it. Working with the fellows becomes an integral and required part of such classes, ensuring that students are not writing papers at the last minute and that they are getting quality feedback on their writing. Students in the course must submit drafts of required writing to the Writing Fellows and have individual conferences with them to revise their papers. The faculty member also engages in dialogue with the WF Program to clarify what constitutes effective writing in each specific disciplinary and rhetorical situation. The Writing Fellows themselves receive training and support in both writing and productively responding to the writing of others.

Our approach to a Writing Fellows program owes much to the distinction Anne Beaufort makes *Writing in the Real World: Making the Transition from School to Work*.<sup>2</sup> Beaufort claims that writers need five kinds of knowledge to succeed as workplace writers: discourse-community knowledge, rhetorical knowledge, genre knowledge, process knowledge and subject-matter knowledge. Through training by the WF Team and dialogue with the course faculty member, the fellows learn the discourse-community, rhetorical, and genre expectations. Through discussions with the students they reinforce and help teach process skills of revision. And while the faculty member remains the expert on course content, in discussing the arguments students write, the Fellow can help recommend students whom should talk with faculty about confusions they face.

## The Purpose of the BC Pilot

The Writing Fellows Pilot was designed to test three hypotheses:

1. That students will become more adept writers if they encounter greater continuity between their First-Year Writing Seminar and discipline-specific core courses. One way to accomplish this continuity is to offer one-on-one conferencing support within undergraduate courses to help students plan, revise, and edit in light of the expectations of the given course and discipline.
2. That a Writing Fellows Program will encourage valuable conversations among faculty across various disciplines, asking instructors to articulate what are often tacit assumptions about what constitutes successful writing.
3. That the experience of conferencing with undergraduate writers in core courses will help Writing Fellows—many of whom will be teaching fellows in the FWS Program in their second year—develop pedagogical skills that will enhance undergraduate learning at BC.

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<sup>2</sup> NY: Teachers College Press, 1999.

## Writing Fellows Pilot Year One (2004-5 Academic Year)

The BC Pilot was created by Dr. Paula Mathieu, Director of the First-Year Writing Program, in a joint effort of the English Department and The Connors Family Learning Center, with the assistance of a Boston College Teaching, Advising, and Mentoring Grant.

Prof. Mathieu assembled a Writing Fellows team of her Associate Director, Staci Shultz, and the Assistant Director of the CFLC, Bryan Marinelli. Associate Prof. Paul Gray, Sociology, volunteered to have Writing Fellows (WFs) attached to his class in Comparative Social Change (SC93), a class of 60 undergraduates. Four Writing Fellows were hired.

The four Writing Fellows, all graduate students in English and experienced tutors, received initial training in how to conference with students and respond to student papers. The participating faculty member met with the WF team to discuss his expectations for student writing, sharing past examples of A,B,C, etc. papers. The WFs also met with the pilot directors at least once a month to discuss the program and their students' work. They attended Dr. Gray's class regularly to become familiar with course content. Each WF was assigned 15 to 20 students with whom they conferenced six times over the course of the semester. Prof. Gray included a conferencing schedule in his syllabus as well as an explanation of the Writing Fellows Pilot Program and its connection to students' participation grades:

*Much like the First-Year Writing Seminar, this course advocates a process approach to writing. Therefore, as you work through each assignment, you will have the benefit of one-on-one conferences with a Writing Fellow – a graduate student possessing both expertise in composition and knowledge of course content. You will be required to attend six, fifteen-minute conferences with your Writing Fellow throughout the semester: once at the beginning of the semester, once prior to each exam due date and three times during the evolution of your term paper. Drafts of each assignment will be due at your scheduled conference time. Participation in these conferences, which will comprise 10% of your final grade, will be instrumental in helping you to meet the standards for writing in this course. Writing Fellows will be assigned after the class roster has been finalized.*

**Three goals** were **achieved** during the Year-One Pilot:

1. **Successfully tested a Writing Fellows component** in one core course to see if and how it enhanced student writing.
2. **Researched existing Writing Fellows Programs** at comparable universities.
3. **Designed plans for a Year-Two Pilot**, which can lead to a fully realized Writing Fellows Program at Boston College.

Assessment of the first-year pilot consisted of a review of all the grades for the course, a survey of all the students in the class, and interviews with the Professor, the Writing Fellows and selected students.

