

Writing Fellows Program

Year-Five Progress Report 2008-2009

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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 fellows are paired with faculty, working closely throughout the semester with students and student writing. The benefits of this program are three-tiered: first, the students benefit from conferencing, mentorship, and direct writing instruction with their Writing Fellow. Second, faculty benefit, finding out what type of writing instruction is most beneficial and effective for their students. Third, the graduate student fellows benefit, honing their teaching and conferencing skills as they prepare to teach in the First Year Writing Seminar (FWS) program the following year at Boston College. Since 2004, over 700 students have been a part of a writing fellowed course at Boston College. Following is a brief summary of our history and accomplishments.

2004-2007: For its first three years, the pilot tested whether a Writing Fellows Program could enhance the quality of writing and writing instruction at Boston College. We partnered with instructors in Sociology, History, Political Science, Geology, and Music. In years one and two, 80% of students found the program a useful resource. All faculty noted higher levels of writing in their courses, and two found the program helped their own assignment design. During year three, the program worked with 130 students. 92% of these students agreed or strongly agreed that the program improved their writing.

2007-2008: In its fourth year, the program moved beyond the pilot stage and expanded its reach to 280 Boston College undergraduates and employed ten fellows. We partnered with instructors in Sociology, Literature, Political Science, and History. 95% of students agreed or strongly agreed that conferencing with the Fellows improved their writing.

2008-2009: In its fifth year, the program partnered with instructors in Theater, History, and Accounting and employed twelve fellows. 92% of students surveyed either agreed or strongly agreed that the program improved their writing. Faculty noted that student writing was better organized, and that their ability to write effective assignments improved as a direct result of the program.

Summer 2008, 2009: In the summer of 2008, the program began a partnership with the Office of AHANA Student Programs (OASP), pairing five Writing Fellows with the 45 incoming freshman who attended OASP's Options Through Education (OTE) program. 86% of OTE students stated that the Writing Fellows were an integral part of their summer experience. This program continued in the summer of 2009 with four Writing Fellows and promises to be a continuing interdepartmental relationship.

ATIG Grant for 2009-2010: The Writing Fellows Program received an Academic Technology Innovation Grant (ATIG) that will facilitate the integration of technology into the Writing Fellows Program and its courses. Tools will be developed that support and capture the collaboration between students and the Writing Fellows.

What is the Boston College Writing Fellows Program?

Since 2004, the Writing Fellows Program at Boston College – directed by Dr. Paula Mathieu, in cooperation with Dr. Suzanne Barrett and The Connors Family Learning Center – has enhanced the effectiveness of writing instruction in undergraduate courses. The Writing Fellows Program pairs trained graduate-student Writing Fellows with faculty members who want to focus more attention on student writing in a course. Fellows meet individually with students three to four times during the semester, offering feedback on paper drafts. The Writing Fellows receive training in responding to student writing and in the rhetorical expectations of the specific discipline and writing assignments. The faculty members also engage in dialogue with the Writing Fellow Program to clarify what constitutes effective writing in each specific disciplinary and rhetorical situation. 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, especially in larger courses that makes such concentrated individual attention difficult for faculty to provide. The Writing Fellows themselves receive training and support in both writing and productively responding to the writing of others. In this way, a Writing Fellows Program at Boston College benefits the students, the faculty, and the writing fellows.

Our approach to a Writing Fellows program at Boston College owes much to the distinction Anne Beaufort makes in *Writing in the Real World: Making the Transition from School to Work*. Beaufort shows 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 Writing Fellow Program directors 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 fellows do not become experts in the course content, they are in a position to pick up on students' confusion and direct students to the faculty for further explanation.

The Writing Fellows Program at Boston College has been involved in courses across the curriculum, including Sociology, Philosophy, Theology, Political Science, English, Theatre, Business, and History. Furthermore, the Writing Fellow Program has begun to develop a relationship with the Office of AHANA Student Programs' Opportunities Through Education (OTE) summer program for incoming freshmen, working with OTE students in 2008 and 2009. The partnership was so successful that OASP has indicated that it plans to make the Writing Fellows partnership a permanent component of its OTE program.

