The Writing Campus

Newsletter of the George Mason University Writing Across the Curriculum Program

Mason's Writing Across the Curriculum Program Again Ranks Among Nation's Best

By: Cathy Cruise

A devotion for putting pen to paper has helped George Mason University's Writing Across the Curriculum Program rank high, for the 13th year in a row, on U.S. News & World Report's best-of list for Writing in the Disciplines. George Mason is one of only 11 schools in the country, and one of only three public universities, to achieve this ranking, and proudly takes its place alongside such institutions as Harvard, Brown and Princeton for contributions to writing excellence.

In an era of abbreviated emails, posts, texts and tweets, why does learning to write not just well, but genuinely and fully, still matter?

"To really learn something deeply, it's important we write about it," says Michelle LaFrance, director of Writing Across the Curriculum. "There's something about the process of writing about personal experiences or things we've learned from a textbook, professor or lab that writing brings into high relief. It activates a type of deep learning that can be difficult, especially in an age of distraction, to achieve."

Started in 1993, the program encompasses more than 75 writing-intensive courses—one in every undergraduate major. It also supports writing initiatives for graduate students and Mason faculty with blogs, speakers, write-ins, retreats and platforms for writing awards, conferences and publications.

LaFrance explains that, while most universities are largely writing-based, Mason in particular has a passion, and history, for the practice. "Mason has long been known for its culture of writing," she says. "It values a vertical writing curriculum, where students are asked to write frequently, at many different stages through undergraduate and graduate majors, and then are supported again as faculty, as professionals."

All undergraduate students are required to take general composition courses offering analytical tools they'll need as writers. Because these classes are taught by instructors within each major, they present specific information on how the problem-solving practices of that discipline intricately connect to professional writing experiences students will encounter in their careers. LaFrance says she often hears from employers how "they really want students who have a strong writing ability. As MIT is famous for saying, 'The engineers who can't write end up working for the engineers who can.'"

Because writing also allows us to express ourselves, it evokes more than academic proficiency, nourishing a sense of well-being that can't be achieved in any other way, LaFrance says. "Writing requires that we slow down, and allows us to bring emotion, passion and intellect into a sort of collaborative synergy."

To maintain its relevancy in an increasingly digital world, the program is developing short, pedagogically oriented blog posts, videos and PowerPoint resources for busy faculty. These allow instructors to quickly learn teaching principles they can bring back to their courses. The Writing Campus blog invites faculty to share assignments, activities and approaches to teaching writing. A writing fellows program is now in the works as well, and a pilot group for this initiative is already underway within Mason's School of Business.

Director's Note

Welcome to the 2014-2015 issue of the WAC program newsletter.

Mason has a long history of investing in support for student writers—a commitment to the deep learning activated by writing. These values are written into the Writing Intensive (or "WI") Course Criteria: every undergraduate student will receive feedback on their writing and be asked to revise in response to that feedback, writing courses will be capped to increase individual attention, and faculty will speak explicitly to what it means to write within the discipline.

Research in the field of Composition and Rhetoric has shown us over the last thirty years that these pedagogical elements are required to nurture the critical thinking, development of voice, independent abilities as researchers, and rhetorical awareness central to savvy writing. Our mission to serve Mason's students and faculty remains the same as it did in 1993 when the faculty senate voted to institute the WI course for all undergraduates and to establish the Writing Across the Curriculum committee. We look forward to continuing our work with you well into the future.

Teach in touch,
Michelle LaFrance, PhD
Director, Writing Across the Curriculum

Supporting Faculty Writers: Writing Retreats

By: Caitlin Holmes

With the support of Mason's Provost Office and Center for Teaching and Faculty Excellence, the Writing Across the Curriculum Program hosted two Faculty Writing Retreats in the 2014-2015 academic year. Such retreats had occurred in the past under the supervision of the Northern Virginia Writing Project, but not for quite some time. This post will review the different structures of the May 2014 and January 2015 retreats, give summaries of evaluation results for both retreats, and provide a few concluding thoughts about what we may try in the future at Mason.

It is important to acknowledge why Faculty Writing Retreats are an important development in the first place. Mason's faculty culture is – as with all institutions – unique. With our campuses located in the Washington DC metro area (from Manassas to Arlington, Fairfax to Loudon), many faculty members commute long distances to campus or are only on campus a few days a week. Community amongst faculty is consequently not as strong as it might be in a smaller city or more isolated college town.