## ***More A's and Fewer C's***

While it is impossible to make definitive claims about the effect of the Writing Fellows conferences on grade performance,<sup>3</sup> convincing anecdotal evidence supports the effectiveness of the Writing Fellows. Prof. Gray noted that in comparison to his other semesters of teaching the same course, there “were clearly more outstanding papers and fewer mediocre ones.”

### Students Who Received A's for Final Grades:

Pilot Year: 28%

Last Year: 25%

### Students Who Received A's on Their Final Term Papers:

Pilot Year: 44%

Last Year: 29%

### Students Who Received C's on Their Final Term Papers:

Pilot Year: 11%

Last Year: 21%

Moreover, Prof. Gray noted that there was a direct correlation between low final grades and less than full participation with the Writing Fellows conferences. Upon examining the breakdown of grades for each student, he explained that in most cases if a student received a low final grade, that student had also received a low participation grade. This correlation could indicate that the student had not benefited from conferences and that the final grade reflected the consequences: lower grades on papers and exams as well as a lower participation grade.

## ***72% of Students: “Writing Fellows Provided a Useful Resource.”***

An anonymous end-of-semester survey asked students to answer a series of questions with numbers (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) as well as written responses. The survey provided a general sense of what students thought about the Writing Fellows Program. Of the 53 students who responded to the evaluation form, 72% (43) either agreed or strongly agreed that “The Writing Fellows Program provided a useful resource.” Only six disagreed that the program was useful, but of these six, four admitted that they had failed to take full advantage of the resource. Students commonly described the WFs with superlatives such as “very knowledgeable,” “genuinely cared,” “very helpful,” and “encouraging.” In the space provided for additional comments, one student wrote, “The program was very useful in helping me prepare my assignments and improving their quality.” Another concluded, “I, overall, really appreciated the program!”

While no one gave a score lower than 2 in response to the helpfulness of the Writing Fellows, several of those who did give low numbers also admitted to arriving for conferences unprepared or to missing them altogether. In response to “How could your Writing Fellow have been a more

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<sup>3</sup> Too many other variables cannot be controlled, such as how well these same students would have performed without the Writing Fellows support.

effective resource for you?”, one student responded, “If I did my work beforehand”; another wrote, “If I put in more effort”; while still another remarked, “If I had the discipline to write beforehand, or if the meetings were closer to the due date.” Indeed, there seemed to be a direct correlation between low rankings and lack of participation.

## ***Feedback and Lessons Learned from Year One***

### **Longer Conferences**

In addition to their general praise of the Program, many students expressed a desire for longer conferences, more focused on specific assignments. One student noted, “At times that was enough, but for papers, especially the term paper, 15 minutes was too short to get through it all.”

### **More Faculty Buy-In**

All four WFs concluded that they would have liked more opportunity to communicate with Prof. Gray and hoped that future instructors would find more ways to integrate the Program into the class and not treat it as a supplement. They felt the role of the WFs should be clearly explained to the students and that the importance of writing should be emphasized in class. Like their students, they too thought it would be good to begin conferencing earlier in the semester.

### **More Communication**

Like the WFs, Dr. Gray desired more communication between the instructor and the Writing Fellows. Because of schedule conflicts, he was unable to attend the WF meetings; however, he would have liked for the WFs to approach him outside of class on a more regular basis, especially to inform him of students who were not taking advantage of the Program. He wished that the WFs had chimed in more frequently when he was discussing assignments and had spoken up in class when they saw opportunities to talk about writing.

### **More Role Clarification**

The WFs remarked on being unclear about their role in the class. Dr. Gray expressed that his teaching assistant felt that students often brought content-specific questions to Writing Fellows when they should have been directed to the TA.

## **Refining the Year Two Pilot (2005-6 Academic Year)**

Based on our own reflective research of the First-Year Pilot and our exploration of other Writing Fellows Programs, the WF team came away with several ways to integrate the Writing Fellows more seamlessly into courses and to foster greater communication among the students, Fellows, and instructors. With renewed funding—thanks to a second year award of a Teaching, Advising, and Mentoring Grant of just under \$15,000—we focused on testing our Writing Fellows model in other courses; we planned as well to modify the original Program and reassessed its effectiveness, in the following ways:

### **Encourage more writing and conferencing throughout the semester:**

Rather than one large paper, an optimal scenario for courses with Writing Fellows is to have writing sequenced throughout the semester (roughly three papers). The WFs then have time to offer feedback, which can be used for revision and for future papers. For the Year-Two Pilot, we sought out faculty eager to include three or more writing assignments sequenced throughout the semester, with time built into the schedule for thorough feedback by fellows and revision by the student.

