Small Writing Classes Afford Better Learning
All Basic and College Writing Sections Now Capped at 15

by David Fleming, Director, Writing Program

This fall, more than 2,000 freshmen walked into their Basic and College Writing classes on the first day of the semester and were greeted by an unusually small number of fellow students. In many cases, the entire class was seated around a seminar table, an unusual situation for a required undergraduate course on a campus this large. In fact, all sections of UMass Amherst’s First Year Writing courses (Englwrit 111/112/112h) are now capped at 15 students each, a nearly 40% reduction in class size from previous years.

The change is the result of a year-long process that rethought the classroom environment of these important first-year writing courses. The goal: to ensure that every freshman on this campus can develop his or her writing skills in a supportive, low-enrollment context, with ample opportunities for feedback from instructor and peers alike.

Research shows that lower class size is one of the more important factors in increasing student engagement in higher education. It is associated with increased attention from teachers, improved classroom relations, higher-quality discussion, better performance by students, reduced failures and withdrawals, and even increased retention.

The new initiative has required new resources from the University: more classrooms, more teachers, and curricular changes that put more emphasis on in-class reading, writing, and discussion (see page 3 for details about our new partnership with OIT). Over the course of this year, the Writing Program and the University Writing Committee will be evaluating the change and assessing its effectiveness.
Writing Center Employs New Software, Enhances Tutoring
By Chris DiBiase, Assistant Director, Writing Center

At the UMass Amherst Writing Center, tutors are putting technology to work in order to better serve university writers. Perhaps the most visible use of technology is the presence of dual-monitor display configurations at each of our tutoring stations. By making use of two monitors at each computer, tutors and writers are better able to work collaboratively on digital drafts. With our dual monitor set up, both the tutor and writer have easy access for viewing and editing digital documents.

Additionally, our tutors have begun to make use of the software program Inspiration to aid students with their brainstorming and organizational writing tasks. This software, which enables writers to create digital idea clusters and flow charts, is particularly useful for visual learners. The ability to represent and manipulate their ideas in a visual digital format enables these writers to experiment with ideas in new ways. By incorporating new hardware and software technologies, our tutors are able to expand upon their range of tutoring strategies and further develop their own understandings of the writing process.

TOs Bring Diversity Issues to Orientation
By Deirdre Vinyard, Deputy Director, Writing Program

Linh Dich and Anne Bello, both Ph.D. candidates in the English Department’s Rhetoric and Composition program and members of the Writing Program’s Diversity Action Group, led a lively discussion on the themes of identity, materiality, and authority in teacher identity for the 32 new Teaching Associates on September 2, the final day of the week-long orientation. The pair used Dich’s essay, “A Reflection on the Teaching Body,” as a way of investigating the expectations of the teacher students may bring to their classes.

Active in the Writing Program since 2006, the Diversity Action Group meets bi-monthly to discuss intersections of diversity, curriculum, and pedagogy in the Writing Program. This presentation marks the committee’s second presentation at the new TO orientation.

The committee also presents at the Writing Program’s Spring Symposium each January. Past workshops have included discussion of teaching texts involving diversity related issues and teaching through “difficult” moments.

The Writing Program
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The Writing Center
Located in the Learning Commons of the W.E.B. Du Bois Library
Sunday 2pm-6pm
Monday - Wednesday 10am-9pm
Thursday 10am-6pm
Friday 10am-2pm
www.umass.edu/writingcenter
Writing Program Partners with OIT: College Writing Moves into the Computer Lab!

By David Fleming, Director, Writing Program

This fall, thanks to a new partnership with the Office of Information Technologies (OIT), the Writing Program has dramatically increased the number of First Year Writing classes using campus computer labs to help students develop digital literacy skills. As of the second week of the semester, instructors from 76 sections of College Writing had reserved a campus computer lab for at least one day this semester. An additional 25 sections of Basic and College Writing are taught wholly in the Bartlett 101/105 computer labs, bringing the total of First Year Writing sections taught at least partly in computer labs this semester to 101, or 65% (impacting over 1,500 students). The Program expects the number of sections taking advantage of the new partnership to increase in the spring as instructors adjust their syllabi and calendars to take advantage of the initiative.

The partnership came about partly as a result of the new smaller class size in First Year Writing classes (see story, p. 1). Smaller classes not only make more campus labs feasible, but they change the nature of the course itself, making in-class reading, writing, researching, and discussion a more prominent part of the curriculum. Working over the summer, Writing Program and OIT staff developed a customized reservation system that allowed each instructor of College Writing to reserve as many as six days per semester in a campus computer lab. Instructors were encouraged to think about reserving a lab about once per unit.

Because so much writing in our society now occurs in a digital environment, use of labs by College Writing students is likely only to grow in coming years. Instructors are using the labs to give students opportunities to draft, revise, and copy-edit their papers in the company of their teacher and peers; they’re also using the labs to help students take advantage of the electronic research resources of UMass Libraries; and, increasingly, they’re using digital writing tools to structure peer response, class discussion, and publication activities. Finally, inspired by the Writing Program’s Tech Fellows Program, more and more sections of College Writing are experimenting with newer forms of literacy, like pod-casting and multi-modal composing.
Every year the Writing Program employs close to one hundred graduate TOs to teach Basic and College Writing. TOs are selected in a highly competitive process and go through a year-long intensive training program with an added year-and-a-half of close supervision and mentoring.

"Using Technology in College Writing": New Session for College Writing Teachers

By Peggy Woods, Assistant Director, Writing Program

Setting up a course SPARK page, requesting a class email list, navigating the instructor functions of SPIRE, and exploring the uses of UDrive were the focus of “Using Technology in College Writing,” a new session included in this year’s Writing Program Teacher Orientation. Christina Jones, the Writing Program’s graduate technology coordinator, introduced 32 new Teaching Associates to the pedagogical uses of SPARK, SPIRE, and the UDrive. New TOs were able to get hands-on experience exploring and navigating the University’s most used technological resources. As teachers uploaded their syllabi to their own course SPARK page and viewed their class rosters, pedagogical issues surrounding the ways to incorporate technology into the classroom were discussed. Issues were raised concerning how these forms of technology can make our lives as teachers easier and what limits need to be set so the technology doesn’t take over and overwhelm us. Due to the success of this session, a trip to a computer lab will become a standard part of our future orientations.

Writing Program Technology Fellows 2010-2011

The Technology Fellows are current Writing Program Teaching Associates who develop new infusions of technology into the College and Basic Writing curricula. This year, projects include the development of visual literacy skills and the use of Twitter to distill student essays.

The University Writing Committee, 2010-11

Judith Holmes, Legal Studies (chair); Holly Lawrence, ISOM; Ingrid Holm, ESL Program; Elizabeth Porto, ISOM; Sarah Hutton, Library; M.J. Peterson, Political Science; Karen Stevens, UWW; David Fleming, English; Stephen Olbrys Gencarella, Communication; Ernest May, Music; Deborah McCutchen, Provost’s Office; Heidi Bauer-Clapp, graduate student; Rand Nashi, undergraduate student

For more information, see http://www.umass.edu/senate/committees/univ_writing.html.