May 2014 Retreat

The May 2014 retreat took place over 4 days after the end of the semester. Faculty met daily and separated into a variety of self-selected groups ("Shut Up and Write," "Goal Setting, then Shut Up and Write," and a draft discussion workshop), coming back together for discussion and workshops at lunch. Participants' feedback offered an interesting way of thinking about how faculty writing retreats function within the university community. For example, one participant wrote, "I am really surprised by how valuable this experience has been. I expected to get undisturbed time to write but did not anticipate the value of the group setting and discussions. I learned more about time management than I expected to and it was especially useful to learn that my challenges were shared by others. The small group was a safe space to discuss this." Shared writing experiences consequently led to shared institutional experiences. As another participant put it, "We really need this culture, need this community. It helps us to feel we are not working alone."

The Benefits of Embedded Peer Tutors

By: Jackie D. Brown

Over the past two semesters, the School of Business partnered with the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program to develop and launch an initiative that brought curriculum-based writing fellows into the SOM 301 classroom, which is currently the required writing-intensive course for all business majors.

In terms of programmatic design, WAC funded three writing fellows in the fall and two in the spring of 2014. Each faculty member hand-selected her/his writing fellow from the previous semester. Each writing fellow had been through the course the semester before and therefore was familiar with both the course content and the faculty member's expectations. The writing fellows were expected to attend weekly SOM 301 labs, meetings with the WAC program support liaison, and meetings with the School of Business faculty members. In addition, writing fellows were expected to meet with students one-on-one outside of class to provide feedback on their writing. The writing fellows reached 141 students over the year.

Based on survey results, classroom observations, and one-on-one discussions, this program has been effective in improving students' confidence with writing and thinking about writing, improving students' learning experience overall, as well as with reinforcing writing fellows' commitment and dedication to their discipline.

As a faculty member having worked directly with a writing fellow for two semesters now, I found students to be appreciative of the extra assistance and direction with their writing and even somewhat eager to hear a peer's viewpoint on their work. In addition, the writing fellows were appreciative of the received mentoring and the chance to assist their peers. Overall, my experience with the writing fellows program has been helpful in that it has provided me with a new perspective on how I approach the classroom—something I find invaluable as a faculty member—and a rewarding opportunity to mentor a budding scholar.

New Professional Resource: The Writing Campus

By: Caitlin Dungan

Over the course of the year, Mason WAC has put major effort into expanding the reach and purpose of our blog, The Writing Campus. Since the first post in February of 2014, the blog has undergone substantial changes, both in appearance and in its overall mission. More than just an online space where faculty can discuss issues related to teaching writing intensive courses across disciplines, the intention is now for the blog to evolve into a hybrid genre of its own. Part scholarly journal, part faculty development resource compendium, The Writing Campus aims to combine and collect helpful learning resources to better assist faculty writing across the disciplines, while also providing space to discuss new and compelling issues related to the teaching of writing in a scholarly yet accessible way.

As the submissions page says, "Here at The Writing Campus, we want to explode your ideas about the genre of blogging. Our goal is to create conversation, share practices and observations, and to provide support for faculty writing instructors who teach writing in many different contexts. We therefore welcome a range of styles, approaches, and topics: Traditional. Hybrid. Multi-Modal. Print. Personal. Scholarly. Reflective. Empirical." To that end, submissions are accepted from all levels – from administrators and faculty to graduate and undergraduate students. All articles go through a double-blind peer review process before they are accepted and posted.

The content of the articles posted varies widely, as do the disciplines represented. Posts explore digital literacies, the writing process, and faculty development. Over the next year, The Writing Campus will be focusing on two new recurring series: "Supporting Faculty Writers" and "Undergraduate Writing Perspectives."

THE WRITING CAMPUS

A Blog for Writing Across the Curriculum Faculty

Wikipedia: What Professors Tell Students and What Students Do

By: Mikal Cardine

The average undergraduate will hear a variety of conflicting viewpoints from their university professors on the topic of Wikipedia. While some professors will openly express distrust of Wikipedia as a source for research, others are more open to the use of Wikipedia as a learning tool. While Middlebury College outright banned undergraduates from citing Wikipedia in any academic essay—stating that "students need to be taught to go for quality information, not just convenience" (Jaschik)—professors such as Mark Kissling argue that faculty do a disservice to their students if they don't help them to understand why instructors are concerned about the source. As Kissling writes, professors have a duty to teach "their students to learn to critically read Wikipedia… helping them understand how it is created, how it defines and positions knowledge, and what it makes possible and fails to do" (Kissling).

As an undergraduate, I have to admit that Wikipedia is in. Originally branded as untrustworthy, the site is now our go-to research tool – but why? Has student scholarship fallen so far? Or has Wikipedia possibly become a useful research tool? Prompted to learn more, I decided to do a little research and created a simple survey to determine Wikipedia's current value to both professors and students.

I approached my fellow classmates with the following questions: "How many of your professors say NO to (or tell you not to use) Wikipedia?" and "When a professor says NO to Wikipedia, how often do you use it anyway to brainstorm or gain a direction?"