### **Test the value of the Writing Fellows Program beyond Sociology:**

The Year Two Pilot tested Writing Fellows in three new courses in three different disciplines: History, Political Science, and Geology. Dr. Jenny Purnell in Political Science and Dr. Crystal Feimster in History received Writing Fellows in the Fall, and Dr. Noah Snyder in Geology and Geophysics partnered with us in the Spring.

### **Clarify the roles and better prepare Writing Fellows:**

In Year Two, the WFs did not sit in on the course in which they were fellows, but rather attended a weekly seminar in the theory and practice of writing run by the WF Team. This seminar allowed WFs – who are all teaching two sections of the First-Year Writing Seminar during the 2006-2007 academic year - to develop their writing as well as teaching skills and to discuss the rhetorical expectations and features of writing within a specific discipline and course. This change helped further clarify the relationships between the faculty member and his/her Teaching Assistants (who set expectations and offer guidance on course content) and Writing Fellows (who respond to students' drafts and help point out assignments' expectations and areas for revisions and improvement, and helped guide students to ask faculty better questions about content). It also provided more training to the Writing Fellows, most of whom desire to teach in the future.

### **Facilitate communication among faculty and fellows:**

We frequently invited the cooperating professors to attend the WF seminar and meet with the WF team, to discuss their assignments, expectations and key features of writing. We also assigned one Writing Fellow to act as a liaison to that instructor.

### **Give more time for focused writing responses:**

With a focus on three writing assignments, the Writing Fellows met for one hour (rather than 15 minutes) after having read a draft of the student's paper. This longer session allowed the time for focused discussion of global writing issues – whether the paper directly responded to the assignment, issues of genre, organization, evidence and citation – as well as specific aspects of language use and writing style, such as specific language, appropriate use of grammatical person and level of formality.

### **Make the work of the Writing Fellows more visible:**

In the Year-One Pilot, the Writing Fellows met in conference with the students, offered verbal feedback only, and assessed the students' participation through a participation grade, which the instructor figured into the course grade. While the instructor learned which students did and didn't fully participate in the WF component, little more about the students' writing, their areas of struggle or progress were ascertained. In Year Two, the WFs did not participate in grading. When the student met for a 50-minute WF session, he or she also received written comments from the WF both on the draft and on an official comments sheet.<sup>4</sup> When the student handed in the final paper, he or she also handed in the draft and comments sheet with the WF's comments. These comments served several purposes: they provided a visual memory aid for the student to use while revising the paper; they provided the faculty member written documentation of student participation in the WF process; and they provided the faculty member information about the students' writing concerns and the type and quality of feedback given by the WFs – which helped facilitate classroom writing instruction as well as communication between WFs and faculty. And, finally, the written comments were useful in training and evaluation.

## **Assessment of Year Two Pilot**

**All five of our goals were achieved** during the Year Two Pilot:

1. **Successfully tested the Writing Fellows' model and effectiveness in three new courses in three new disciplines:** History, Political Science, and Geology.
2. **Established more writing and conferencing** throughout the semester.
3. **Developed and implemented a weekly seminar to train fellows** in how to respond to student writing and to facilitate communication among faculty and fellows.
4. **Instituted 50-minute long conferences** for each course's three writing assignments.
5. **Made the Writing Fellows' work more visible through having them and their students complete a comments sheet**, which was then turned in along with the final draft of the paper.

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix

To assess Year Two of the Writing Fellows Pilot, we asked all the students to complete an end-of-the-semester anonymous program survey, as well as to conduct interviews with our cooperating faculty members and Writing Fellows.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Better, Clearer Papers and Higher Grades***

The feedback from our cooperating faculty members, while anecdotal, was overwhelmingly positive in terms of the increased quality of papers they received, and the higher overall grades earned in the course. Prof. Purnell explained that overall her students became better, more confident writers. “Good students became really good students by learning basic writing skills, such as organization and style, and thus they became more comfortable and didn’t need to have their hands held.” Additionally, Prof. Purnell, who is a self-proclaimed “tough grader,” found that while she normally only assigns two or three A’s, in her Fall 2005 Fundamental Concepts of Politics I course, she gave at least six A’s. Similar to Prof. Gray’s experience in Fall 2004, Prof. Purnell commented on how the students who committed to the program were also the ones from whom she saw the most development, “I got the feeling that everyone who took it seriously got lifted up a level. The students who weren’t struggling got very, very good. A couple chose not to do it, and I deducted points for it. Some students simply chose not to do well.” As in Prof. Gray’s Sociology course, there seems to be a direct correlation between students who commit themselves to taking full advantage of the Program’s resources and an increased level in their writing, as well as their final course grade.