The History of the Writing Fellows Program

The idea for the BC Writing Fellows Program began at a meeting of the BC Core Curriculum Committee in 2003 when Prof. Paula Mathieu (English) attended the meeting to discuss the aims and structure of the First-Year Writing Program – the only required writing course at BC – which she directed. Prof. Paul Gray (Sociology) asked how he might better teach writing in a core sociology course of 60 students. Prof. Mathieu briefly described the Writing Fellows concept as one used at other universities that might work here. Dean Joseph Quinn followed up that meeting by encouraging Mathieu to apply for a Teaching, Advising and Mentoring (TAM) Grant to develop a pilot for such a program. The first three years of the program demonstrated the value of the program and during the fourth year the program endeavored to expand its reach.

2004-2005: Year one of the Writing Fellow Pilot Program was funded by a Boston College Teaching, Advising and Mentoring Grant (TAM). Four Writing Fellows, each incoming English Masters students, went through training in reading and responding to student writing, and met three times with students during the semester to offer feedback on drafts of papers. In the second semester, the Directors and Writing Fellows researched large, fully realized Writing Fellows Programs at nearby universities such as Brown and Tufts. Research into the effectiveness of the Year-One Pilot was anecdotal, but strongly positive. Seventy-two percent of the students responded that the program provided a useful resource. Dr. Gray, the Sociology Professor, stated that there were “more As and fewer C” papers than in previous semesters of the course.

2005-2006: Year two of the Writing Fellow Pilot Program was funded by a Boston College Teaching, Advising and Mentoring Grant (TAM). The program partnered with instructors in Sociology History, Political Science, and Geology. All participating faculty commented on the higher level of writing in their courses overall, particularly from students who seriously committed themselves to the process. Two also noted that they found the program helped their own design of assignments. Of students, 80% found the program a useful resource. All participating faculty commented on the higher level of writing in their courses overall, particularly from students who seriously committed themselves to the process.

2006-2007: With \$15,000 in funding from the College of Arts and Sciences, the Writing Fellow Pilot Program sought to increase the diversity of courses with which it had worked as well as to create continuity by extending partnerships with faculty beyond one semester. In the fall, Writing Fellows worked with two courses, Introduction to World Music and Perspectives on Western Culture. In the spring, the program continued with the yearlong Perspectives course and cooperated for a second year in a row with the Rivers and the Environment course. In total, the program worked with 130 undergraduates. The feedback from student evaluations showed that an overwhelming majority of students (92%) saw the value of the program in improving their writing skills, and nearly as many (86%) would take another Writing Fellows course or recommend one to a friend.

2007-2008: An increase in funding to \$25,000 from the Office of the Dean of Arts and Sciences enabled the program to increase its number of Writing Fellows to ten, significantly expanding its reach to work with a total of 280 students. In the fall, the program partnered with Dr. Juliet Schor's Shop 'Til You Drop course, a core class of 180 students. In the spring, the program partnered with three classes: Prof. Marla De Rosa's Literature and Society core course, Prof. Jennie Purnell's Fundamental Concepts of Politics II and Prof. Kerry Cronin's Perspectives on Western Culture, working with close to 100 students. By working with these larger courses, the fellows provided students with much-needed personal attention that they could not otherwise access.

2008-2009 Report on the Writing Fellows Program

Faculty Partnerships in 2008-2009

In 2008-09, the Boston College Writing Fellow Program employed twelve Writing Fellows, each of whom were graduate students in the English Department. This increase of 20% in the number of fellows has enabled us to reach more students and also to train more prepared FWS instructors.

This year our fellows worked with three courses: **Howard Enoch's Introduction to Theatre course**, **Bethany Tanis' History core course**, and **Liz Keating's Managerial Accounting course**. Working with CSOM students was a new and exciting opportunity in 2008. A report from The National Commission on Writing, "Writing: A Ticket to Work or a Ticket Out" notes that "Writing is a 'threshold skill' for hiring and promotion among salaried (i.e., professional) employees. Survey results indicate that writing is a ticket to professional opportunity, while poorly written job applications are a figurative kiss of death" (5). By pairing the Writing Fellows program with CSOM, Boston College business students have been given the opportunity to master the writing conventions and skills that are a necessary part of effective business writing. By continuing to work closely with the humanities and expanding our program to CSOM, the Writing Fellows Program has continued to reach a larger body of students; since 2004, over 700 students have been a part of a writing fellowed course at Boston College. We currently reach about 3% of the student body each year, but hope to increase this percentage to 25%-50% as our program continues to grow and become a permanent fixture on the Boston College campus.

