

WRITING @ CENTER

Publication of the George Mason University Writing Center and Writing Across the Curriculum Program

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News from the Center

Good News: This semester, the Provost allocated a budget so that the Writing Center is able to pay peer tutors a small stipend when they tutor in the Writing Center as part of CAS 390: Peer Tutoring in Writing in the Disciplines.

GMU Writing in Disciplines Program Nationally Ranked: For the second year in a row, *US News and World Reports'* College Issue has named George Mason University's Writing in the Disciplines program (WID/WAC) among the top thirteen in the country. Only five on the list are public institutions.

As of November 14 of the **current fall semester**, the Writing Center has seen a total of

- ✍ 709 clients in
- ✍ 1,037 sessions.

“Celebration of Writing” Recognizes Faculty WAC/Assessment Efforts

by Megan Kelly, GRA, OIA/WAC

“This is a tremendously important aspect of George Mason University,” Provost Stearns told a room full of faculty and administrators who had been invited to a “celebration of writing” held in George’s on September 17th. Stearns was referring to the inclusion of writing as an integral part of the curricula in the majors. In spite of the extra time and effort it requires, Stearns noted, “it is absolutely essential to make sure that writing becomes a component of any disciplinary or professional experience.” He went on to praise the exceptional dedication that faculty have demonstrated toward student writing in the disciplines – a dedication that was also recognized for the second year in a row by our high ranking in *US News and World Report*.

The Celebration reception recognized the work of faculty who had been participating in assessing student writing competence in response to a mandate from the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV). Participants included faculty from the School of Management, the College of Nursing and Health Science, the College of Visual and Performing Arts, and, in CAS, from Communication, English, Philosophy and Religious Studies, Psychology, and Public and International Affairs.

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Issue Papers: Putting Students in Charge of Their Own Learning

by Debra Bergoffen, Philosophy, Women’s Studies, Cultural Studies

One of the challenges that confronts me as a professor of the humanities (though I doubt that this is only true of the humanities) is the task of transforming passive consumers of information into engaged students of ideas. To paraphrase Simone de Beauvoir, one does not enter the university a student; one (hopefully) leaves as a student. As one of those charged with effecting this transformation I see it requiring two types of strategies: one responsive to the situation of the classroom; one attentive to the circumstances outside the classroom. Responding to the situation of the classroom is, I think, a performative art, though this does not mean that teaching is a form of entertainment. Responding to the situation outside the classroom means remembering that students sign up for courses not classes. To explain, I’ll turn to my issue paper assignment.

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“It sucked to be alive back then”: Critical Analysis, Interpretation, and Writing About Data

by David Beach, Assistant Director of English Composition

Every semester, I ask my students to examine data from “The Diseases, and Casualties in London this year being 1632,” compiled by John Graunt and found in *Bills of Mortality*. Some students Google, some giggle over causes of death such as *rising of the lights or overlaid*, and some sit perplexed. Then I ask the students what they notice about the data. One day, a student responded, “It sucked to be alive back then.” We all laughed. But his comment was an apt interpretation of the numbers. We can validate this interpretation by exploring 17th century mortality data and comparing it to 21st century data. Data does tell a story, and one of our tasks is to teach students the skills to tell that story.

Students in general education courses will often intuit the meaning behind data, but when asked to use data in a writing assignment, many fumble with words, logic, and/or structure. I find discussing Graunt’s data helps students analyze data in context, create questions about data, formulate new hypotheses around data, compare historical and current data, and write about data meaningfully.

There are many vague and odd causes of death like ‘teeth’, ‘rising of the lights’, ‘planet’, ‘quinsie’, ‘grief’, ‘suddenly’. These show how differently people described and understood death and its concepts. —Alex K.

Students are given the Graunt handout (available at <http://classweb.gmu.edu/dbeach/graunt.htm>) and asked to examine the data and note what life and death might have been like in 17th century London and how the data might be different today. After 10 minutes, we begin discussion. The overarching question, “What are some of these things?” is answered when I produce modern terminology.

We still have people that die from old age, people that die from sudden ailments like heart attacks or strokes. But what you also see is our definitions have become more scientific in a sense. Yes when someone has a hemorrhage their [sic] skin turns purple because of the blood in the skin. But they named it “purple” not knowing what it truly was, and therefore we have more scientific names and descriptions of the diseases. —Bryan C.