### ***80% of Students Found the Writing Fellows a “Useful Resource” and 43.7% Would Recommend a Fellowed Course to a Friend***

As we did in Year One, at the end of each course we asked all the students to complete an anonymous survey of the Writing Fellows Program. Over the course of Year Two, we received 80 completed surveys. When asked if they found the “Writing Fellows program a useful resource,” 80% of the respondents, which is 64 of the 80 students, either agreed or strongly agreed that the program was useful. Typical comments from students who found the program useful were: “very helpful,” “feedback was useful,” “very well organized & useful, definitely improved my grades,” “My WF pushes me to revise my papers,” “She encouraged me to ask questions and I did,” “I think this program really did help. Thanks for your time!” and “My writing greatly improved throughout this course – thanks for the help!” We received 8 surveys that disagreed with the usefulness of the program, but of these 8 students, only 3 of them claimed to have taken “full advantage of the resource of the Writing Fellows Program,” while the other 5 “strongly agreed” that they did not make full use of the Writing Fellows Program. And these students’ comments seemed to show that finding the program not useful correlated with a lack of commitment to it: “I didn’t really care,” “I didn’t bring in complete rough drafts,” and “I could have utilized him, but that was MY FAULT for not reaching out to him.”

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<sup>5</sup> Prof. Feimster was unavailable to interview as she began a new academic position at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, and left very quickly after the Fall 2005 semester ended.

In the Spring 2006 Writing Fellows Evaluation, we added two questions to investigate BC students' desire to see the Writing Fellows Program in more courses. In response to the question, "Would you like to see the Writing Fellows Program expand to other courses and disciplines," 37.5% of the students, which equates to 12 out of 32 respondents, agreed with the wish for expansion. While this may seem like a small percentage, it needs to be placed within the context that 40%, or 13 out of 32 students, did not respond to this question, and only 21.8%, or 7 students, disagreed with the idea of expanding the program. Of those students who disagreed with program development, the majority of them did not take full advantage of the Program. And finally, when asked if they would recommend a fellowed course to a friend, over 43% of the students would suggest a fellowed course to a friend, with 10 students agreeing and 4 students strongly agreeing. As with the past questions, there were only 4 students, which is 12.5%, who would not recommend a fellowed course to a peer; all of the 4 students admit they did not take full advantage of the program.

Overall, what these surveys show is that the students seemed to find the program not only useful, but very beneficial to their development as whole students, as long as they committed themselves to the process.

## **Feedback and Lessons Learned from Year Two**

### Clarify the Content/Form Divide

One of the lessons we learned in Year One of the Program was that because the Writing Fellows attended the class regularly, and had access to the course materials, many students went to them with questions of content. This dynamic caused much stress for our WFs, and confusion for the students and TAs in the course. In reconsidering the program structure for Year Two, the WF Team asked that the WFs not attend class and instead come to a weekly seminar devoted to developing their understanding and teaching of rhetorical skills through theoretical and practical assignments. In creating this seminar, and conveying to the students that all questions of content should be directed to either the professor or TAs, we felt that we would best resolve the confusion over the WFs' role in the course. We fear, however, this unintentionally communicated a content/form split which we feel is unrealistic and not useful. In fact, the WFs, cooperating faculty members, and students commented that the WFs needed to have some content knowledge to best serve the students' rhetorical questions and challenges.

Going forward, we hope to communicate the goals of the program more clearly by using Anne Beaufort's distinction of the five kinds of knowledge necessary for writers: discourse-community knowledge, rhetorical knowledge, genre knowledge, process knowledge and subject-matter knowledge. The goal is for Writing Fellows to help students primarily in the first four areas of knowledge—information they will gain through dialogue with the faculty member and training from the WF Team. But issues of content can never truly be separated out of writing. Through conferencing with students, WFs can gauge where students are unclear on their content knowledge and can encourage them to clarify their understanding with the faculty. Also, faculty will provide definitions for key concepts and terms to WFs so they do not feel entirely separated from issues of content.

