The Newsletter

“A Program That Really Works”:
Review of Junior Year Writing Finds Strengths, Challenges

By Stephen Olbrys Gencarella, Associate Professor of Communication

The 2008-2009 academic year was an exciting and productive one for the Junior Year Writing Program at UMass Amherst. In October, the University Writing Committee presented its five-year Review of the Program to the Faculty Senate. The Review commended the robust health and national prestige of the Program and concluded that it remains imperative to “sustain the high quality of advanced undergraduate writing instruction” here (19). The Review offered several recommendations to nourish the Program’s strengths, even in troubling economic times, including budgetary investment, maintenance of smaller class sizes, addressing ESL concerns, attention to the relationship between First and Junior Year Writing, and fostering community among Junior Year Writing instructors through workshops and similar events. The Review can be found at http://www.umass.edu/writingprogram/jy/index.html.

The Review praised the leadership of Nursing Professor Genevieve Chandler, who served as Associate Director of the Writing Program for Junior Year Writing from 2005 until 2008 and who has long championed the importance of writing in the undergraduate experience here. At a reception held for Junior Year Writing instructors and representatives in December, Professor Chandler’s stewardship of the Program was described as “indefatigable.” Junior Year Writing at UMass Amherst is large, diverse, and decentralized. There are close to 80 separate courses, administered by 53 different departments or units across eight schools and colleges, and serving nearly 4,500 students a year. In 2003, U.S. News & World Report named Junior Year Writing here one of 25 “Programs that Really Work” in writing in the disciplines.

Writing Program Wins National Award of Excellence

Recognizing more than a quarter century of leadership in student writing development, the Conference on College Composition and Communication named the UMass Amherst Writing Program one of three national Programs of Excellence for 2008-09. This is the highest honor given to university writing programs in the United States and comes from the nation’s oldest and largest organization of writing teachers, researchers, and program administrators.

Founded in 1982, the UMass Amherst Writing Program was one of the first in the country to combine a general first year writing requirement, satisfied by completion of College Writing (Englwrit112), with a discipline-specific junior year requirement, satisfied by an advanced writing course in each student’s major. The idea was to infuse writing throughout each student’s college career and across his or her studies. Including the fast-growing Writing Center, the Writing Program works with more than 10,000 students a year and remains one of the most important components of UMass’ General Education effort. (see photo, page 4.)
New Teachers Refresh Writing Program

by Patricia Zukowski, Assistant Director of the Writing Program

“I was thrilled,” exclaims new Teaching Associate (TO) Andrea Lawlor as she reflects on learning that she had been hired to teach College Writing (Englwrit 112) in the Writing Program starting Fall 2008. Such enthusiasm, along with evident dedication and reflection, are the hallmarks of our TOs.

Having already taught for three years at Temple University, Andrea didn’t have the jitters that some new TOs face. Still she found orientation to be an exciting and highly instructive experience. “I was particularly impressed by the creativity and the amazing wealth of ideas, particularly from the Resource Staff.” Andrea also appreciates the reasonable workload supported by the Writing Program.

“At Temple, we taught two courses one semester, and one course plus a Research Assistantship the other.” The TO workload in the Writing Program of one course each semester brings responsibilities closer to the ideal for both effectively teaching students and balancing her work in the MFA fiction program.

Grading is of particular interest to Andrea. “Grading raises deeper questions about pedagogy and how we communicate with students,” she said. “I appreciate working with a portfolio system, which allows for grading a student’s writing process holistically.” We’re glad that Andrea’s so passionate about being in the Writing Program—we’re lucky to have her here.

On Beyond Google: Writing With the Library

By Peggy Woods, Assistant Director of the Writing Program

There isn’t much distance between Bartlett Hall and the W.E.B. Du Bois Library. And thanks to Emily Alling and the research librarian staff, the distance between College Writing and the library is even shorter. Walking into the library can be a bit intimidating for many first-year students. However, attempting to navigate the multitude of databases can be even more overwhelming, so overwhelming that many students stick to the research tool they know—Google. Through a partnership with the library, College Writing is moving first-year students into the library and beyond Google. Each year, Emily Alling, Coordinator of the Learning Commons & Undergraduate Library Services, presents a training workshop focusing on the research literacy skills our College Writing students need to discover and evaluate sources. Our instructors also receive hands-on experience maneuvering through the three key databases our students will use. Becoming aware of the 24/7 “Ask the Librarian” service, how to use UMLinks, and the importance of accessing research databases through the library enables both students and instructors to take full advantage of the library resources.