A common student response is that 1632 taxonomies are not *scientific*. We then explore how science develops—by observation, hypothesis, and analysis—and how a 17th century understanding of anatomy, physiology, and pathology would serve as the *scientific* method of classification: a dead body has purple patches, an incision on a purple patch of skin results in

no different effect than an incision on a non-purple patch of skin; therefore, the person is afflicted with *purples*.

Below is a sample of data from *Bills of Mortality*. I also give students (after the initial assignment) a translation of the antiquated terms compiled by S. Cazalet at <http://www.homeoint.org/cazalet/oldnames.htm>.

Affrighted	1
Aged	628
Ague	43
Apoplex, and Meagram	17
Bloody Flux	348
Burst, and Rupture	9
Cancer, and Wolf	10
Childbed	171
Jaundies	43
Jawfain	8
Impostume	74
Kil'd by several accidents	46
King's Evil	38
Lethargic	2
Made away themselves	15
Christened: Males	4,994
Females	4,590
In all	9,584

Then, I ask students to calculate simple statistics. Here’s an example:

- How many dead were reported? (8,704).
- What is the most frequent cause of death and its percentage of the whole? (*Chrisomes and infants*, 21.6%).
- What is the ratio of natural deaths to man-made deaths? (49:1).
- What is the mortality rate for children? (31.5% based solely on two specific categories: *Chrisomes and infants* [unbaptized and recently baptized infants] and *Teeth* [children who are teething and succumb to bacterial infections]).
- What is a net growth rate? (+49 based on the number of children christened versus the number of men and women buried).

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Tutoring Online: How OWL Works

by Matt Kollmeyer, Writing Center Graduate Tutor

“Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.”

—Chinese proverb, *The International Thesaurus of Quotations*

And so it is at the Writing Center, where tutors help clients* improve their writing, not by proofreading or correcting their papers, but by working with the clients themselves—by listening to them read, by asking questions, and by teaching to examples that occur within a larger pattern of error. All well and good, you might say, for a face-to-face session, but how is that spirit of cooperation kept alive with the Online Writing Lab (OWL), where the client emails a paper and the tutor responds but once? Where’s the back and forth—the Q&A—there? Aye, there’s the rub.

The dynamics of OWL and live sessions differ. That’s certain. Ask a client who’s been to several face-to-face sessions, and he’ll likely tell you that tutors resist taking possession of the client’s paper. If the client has brought in a separate copy, the tutor will gladly take that, but if, as is more often the case, there is only one copy in the room, the tutor will probably scoot her chair a bit closer and look on with the client. Writing Center tutors can be said to work more *with* their clients than *for* them.

In an OWL session, on the other hand, the tutor has no choice but to take possession of the paper. The client emails her a copy, she reads it in a different time and place, and sends it back with comments. It’s the specific nature of those comments, however, that allows OWL sessions to stay true to the Writing Center’s goal of furthering the development of the writer as opposed to sending him away with a marked-up copy of his paper and no greater understanding of the concepts involved nor a greater passion for realizing his potential as a writer among writers.

Getting Started

The OWL session begins much the same way a face-to-face one does. In his email, the client has named the areas he’d like the OWL tutor to focus on. With these concerns in mind, the tutor reads the paper—in its entirety if it’s only a few pages long; the first two or three pages if it’s much longer than that. Though the style of commentary may differ from OWL tutor to OWL tutor, the basic aims don’t change: to foster in the client a keener understanding of his most common challenges and to suggest paths toward improvement.

Commenting on Focus and Structure

Suppose a client sends a paper, the thesis statement of which—strong though it may be—is not supported in the paragraphs

that follow it. Instead of simply commenting that the body of the paper needs to support the original thesis, the OWL tutor might ask the client, rhetorically, in writing, what his understanding of the purposes of a thesis statement is. The tutor might then write another question, asking the client if he thinks those purposes have been satisfied. At this point, the tutor might then explain, in writing, how to arrange arguments within a paper, what constitutes persuasive evidence, and so on, adding the caveat that the client might want to consider consulting other sources: the professor who assigned the paper, an MLA or APA website, or a professional organization of the discipline in which he’s writing.