### Provide Clearer Expectations and Guidelines

Both Profs. Purnell and Snyder, as well as all three of our WFs, felt that the students needed clarification of both the Program guidelines and the instructor's expectations for each assignment. Oftentimes, the fellows were unclear as to if and how a student would be penalized for turning in a draft late, how they should handle students who either did not attend their conferences or asked to reschedule them, and how the instructors wanted the fellows to convey late and/or missed appointments. Since we had decided to eliminate the fellows' responsibilities of evaluating the students in any way, as they had in Year One, there seemed to be some confusion on both the fellows' and the students' parts as to what exactly was the role of the WF and the seriousness with which this aspect of the course should be taken.

### Have More Focused WF Preparation

The pedagogical models for WF preparation are not exactly the same as those used to train tutors, writing instructors, or teaching assistants. Thus, in developing the weekly seminar, we continue to clarify what exactly the role of the WF is, and then find the most appropriate pedagogical training tool to prepare our fellows. We see this as an opportunity to develop useful pedagogical materials currently unavailable in the textbook market, which might be useful not only at BC, but elsewhere as well.

## ***Benefits for the Writing Fellows***

This pilot considered the benefits for WFs both in their ability to help students in the pilot courses and in their own development as teachers. At the end of the pilot during Year One, the WFs were interviewed individually, and asked to comment on the program as a group at the end of Year Two. Between the seven WFs, they all agreed that the pilot helped them form a teaching community. For example, they appreciated having an office where they could not only meet with their students in a professional environment but could also establish camaraderie with the other WFs. Listening to each other's conferences proved beneficial; they would often seek advice from one another regarding their students. The three WFs from Year Two gained skills and a sense of group cohesiveness from the weekly seminar meetings where we provided them with both theoretical and practical training in responding to student writing. All seven of our WFs agreed that overall the one-on-one conferences went well, especially if students came prepared. In both years, all the WFs felt that the experience provided valuable preparation for the teaching they would be doing the following year at BC in the First-Year Writing Seminar. They learned how to better articulate their suggestions to students and assess and then address higher order concerns to help students more efficiently and effectively, while developing their teaching personas.

In Year Two, we also facilitated the professional development of our three graduate WFs by proposing and presenting a panel at the Northeast Writing Centers Conference in New Hampshire. This talk, which allowed us to dialogue with people developing small Writing Fellows projects across New England, was for two of our three WFs, their first academic conference presentation. The positive response we received helped bolster their confidence.

## ***Benefits for the Faculty Members***

At the end of each semester, one WF team member interviewed each of our cooperating faculty members (with the exception of Crystal Feimster due to her transfer to UNC-Chapel Hill). In the Fall of 2004, Dr. Gray said that the Program helped the students take the assignments more seriously, and that from the data he gathered he could infer that the WFs had impacted the students in a positive way. He said he would like to see the program expanded and thought that while it was effective to have WFs from the English Department, he would like to see the opportunity for WFs from Sociology or other departments as well. Ultimately, Dr. Gray expressed enthusiasm for the potential of the WF Program to alter the way introductory courses are taught and confirmed his interest in remaining involved in the evaluative process of the Program.

At the end of the Fall 2005 semester, Prof. Purnell echoed much of what Dr. Gray noted in his interview. In regards to student performance, Prof. Purnell claimed that if the students took the program seriously, then there was an increase in their overall level as writers *and* students. Her data confirmed that, for the first time, she gave out more than 3 A's, a fact she attributes to working with the Writing Fellows Program. Additionally, Prof. Purnell spent much of her time in the interview discussing how beneficial the program was for her development as an instructor. With the implementation of our weekly seminar meetings, Prof. Purnell came periodically throughout the semester to explain her overall writing expectations and expectations for specific assignments to the fellows. Prof. Purnell discussed how helpful this was for her and her students because it forced her to clearly define what she expected from her students' writing, and the goal and purpose of each assignment. She also claimed that this is a service that would be beneficial to all university faculty members, "If you had a lot of money, I would do seminars for faculty on writing good assignments. If it [these seminars] were made available to faculty, then I believe we would see better writing throughout the university. The better we understand our own expectations, verbalize them, and communicate them to students, the better students will do and the less painful grading will be. I've learned that we take so much for granted within our own disciplines that we don't verbalize it. We can't expect students to know these things." Overall, Prof. Purnell would like to see the Program grow and expressed a desire to continue participating by both making her courses available to the Program, and through enrolling in any seminar this Program has to offer.