The results confirmed what most would assume: professors don't seem to care for Wikipedia, and their students use it anyway. Out of 30 student participants, 18 respondents said that most of their professors forbid any use of the site. Of those 18 respondents, 15 student participants said that they often use Wikipedia in spite of what their instructors say, although students also added that they would "Never (use Wikipedia) as a source for facts" (Peirce) or "use it in any real research" (Sachs).

The reasons for turning to Wikipedia were all essentially the same: "Sometimes you just need the general idea without scrolling through a 60 page scholarly article" says one student (Garbarino) while another explains that "the interconnected articles make it easy to hop from research on one topic to another" (Raley).

Students shy away from actually using the information they find on Wikipedia, as most are afraid of – in the words of one respondent – "getting flunked" (Lowery). Instead, those who use the site see it as a stepping-stone from an abstract idea to a manageable and concrete direction for their research.

While the initial results may give the impression of rebellious students, more than half of the students who use Wikipedia regularly answered that most of their professors allow or even encourage it. Students with pro-Wikipedia professors said that their instructors "encourage it for learning and brainstorming" (Lash) and allow students to "use it as a place to start our research" (Webber).

One student gave a slightly different, more in-depth response, explaining, "Professors encourage us to read Wikipedia…because it forces us to consider the construction of knowledge and the inevitable disparity between the general public's perception of history and the actual facts" (Sachs).

Intrigued by my findings, I did some outside research and found that writing centers at universities like Yale and Harvard have statements available on Wikipedia. The Yale College Writing Center states that, "Some professors will warn you not to use Wikipedia" but "Wikipedia merits additional attention because of its recent growth and popularity" (Yale). Harvard's College Writing Program offered a post entitled "What's Wrong with Wikipedia?" which concedes that just because "Wikipedia is not a reliable source for academic research doesn't mean that it's wrong to use basic reference materials when you're trying to familiarize yourself with a topic" (Harvard).

It seems that these universities and my student participants have caught on to the same realization: Wikipedia could play a valuable role in our creation of knowledge through college writing. As students, we take a genuine interest in the construction of knowledge and the complexity of the tools at our disposal. Wikipedia is a relevant part of that process, and it therefore merits our attention. Instead of simply banning the site, professors should give their students more credit by instructing us on the realities of Wikipedia – both its benefits and its pitfalls. This way, we could approach research with a real understanding of what we're getting ourselves into.

Mikal Cardine is a senior studying English at George Mason. She previously worked with WAC to create disciplinary writing guides for student use.
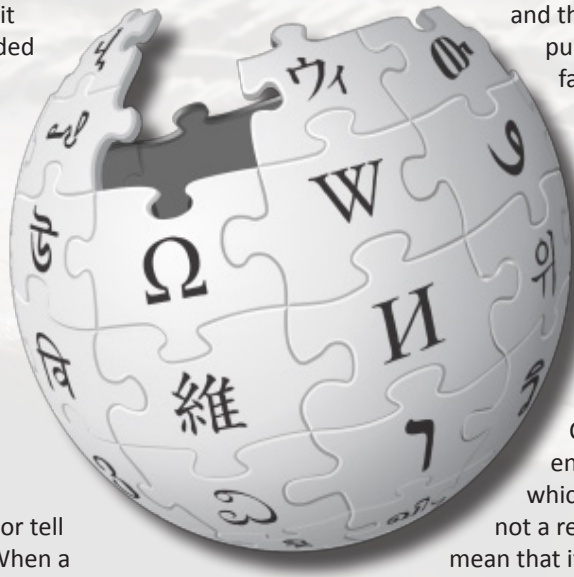
Working with Multilingual Writers

By: Caitlin Dungan

In the past several months, Mason WAC has had the privilege of working with Anna Habib and Karyn Mallett as we seek to expand our understanding of best practices for working with multilingual writers. Both Anna and Karyn bring years of experience teaching and mentoring these students, who all have different needs and cultural concepts of what constitutes strong writing. Both were kind enough to agree to an interview wherein they laid out what they believe to be the best general tips, suggestions, and solutions to common problems or questions when faculty first begin teaching multilingual writers. Following the interview, they gave two wonderful presentations at Mason's Multilingual Writing Summit in January.

In both the summit and the interview, Anna and Karyn addressed the difficult balance that faculty often confront between wanting to give helpful, global feedback to students but having trouble doing so due to the distracting nature of persistent grammatical errors. They addressed this issue by providing alternative commenting strategies that minimize work for the instructor while also providing a lesson for the student, such as error location or verbal cues rather than directly correcting every sentence-level error.