Rigorous Training Prepares Writing Center Tutors

by Carolyn Warger, Writing Center Tutor

What do English and philosophy major RJ Boutelle, Jr., biology major Yasemin Ayraman, and accounting major Carolyn Warger all have in common? All three undergraduates are writing tutors in the University of Massachusetts Amherst Writing Center. The Writing Center, located in the lower level of the W.E.B. Du Bois Library, is a place where student writers can have a knowledgeable writing tutor respond to their writing and offer revision and editing strategies. What students and faculty may not realize is that the Writing Center is moreover a place for forty fellow tutors and I to cultivate fresh approaches to writing and writing education.

Undergraduate students who work as writing tutors are a select bunch who have taken or are taking the competitive-enrollment two-course sequence, English 329H and 298H. These courses are a rigorous introduction to social theories of writing, research on writing processes and genres, and writing pedagogy. During his time at the Center, RJ has developed a personal instructional philosophy which will serve him in his future as an educator. Having worked with multilingual writers, he is now seeking a Fulbright English Teaching Assistantship in Argentina, where he hopes to teach English and foster both fluency and an improved understanding of larger lexical concepts. Similarly, Yasemin, a biology major with a minor in Chinese, is interested in the tutorial interactions she has with diverse writers. She enjoys tutoring because it is not just a conversation about writing, but about ideas, backgrounds, and cultures. Her conversations with students from different linguistic, cultural, and disciplinary backgrounds have broadened her educational experience.

Even as tutoring writers most directly prepares future educators like RJ, the conversations that we have about writing and cultural contexts can support many professional aspirations. For Yasemin, a cultural awareness will aid her in her pursuit of a medical degree. For me, as an Accounting major, I recognize that the business field is built on the ability to communicate effectively with others, in both conveying one’s own ideas and negotiating ideas and meanings with others. My tenure in the Center has taught me to work with others across differing areas of expertise, and the experience I have gained with communicative forms will surely contribute to my work as a public accountant, which I will begin post-graduation. To be sure, the Writing Center is a site where students and tutors alike can grow as writers.

Note: For information about the tutor application process, please send a note to writingcenter@acad.umass.edu.
Writing course for psychology majors. The course is taught in sections at UMass Amherst is Psychology 392, a 4-credit Junior Year seminar. Joan DeGeorge, a third year PhD student in psychology whose area of expertise is psychotherapy and who is interested in the relationship between therapist and client. Joan did her undergraduate work at Sarah Lawrence, where almost every course, no matter the topic, required a substantial writing project. Here, at UMass, she has appreciated how the Psychology Department takes a holistic approach to the profession, encouraging students like her to balance their clinical, teaching, and research work. It’s also a department, says Joan, that really values good writing.

Joan has now taught Psych 392 five times. Her own section, subtitled “How Therapy Works,” is an overview of psychotherapy. Learning in the course always involves writing, though, whether it’s informal, in-class assignments or longer research-based projects where students can really delve into a topic. As an example of how she combines writing instruction with content learning, in the unit on psychoanalytic therapies, Joan gives students an actual case study from Freud and asks them to write up their own analysis.

Junior Year Instructor Inspires Writing
By David Fleming, Director of the Writing Program

One of the longest-running and most successful writing courses at UMass Amherst is Psychology 392, a 4-credit Junior Year Writing course for psychology majors. The course is taught in stand-alone sections of 20 by graduate student Teaching Associates (TOs). Prof. Elizabeth Jakob trains and mentors the TOs, supervises all the different sections, and is responsible for the overall structure of the course. The TOs design their own sections around specific topics (e.g., post traumatic stress disorder), drawing on their own areas of expertise. All students, regardless of section, make their way through the same four assignments, including “Writing for the Public” and “Constructing an Argument,” and work their papers through the same drafting process, which includes extensive peer review and substantial revision.