Prof. Noah Snyder was, as he put it, "keen to participate in the program because I believe that learning to write well is central to a quality liberal arts education." After the semester-long partnership, he expressed pleasure in terms of how the program helped him as an instructor:

"I greatly enjoyed working with the program for a variety of reasons. First, because I prepared the writing assignments in consultation with the Fellows and [the WF team], I got detailed feedback about how best to design rigorous and well-designed projects for the students. This feedback helped not only with the Rivers class, but with assignments for other classes as well. Second, because the students went through a draft process with the Fellows, the papers I read were dramatically improved compared with those that I had read the year before, particular in terms of clarity of expression. This allowed me to focus my comments on student papers on improving analyses. I hope to be able to participate in the Writing Fellows Program again. . . because I now have better insight in how to communicate through the Writing Fellows to the students on expectations for their papers."

## Looking Ahead to Year Three: Continuing to Develop a Fully Realized Writing Fellows Program

With two years of program development, implementation, and reflection, the WF Team, Fellows, and faculty members all agree that this program holds the potential to greatly strengthen not only our undergraduates' writing skills, but also their development as capable and confident students and scholars. Thus, with continued and generous funding from the College of Arts and Sciences, during our third year we aim to continue testing the feasibility of our original Writing Fellows model in other courses; we also plan to modify the original Program and reassess its effectiveness in the following ways:

- **To continue testing the value of the Writing Fellows Program in courses in varied disciplines:** The Year Three Program will test Writing Fellows in two new courses: Music and Perspectives. Prof. Ann Spinney in Music and Prof. Kerry Cronin in Perspectives will receive Writing Fellows in the Fall. As for the Spring, we are having conversations with faculty members in the Biology Department who are very interested in utilizing this Program, as well as with Prof. Snyder, who would very much like to have Writing Fellows in his "Rivers and the Environment" course again. He strongly believes that the WFs' work increased the level of student writing, and comprehension, but he would also like the chance to work with the Program again to see how specific changes in his assignments might help develop his students as scientific writers and thinkers even more. The WF Team is also considering continuing with Prof. Cronin's course in the spring to investigate if working with a Writing Fellow for a full academic year will provide even more solid writing skills and a deeper understanding of composition and rhetoric for the students, faculty, and fellows.
- **To investigate the effectiveness of hiring Writing Fellows from disciplines outside of English:** After all of our cooperating faculty members commented on a desire to see how having Writing Fellows from outside the English Department would work within the Program, we decided to test out their question. Thus, this year we have hired four Writing Fellows, all of whom are graduate students with experience as writing tutors and/or instructors, but they are not all from the English Department. The Writing Fellows consist of two Master's students in English, one doctoral candidate in English, and one Master's student in the joint Mental Health/Pastoral Ministry Program. We based our hiring not only on past tutoring and/or writing instruction experience, but also on the candidates' subject areas of expertise. Our fellow who is enrolled in the Mental Health/Pastoral Ministry Program comes with a deep theological background, and thus is a good fit to fellow the Perspectives course. Our fellow who is a doctoral student actually has a BA in English, a BS in Biology, and musical training; with his broad academic background, he is poised to fellow well in both the Music course and either the Biology or Geology class. By hiring fellows from multiple departments and with varied academic interests and expertise, we will not only test the feasibility of having fellows from across the university, but we will also hopefully bridge the content/form divide.
- **To explore permanent funding opportunities to ensure the future and full development of the Writing Fellows Program:** While we have received generous funding from two Teaching, Advising, and Mentoring Grants, and a third year of funding (\$15,000) from the

College of Arts and Sciences, for this program to reach its potential to serve the writing needs of our students and faculty, it is imperative that we find permanent and generous funding opportunities. For this program to be fully realized, we need an administrative team of skilled and trained professionals who can dedicate all of their time to developing this program, recruiting and training the fellows, and collaborating with the faculty and administration to help find ways for this program to best serve the whole BC community. We also need to secure long-term physical space in which the Program can grow and develop. Having this physical space will also make the Program more visible to the whole BC community, thus highlighting BC's commitment to ensuring every student's development of one of the cornerstones of a liberal arts education: writing.

The Writing Fellows Team strongly believes that these revisions to Year Three of the Boston College Writing Fellows Program will both prove its usefulness and serve as a solid working model for a fully realized Writing Fellows Program. Additionally, we will seek to cooperate with the university in garnering permanent resources for a wider campus initiative, which could utilize a range of graduate and undergraduate students in the capacity of Writing Fellows and could extend across a range of writing-intensive core courses.