One of the underlying issues that contributes to the disconnect between what faculty expect in written assignments and what multilingual students hand in is a lack of clarity about faculty expectations. The approach to bypassing this issue is two-fold: The instructor should be as explicit as possible about what they will be looking for in an assignment, but also, as Anna and Karyn point out, about what sort of reading they expect students to be doing. Much of the confusion that comes through in multilingual student writers' work is due to a misunderstanding about how to read a text and what to be looking for when they do.

As Anna and Karyn have found, being explicit about this process with students, as well as possibly providing questions for guided reading, has significantly increased the content strength of the written work they receive from their students.

Here are a few highlights from their presentation:

Managing Writing Expectations: Be Clear

When I think about writing assignments in my course, I'd say...

- Writing is a product in which students **display** their comprehension/knowledge of the course content
- Writing is a tool students use to **reflect** personally on a topic
- Writing is the means by which I evaluate students' ability to **synthesize, analyze, summarize,** and **compare**
- Writing is a tool student use to **explore** a topic
- Writing is an outlet for **creative** expression
- Writing is a **process** involving many phases and drafts
- Writing is meant to be **reviewed/shared** in class
- Writing is a regular in-class **activity**
- **Writing is a product that allows me to assess students' grammar**

GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY

Innovative – Diverse - Entrepreneurial - Accessible

4 General Guidelines for Giving Feedback to Multilingual Writers

1. Give top priority to the most serious errors: those that affect a reader's comprehension of the text.
2. Give high priority to those errors which occur most frequently.
3. Consider the individual student's level of writing proficiency.
4. Consider a consistent method for marking errors.

Do not feel that you must given written error feedback on every single paper students write!

Participants' comments also revealed the extent to which writing is not simply a productive process, but also one bound up in reading, analysis, formatting, and submission requirements. One respondent noted, "I was primarily editing & finishing full book MSS, so I didn't do much writing & revising, but I did ship off 1 final monograph MS & I edited collection MS for initial review." Another said, "The equivalent of 8 pages (?) not including several pages of notes (etc.)." Note-taking, reading, fixing tables, editing manuscripts, running data, working on indexes – all of these activities reflected the very different positions and disciplinary expectations for writing production.
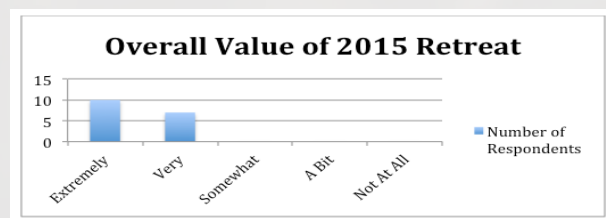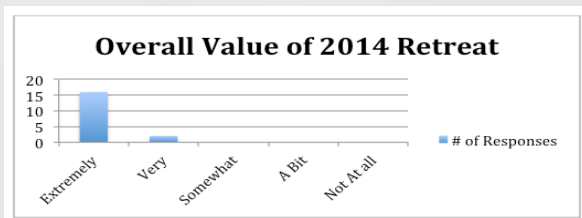
January 2015 Retreat

The January retreat was much shorter than the spring retreat – only 2 days. Faculty were once again divided into four self-selected groups (2 "Shut Up and Write," 1 "Goal Setting, then Shut Up and Write," and 1 draft discussion workshop), with conversation during lunch.

Respondents' comments also offered feedback about what they appreciated most about the retreat. Again, the sense of community amongst writers emerged as a top reason why faculty liked the event so much. Participants wrote, "It's so invigorating to chat w/ others who value writing and hear/learn about all the wonderful projects going on at Mason. I feel I can talk (more informed) about the dept. level activities going on better than I could before this." Also, "The highlight is really the sense of community and the dedicated time to work." In fact, one respondent felt like she might have needed more community in writing than she originally thought: "I think that even though I had joined the 'shut up & write' group, I might have enjoyed more frequent check-ins after all."

Having the retreat at the start of the semester rather than the start of summer changed the dynamics of the event. Faculty had to take time away from course preparation, which led to some fascinating comments in terms of writing in the classroom. In addition to workshops on book publishing, tenure requirements, and writing strategies, respondents suggested workshops on helping graduate student writers and publishing in disciplinary writing pedagogy.

Overall Conclusions

These two retreats raised questions about the different needs that they may have in successfully completing that research. Time and space were, naturally, the two needs that respondents identified most frequently as key to their success. That there were benefits other than productivity – such as figuring out more about how the university, tenure, writing, and teaching work; finding a sense of community and support amongst other writers; and thinking about writing pedagogy as an extension of personal writing – invites further study about the relationship between faculty professional development and its impact on student writing, especially in disciplines outside of rhetoric and composition where writing pedagogy is not featured as centrally in graduate coursework.

Overall Value of 2014 Retreat

Overall Value of 2015 Retreat