New Home for the Writing Center
by Haivan Hoang, Director, Writing Center

The Writing Center was delighted to be a part of the long-awaited dedication to the Learning Commons expansion on February 8, 2010. In an effort to make the Du Bois Library inviting to students, the Learning Commons created more space for students to research, write, and study together. And central to this vision of collaborative student learning: the Writing Center, a place where students can get advice from knowledgeable writing tutors in 45-minute sessions. The Writing Center may have a new home in the northern wing of the library’s lower level, but it has surely been part of writing education at UMass Amherst for much longer.

Writing tutors were advising students across campus—from the residence halls to the basement of Bartlett Hall—as early as the 1970s. By 1994, the Writing Center had dedicated space in 303 Bartlett Hall, neighboring the university’s Writing Program. But it was not until a decade later that the Writing Center would truly grow.

As a result of a new partnership between the Writing Program and the Learning Commons, the Writing Center found a place in the Du Bois Library in 2005. The more centrally located Center could better serve student writers from across campus. Such growth is evident when we consider that the Writing Center provided 430 tutorial sessions in 2000-2001 and close to 3,000 sessions in 2008-2009. Students report home languages as diverse as English, Cantonese, Spanish, Korean, and Russian, and they most often are majors within the School of Management, psychology, biology, English, and political science.

Moreover, tutors themselves have found it rewarding to work with fellow students and learn more about writing and writing education. Recent graduates say that prospective employers are drawn to their writing background, and quite a few have been offered coveted positions—e.g., as a public accountant, travel writer, technical writer, Fulbright English Teaching Assistant, TeachforAmerica instructor, and more.

In the midst of the bustling, newly-expanded Learning Commons, the Writing Center looks forward to supporting more students and meeting more faculty from across the university. Learn more about the Writing Center at www.umass.edu/writingcenter.
University Connections: The Writing Program Teams up with RAP
By Deirdre Vinyard, Deputy Director, Writing Program

No question—UMass is a big place, especially for brand new first year students. Residential Academic Programs (RAP) help ease new students into the UMass world by providing small, residentially-based learning communities to new students, and College Writing (CW) is proud to be a part of this effort—it is often one of the classes groups of dorm mates take together. But on the flip side, RAP and Residential First Year Experience (RFYE) have been helping to expand the classroom walls for students in CW by creating educational opportunities outside the normal teaching and learning spaces. College Writing teachers and RFYE administrators have been teaming up to take first year students on field trips, from as close as the campus art gallery to as far away as Boston, to make the curriculum come alive. Kelly Gray, who until recently was a First Year Experience Specialist, reports that the small class size of CW provides the perfect venue for creating learning experiences outside the classroom. Kelly has been supporting the efforts of CW teachers to take learning outside—RFYE provides transportation and funding to make these trips a reality. Kelly especially remembers the first such collaboration between RFYE and a CW teacher: Amy Dickinson (MFA 2007) took her class to MIT to see the architecture of a building they had discussed in one of their readings in class, turning an academic exercise into a real life experience. Just this past fall, Christina Jones, a current Teaching Associate in the Writing Program, took her RAP section of CW to Hartford to see a film.

Sometimes people assume that a RAP section of College Writing holds classes in the residential halls – and otherwise is just like any other class. But by teaming up with administrators such as Kelly, the RAP/College Writing connection provides students with so much more.
Assistant Professor Maria Bulzacchelli came to UMass in 2007, the same year that the University inaugurated an undergraduate major in Public Health. One of the things that attracted her to UMass, in fact, was the opportunity to work with undergraduate students (at many universities, public health is a graduate-only degree). Once here, she became interested in the department’s Junior Year Writing course, and has been active ever since in teaching, and thinking about, that course.

An expert in injury prevention, Bulzacchelli came to public health in a roundabout way. A psychology major at Bowdoin College, it was her minor in economics, and especially courses like the economics of population, that got her interested in public health. After college, Bulzacchelli’s first job was as a research assistant in the Psychiatry Department at Mass General Hospital in Boston. That job convinced Bulzacchelli that she was more interested in research, and especially research on population-level health issues, than clinical practice. A subsequent job at the Harvard School of Public Health confirmed her new career path. Soon after, she accepted an admissions offer to the PhD program in Health Policy and Management at the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, where she specialized in injury prevention. Bulzacchelli’s dissertation concerned the role of OSHA regulations in occupational injury prevention. She continues to work on that issue even as she now embarks on a new research project designed to help the U.S. Army reduce injuries by soldiers during basic training.

Bulzacchelli has now taught Public Health 320, the department’s Junior Year Writing course, three times. She loves it and is constantly thinking of ways to make it better. She likes the way the course introduces students to a broad range of topics and issues in public health, with writing used to help them explore the particular topics they find most interesting.

The central assignment of the course is a literature review, a 7-10 page paper that lays out “the state of the field” on a specific topic in public health. Bulzacchelli breaks down the assignment into a series of steps or tasks, each one involving writing of some kind. First, students come up with a topic, invariably one (e.g., childhood obesity) that turns out to be too broad to write a good 7-10 page literature review on. So, through exploratory reading, Bulzacchelli encourages students to refine their topics to something more narrow (e.g., school-based interventions in preventing childhood obesity).

The next step is an annotated bibliography, in which students summarize the articles and reports they’re finding via PubMed and other research databases. Then they write an outline, where they begin to organize what they’re learning into themes and arguments. The next step, the first draft of the review itself, is then subjected to peer review – each student reads and comments on the drafts of two classmates using a form Bulzacchelli devised. She finds this part of the process especially helpful for students – not only because they get so much detailed feedback on their own work, but because they see what their peers are writing about and how they’re going about it. The final version of the review is then turned into the professor for comments and a grade.

In teaching the course, Bulzacchelli has become a big fan of the UMass Writing Center, which she recommends to students who she thinks would benefit from additional peer feedback on their writing.
The University Writing Committee 2009-10

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