## **Future Visions: Beyond the Year Three Program**

The possibilities of a fully realized Writing Fellows Program at Boston College are exciting and broad. The resources at Boston College make it an institution poised to create a Writing Fellows Program that is not only on par with programs like those at Brown and Tufts universities<sup>6</sup>, but which also distinguishes itself nationally, while serving the needs of Boston College students in immediate and important ways. The future is open, but what follows are lists of the key strengths and opportunities facing the Writing Fellows Program:

### **Strengths**

- A solid three-year research base testing the effectiveness of the program.
- The First-Year Writing Program possesses faculty who specialize in writing pedagogy and program design.
- The Connors Family Learning Center already possesses a program for tutor training and a visible location on campus.
- A strong collaborative relationship exists between the First-Year Writing Program and the Connors Family Learning Center.
- Faculty from a range of disciplines interested in the initiative as a way to bring more focused writing instruction to their students.
- Writing Fellows offer a way to enhance writing instruction within the existing curriculum and beyond the First-Year Writing Seminar
- A large group of potential Writing Fellows, which could include graduate and undergraduate students from across the university, as the program develops.

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<sup>6</sup> See appendix for information on their programs.

## Weaknesses

- No secured operational funding, beyond the Year Three Program
- The lack of a director whose primary job is to develop the Writing Fellows initiative.
- The lack of guaranteed space for fellows to meet with students (the English Department has generously granted one office in Carney Hall during this pilot phase of the Program).

## Opportunities

- A fully realized Writing Fellows Program has almost limitless potential for growth throughout the BC campus. Depending on how the program develops, Writing Fellows could enhance the teaching and practice of writing throughout the university, from undergraduate to graduate students. Brown University uses undergraduate writing fellows to work with undergraduate courses; Georgetown University utilizes a Writing Fellows program in its law school. Boston College could distinguish itself by creating a diverse program, one that utilizes Writing Fellows throughout the university, wherever receptive faculty are found.
- Because of its amazing growth potential and possible visibility on campus, the Writing Fellows Program could be an attractive site for development funding, as it was at Brown University, where a Writing Fellows endowment was given.

## Threats

- This program would need institutional support from bottom to top in order to thrive. Faculty should be encouraged to participate but *never required* to do so. An instructor needs to communicate enthusiastically to students in the course the value and importance of the Writing Fellows.
- Without core funding and staffing, the initiative would never reach its full potential.

The Writing Fellows Team is optimistic and excited about the possibilities going forward and encourages interested BC faculty and administrators to contact us to discuss and help plan the future of a fully realized Writing Fellows Program at Boston College.

## Acknowledgments

As in any successful educational initiative, collaboration has been essential to the Writing Fellows Pilot; the collegial relationships forged here have been extremely rewarding. This initiative began from a series of conversations: lunch between Paula Mathieu and Bryan Marinelli, where we first discussed the idea of writing fellows; a meeting of the Core Curriculum Committee, where Paul Gray expressed concerns about his students' writing with Paula Mathieu; and subsequent e-mails from Arts and Sciences Dean, Joe Quinn, who encouraged Paula to develop the idea further. The collaboration among Paula, Bryan 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 in giving this program life. The faculty with whom we have cooperated—Dr. Paul Gray, Dr. Jenny Purnell, Dr. Noah Snyder, and Dr. Crystal Feimster—were generous with their time and adaptable to this new idea as well as supportive throughout. Our two years of Writing Fellows—Nicole Biergiel, Bridget Cooper, Eileen Fenn, and Jon Jurich, Christopher DiBiase, Kristin Imre, and Alicia Pilar Perez—offered their hard work, insights and enthusiasm, which helped refine this pilot.

Many other hands and minds helped shepherd this small project along, to whom we would like to offer our gratitude. Dean Joe Quinn remains an important booster of this project, and his support is deeply appreciated. This project would not have been possible without the support of two BC Teaching Advising and Mentoring Grants and the Office of the Academic Vice President, who funded this pilot. Mary Crane, Chair of the English Department, has also been a strong supporter of the initiative, offering advice, encouragement, and an office for the fellows. Thanks also to Dee Speros, from the English Department, who made sure the Writing Fellows got paid. Sue Barrett, Director of the Connors Family Learning Center, has supported the project from its outset; and since Bryan left BC to run academic services at Providence College, she has joined the WF Team. It is a true pleasure and privilege to be working closely with her. The same is true for working with Diane Hotten-Somers, who took over as Associate Director of the program when Staci Shultz left BC to pursue a doctorate in composition at UMichigan. We also owe a debt of gratitude to John Carfora and Arnold Shore in the Department of Sponsored Programs, who have met with us on several occasions to discuss the planning, fundraising and reporting of this project—offering their sage advice with a great sense of humor.