One TO who regularly teaches Psychology 392 is Joan DeGeorge, a third year PhD student in psychology whose area of expertise is psychotherapy and who is interested in the relationship between therapist and client. Joan did her undergraduate work at Sarah Lawrence, where almost every course, no matter the topic, required a substantial writing project. Here, at UMass, she has appreciated how the Psychology Department takes a holistic approach to the profession, encouraging students like her to balance their clinical, teaching, and research work. It’s also a department, says Joan, that really values good writing.

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Basic Writing Explores Literacies
By Deirdre Vinyard, Deputy Director, Writing Program

In Fall 2008, the Basic Writing Course (ENGLWRIT 111) launched “Reading Multiple Literacies: An Exploration of Language, Identity and Power” after a two year, collaborative effort. This collection of readings, compiled by a committee of Writing Program Teaching Associates and staff, focuses on the many languages we all use and the many ways we use them. The new text is a collection of 24 essays on topics ranging from the language of IM’ing to the discourse of racism and features a wide range of authors, including Amy Tan, bell hooks, Richard Rodriguez, Eleanor Kutz, Min Zhan Lu, and David Sedaris. In addition, Gustavo Llarull, a Writing Program Teaching Associate and graduate student in the UMass MFA Fiction program, contributed “Out of the Writing Closet: The Construction of a Bilingual Identity,” an essay he wrote for this book. Accompanying curriculum can be found on the Writing Program website.

Plugging In with Tech Fellows
By Leslie Bradshaw, Technology Coordinator, Writing Program

Facebook. Flickr. Podcasts. Twitter. Students today participate in an alphabet-soup of digital technologies. As teachers of writing, we are bound to use some of these: Microsoft Word, Spark, and email are all likely spots where technology enters our pedagogy. But what if we looked into some of the other digital tools available? How might our students’ experiences and expertise change the dynamic of the classroom? What might we learn about composing by looking beyond print text? These questions are at the very center of the Writing Program’s Technology Fellows project.

Begun by Donna LeCourt in 2007 through a grant and now funded by the Writing Program, the Tech Fellows are seven veteran teachers of College Writing (Englwrit 112) who want to think about new ways to infuse technology into their writing courses. This desire comes not only from the inevitable cultural push of these forces, but also from a firm belief that exploring new modes of writing can help us become more rhetorically-aware writers. For some of the Tech Fellows, this might mean focusing on a specific technology; Teaching Associate Tim Zajac and his students have explored podcasting and how aural texts negotiate tone and authority. Other TOs, like Megan Texler, are looking specifically at moments in the writing process, like reflective writing, and are exploring ways that various visual and audio technologies might impact students’ awareness of their writing processes.

Teaching with technology can also be tricky, and that’s why having a support system, like Tech Fellows, really helps with the planning and execution of new projects. When others voice their opinions and share their experiences, we can work together to carefully consider the goals and possible problems of introducing a given technology into the classroom. That kind of support is really the heart of the Technology Fellows: it’s a space where we can come together to critically consider new technologies and discuss ways to usefully incorporate them into our classrooms.
Writing Program Honored with National Award

By Amber Engelson

This spring, National Public Radio selected an essay written by a UMass student to feature in the This I Believe series. Daniel Wu’s moving essay, “A Thousand Words,” was originally written for an assignment in Amber Engelson’s College Writing (Englwrit 112) class. Wu commented that in Engelson’s class his writing “became less about obligation and more about expression.” His expression shines in his writing, now showcased on the NPR website.

Writing Program Staff
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The University Writing Committee, 2008-09

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Steven Brewer, Biology
Ingrid Holm, ESL Program
Judith Holmes, Legal Studies
David Fleming, English
Stephen Olbrys Gencarella, Communication
Matt Ouellett, Center for Teaching
Ernest May, Music
Amber Engelson, graduate student
Ryan Brundage, undergraduate student

Former Directors Anne Herrington, left, and Donna LeCourt share in the Writing Program’s success with David Fleming, current Director.