Additionally, four of the 2008-09 Writing Fellows continued to work as Writing Fellows with the **OTE 2009 summer program**, providing the fellows with continued experience before teaching FWS, and providing the OTE students with experienced Writing Fellows.

English Department Instructors Treseanne Ainsworth, Erin Wecker, Ricco Siasoco, and Marla De Rosa taught the four English classes offered during the OTE summer program. Each of the four English classes was assigned a Writing Fellow. The Writing Fellows were an especially important component of OTE because as a transitional program, one of OTE's goals is to equip students with the skills necessary to successfully adjust to college work, and writing is fundamental to a liberal arts education. Emma, a Writing Fellow who

worked with the 2009 OTE summer program, has expressed the importance of this program to the OTE students, citing the continued mentorship she has been able to provide to a number of her writing fellow group as her students transitioned into the fall semester at Boston College. Not only do the Writing Fellows provide students with professional writing guidance, but they also provide leadership models and mentorship to undergraduate students at Boston College.

The Office of the Dean of Arts and Sciences provided the 2008-2009 academic year funding of \$25,000. An additional \$7000 in funding was provided by the Accounting Department in the Carroll School of Management. The additional funding provided by CSOM allowed the program to support three sections of Managerial Accounting during the academic year. In addition, \$5000 was provided for the Options Through Education summer program.

Accomplishments in 2008-2009

Since the Writing Fellows Program began at Boston College in 2004, we have consistently met – and even exceeded – our three main objectives:

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

- In the fall of 2008, 91.6% of students surveyed either agreed or strongly agreed that conferencing with the Writing Fellows improved their finished work. In the fall of 2007 and spring of 2008, 90% and 99% respectively agreed or strongly agreed to this same question.
- 86.1% of the 2008 OTE summer program students either agreed or strongly agreed that the Writing Fellows program was a “necessary part of the OTE program.”
- In the spring of 2009, one student responded that: “I would actually prefer a course with a Writing Fellow over one without and I would recommend it strongly to my friends.”
- In the spring of 2008, one student responded that: “Talking with the Writing Fellow helped me to not only articulate my thoughts but also to receive feedback about what part of my writing was not clear...By taking the time to edit and rewrite our papers, I believe that the final product was truly representative of our capabilities and knowledge.”
- Marla De Rosa, an English Instructor who has worked with the Writing Fellows in her spring 2008 course and through the OTE summer program in 2008 and 2009, observed: “I saw dramatic increases in the student's writing abilities and their confidence. The dedication and time shown by the Writing Fellows gave students the encouragement and help they needed to really work on and push forward with their writing.”

- Howard Enoch, a Theatre Professor who worked with the Writing Fellow Program from fall 2008-fall 2009, added: “The student’s writing was much better organized” in his Writing Fellowed courses as opposed to non-fellowed courses. He called this difference “a dramatic improvement.”
- Liz Keating, a Business Professor who worked with the WF Program in Fall 2008 and Spring 2009, stated: “It is very clear that the students have a much better grasp of business writing due to the one-on-one intensive work that the students did with the writing fellows.”

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.

- Liz Keating, a Business Professor who worked with the WF Program in Fall 2008 and Spring 2009, remarked how the WF Program helped her write better assignments: “Working with Writing Fellows from the beginning had a benefit, because we worded the assignment differently from the outset.” She added: “Writing Fellows are essential to the teaching of business writing as a discipline.”
- Howard Enoch, a Theatre Professor who worked with the WF Program from fall 2008-fall 2009, continually met with the Writing Fellows to brainstorm about better ways to write clear assignments for the students. Emma Perry, a Writing Fellow who worked with Professor Enoch’s course for all three semesters, added that she perceived definite improvement in the clarity of assignments, due in part to these feedback and brainstorming sessions.
- Warren Chaing, Director of the OTE summer program, stated: “I am fully confident that our students are better off for having spent the extra time solidifying their skills, setting a higher standard for themselves, and making a connection with another potential resource in the fall.” As a positive resource and addition to the program in 2008, the Writing Fellows continued to work successfully with OTE in the summer of 2009.

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

- Rachel, a 2008-09 Writing Fellow, commented: “My experience as a Writing Fellow has definitely prepared me for future teaching positions. As a Teaching Fellow for a Freshman Writing Seminar at Boston College next year, I will work with students in the classroom and in individual conferences. My experiences working with students one on one as a Writing Fellow will inform my approach to these conferences. I have learned to meet the needs of each student, guiding them toward better drafts and helping them to become stronger writers regardless of the current state of the draft or skill level of the student.”