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.

## **Appendix**

### ***Fully Realized Writing Fellows Program:***

#### ***Brown University***

Brown University has a large and well-developed Writing Fellows program that serves 40 to 50 courses per year, reaching more than half the undergraduates at Brown each year (approximately 3,000 students). The 80 Writing Fellows are undergraduates, carefully selected and trained to help other students improve their writing skills. Competition is stiff: over 300 students vie for roughly 35 positions that open up each year and are chosen based on their demonstrated writing ability and interest in helping other students. Chosen after their first, second, or third undergraduate years, fellows continue to serve the university as peer tutors as long as they are enrolled at Brown.

Once the Writing Fellows are selected, they complete a three-credit seminar, taught by Program Director Professor Rhoda Flaxman, on the theory and practice of teaching writing. After completion of the seminar, fellows are regularly evaluated and participate in On-Going Training Sessions every semester.

Each Writing Fellow is assigned to 15-20 students in a course whose professor has requested assistance. The program serves from 40-50 courses each year, reaching more than half the undergraduate population at Brown each year (approximately 3,000 students). The program serves all disciplines at all levels, from introductory philosophy lectures to seminars in biomedical ethics.

In a "fellowed" course, students submit a first draft of each paper to the fellow two weeks before it is due to the professor. During the first week, the fellows comment extensively on the student's writing, noting strengths and weaknesses in argumentation, analysis, organization, clarity and style. The students then have the next week to consider these suggestions, meet with his/her fellow in a conference, and revise the paper before handing it in to the professor. The students hand in the annotated first draft with the final version, enabling the professor to consider both the process the student went through and the final product.

The annual budget for the Brown Writing Fellows Program is \$200,000, which covers the full-time faculty salary of the program director as well stipends for the 80 Writing Fellows. A full-time administrative assistant services the program as well, but is funded through a separate budget. The location was funded by an endowment from the Rose Family, for whom the program is now named.

#### ***Tufts University***

At Tufts, the WFs are primarily undergraduates; they receive a \$500 stipend each semester, paid in monthly installments. Fellows are usually assigned to classes in their discipline, and are

recommended by faculty for a WF position. During their first semester as a WF, they attend a one-credit course to teach and support their Writing Fellows work. In this course, they research rhetorical differences in the disciplines, discuss grammar, style and produce a newsletter at the end of each course with articles based on their research. Texts used in the course include Patricia O’Conner’s *Woe Is I*, Anne Lamott’s *Bird by Bird*, and Diane Hacker’s *A Writer’s Reference*. Fellows also organize and run an Academic Integrity Workshop as part of new student orientation at the beginning of the school year.

Faculty as well as Writing Fellows receive training and support, in the form of a one-day workshop before the semester begins, for which faculty receive a stipend, and meet with fellows at least twice during the semester. Many faculty members consult with fellows more regularly. In some cases, when it is difficult to coordinate meeting times, the fellows will self-select a point person to meet with the faculty member and disseminate important information (i.e. clarification of assignments) to the others. Currently, the social sciences and engineering departments utilize the WFs the most.

WFs at Tufts meet with their students 2-3 times a semester for up to an hour each time. Larger papers are sequenced, and fellows are given a minimum of ten days between the assignment and the due date to meet with students. The students meet in an on-campus coffee shop for the most part.

While students evaluate their WFs at the end of the semester and faculty compare writing in WF courses to that in their other course, no formal outcomes assessment has been conducted.

Our WFs and those at Tufts shared similar concerns. The Tufts WFs noted that the “professor needs to set the tone and buy into the program” to give the WFs validity and ensure the success of the Program. They remarked that sometimes professors unintentionally “sabotage” the WFs’ validity by failing to reinforce their importance to students. Finally, they expressed concerns about the way assignments are written; often the professor’s expectations are not clear to even the WFs, making it difficult for them to help students fulfill the assignment.

**Sample of response page:**



BOSTON COLLEGE  
Writing Fellows Program

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Writing Fellow: \_\_\_\_\_

Course: \_\_\_\_\_

Paper: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Comments by Writing Fellow (prior to conference):

**(On Back) The student:** Please write a brief summary of the suggestions and ideas for revision you took from this conference and evaluate their usefulness. Also, indicate what you feel strongly about in this paper and what areas about which you still have questions or concerns.