- Nick, a 2008-09 Writing Fellow, commented: “Working as a writing fellow has helped me feel more confident about moving into a teaching position. I have had time to learn how to relate to the students, and I have had space to develop my teaching persona. I have also had an opportunity to see the type of writing that will be asked of BC students after leaving first-year-writing. This has helped shape my syllabus and has put me in a better position to prepare the students for what will be expected of them in the future.”
- Emma, a 2008-09 and 2009-10 Writing Fellow, commented: “One of my favorite aspects of the Writing Fellow program at BC is the ‘repeat customer’ - getting to work with the same students throughout a semester on a variety of assignments. It was rewarding to see students improving from one paper to the next, and valuable to hear the ways in which our last meeting helped them gain tools that they could then apply to their next assignment. When teaching a class, we will be working with the same group of students throughout a semester, so the process of building an actual relationship with the student - and not merely a relationship with their writing and their writing only - was invaluable.”

Goals for the Writing Fellows Program in 2009-2010

Our goal is to see the Writing Fellows Program continue to grow until it is a fully realized and established program within the university—with a program director, stable budget, and the ability to reach a quarter to half of BC undergraduates annually. We think this program would be an ideal component of a much-needed university Writing Center, which could house not only the Writing Fellows Program but also the Online Writing Center (OWL) and the writing tutoring. As Liz Keating, a 2008-09 faculty member for a Writing Fellowed course, stated, “We need more support for teaching writing across the curriculum.” We believe the Writing Fellow Program can provide this support as we continue to grow.

Adding technology to the Writing Fellows Program is the next step we will take in the 2009-10 academic year. The Writing Fellows Program received an Academic Technology Innovation Grant (ATIG) that will facilitate the integration of technology into the Writing Fellows Program and its courses. With the help of an Instructional Design consultant and project oversight by Instructional Design and eTeaching Services (IDeS), we will use audio tools and Blackboard Vista to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the WF program. These tools will be used to capture the interactions between the Writing Fellows and students. In addition we are planning to develop a program archive and community website where these records and other resources of the program could be stored for research, training, and program evaluation. We will more effectively use Blackboard Vista so that Writing Fellows will make their comments via Blackboard Vista and record the audio of their meetings with students. Audio and written comments, plus recordings of the meetings will be posted with the draft and comments available to the student, the Writing Fellow and the instructor. In this way, the instructor can review fellow comments and see

easily see the draft progress of each student. Students can access recordings of their meetings, ensuring they will not forget any helpful tips or conversations they had with their fellow. The fellow can ensure that assignments are turned in on time, and can keep a record of each student's progress in an easy-to-access electronic format.

This not only provides a clear communication triangle between fellow, faculty and student, but also makes the Writing Fellow Program's process easier for all parties. By providing laptops to the Writing Fellows, the ATIG grant will allow the Writing Fellow Program to facilitate these technological advances and make the drafting, conferencing, editing, and communication aspects of the program easier and more readily accessible for students, faculty and fellows alike. After the system is fully implemented in the 2010-2011 academic year, the Writing Fellow program will designate a portion of our annual budget for a design consultant who will be responsible for the updates and maintenance of the system and related content.

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 were generous with their time and adaptable to this new idea as well as supportive throughout. The OTE program directors, Dr. Ines Maturana Sendoya and Warren Chaing, made possible the smooth integration of the Writing Fellows into the summer program in 2008 and 2009. Our five years of Writing Fellows offered their hard work, enthusiasm, and vital feedback, 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. This project would not have been possible without the support of two BC Teaching Advising and Mentoring Grants and the Offices of the Academic Vice President and of the Provost, especially Dr. Donald Hafner. The Arts and Sciences Deans Office have shown unwavering support and continued funding for the program. 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. Diane Hotten-Somers, who worked as Associate Director of the program in 2005 and 2006, contributed valuable insights from her experience as an FWS teacher and a tutor. We are grateful to the Department of Sponsored Programs, who have met with us on several occasions to discuss the planning, fundraising and reporting of this project. 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 Associate Professor in the English Department and trades off responsibility with Lad Tobin running 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 BC since 1992. In addition to coordinating all the services of the CFLC, 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.

Emma Perry is a doctoral candidate in English Literature and was a member of the 2008-09 and 2009-10 Writing Fellows program.