Working on the Sentence Level

Regarding sentence level concerns, OWL tutors take essentially the same approach used in face-to-face sessions. They teach to examples occurring within a larger pattern, a method which differs from proofreading in an important way. Suppose a client’s paper contains several instances of subject-verb disagreement. Instead of correcting these mistakes one-by-one, the OWL tutor might highlight one or two examples and then mention the rule of grammar at play. With the principle explained, the OWL tutor can then ask the client to reexamine the highlighted sentences. At this point, the tutor may then offer a corrected version of the sentence, not to do the client’s work, but to offer a concrete example of, in this case, subject-verb agreement. But isn’t that editing? one might ask. In fact, it isn’t. Not only does the OWL tutor not correct each instance within the pattern of error, she doesn’t even highlight each instance. She leaves that to the client. It’s an excellent opportunity to put to immediate use the ideas so recently discussed. If practice makes perfect, then this approach is more effective than editing.

Errors That Resist Short Explanation

Sometimes, though, tidy patterns don’t exist. A paper might display a number of concerns that don’t lend themselves to quick categorization. Suppose, for instance, that the following three sentences represent the closest thing to a pattern in a client’s paper: 1) The variables were not controlled was a flaw in the experiment. 2) Not wanting to loose valuable data, the initial interviews ended. 3) In furthermore, the hypothesis don’t even tested. It would be difficult to group these sentences in a category more specific than garbled syntax. In such cases, the OWL tutor might take a more global view of sentence structure, explaining that the meaning of an effective

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Tips for Using Writing in Large Classes

Objectives:

- To focus and maintain student attention during lectures and other presentations.
- To help overcome the anonymity that often occurs in large classes among students and between teacher and student.
- To give students regular practice in writing to conceptualize and synthesize.
- To help the teacher track student needs for clarification of concepts.
- To enable teacher feedback to students, while minimizing “paper load.”

Techniques:

- “Discussion Starters” and “Class Closers”—quick, informal assignments at start of class (to focus attention) and end of class (to summarize/synthesize); may be collected but need not be (see “quick reads”).
- “Quick Reads”—occasional skimming of “class closers” by teacher to check participation and see where students might need additional explanation in next class.
- “Note-making vs. Note-taking”—classtime spent early in course to teach students how best to take notes and then revise them for better understanding (Farrington).
- “Log, ‘Blog,’ or Online Forum”—using WebCT, Townhall, or student webpages for weekly brief responses to teacher prompts.
- “Break Writes”—occasionally stopping mid-lecture for students to question, clarify, and synthesize writing.
- “Think-write, Pair, Share”—occasional time given to student in-class comparison of their “discussion starters” or “break writes,” usually in pairs but also in small groups.
- “Microthemes” (formal and informal)—occasional mini-essays (250 words max.) that ask for definitions/syntheses/applications of concepts; informal for practice, formal for “quiz” grades (Bean).
- “Grid-grading”—reduces grading time and standardizes grading by awarding points according to list of assignment criteria on scoring summary sheet.

Cautions:

- *None* of these techniques allows for personalized attention or for *careful feedback/revision*; hence, these needs must be met in smaller classes in the discipline, such as the WI classes.
- If a *student assistant* is hired to work individually with students on projects and revision OR as a grader, that assistant will need to be *carefully trained* in order to replicate teacher’s criteria OR to be given autonomy in grading.
- It is *not* recommended that assistant read first drafts and teacher grade revised drafts—research (e.g., Henry) shows that different criteria will be applied and students will be confused, not helped.

Sources:

Bean, John. *Engaging Ideas*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996.

Farrington, Mark. “Note-taking and Note-making in Freshman Composition,” *Journal of the Virginia Writing Project*, Nov.-Dec. 1999, 16ff.

Henry, Jim. “A Narratological Analysis of WAC Authorship,” *College English* 5 (1994), 810-824.

Thaiss, Chris. *The Harcourt Brace Guide to Writing across the Curriculum*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1998.

From Chris Thaiss, Interim Director of Composition/English

Managing the Paper Load and Responding Effectively to Student Writing

Give feedback appropriate to stage of the writing process:

- *Formative*: Purpose is to provide feedback for revision. Students will often not read formative feedback if there's no opportunity to revise.
- *Summative*: Purpose is to sum up strengths and weaknesses and to give evidence for the final grade.

Invest time up front by doing the following:

- Read and explain the assignment in class. Try writing a thesis or opening paragraph yourself.
- Provide students with a list of characteristics for A/B/C/D/F papers and/or show them an example of an "A" paper and discuss the reasons it got an "A" grade.
- Clarify your evaluation criteria and make a rubric for grading. Give students the rubric well before the paper is due and discuss it with them.
- Ask students to fill out the criteria for themselves, using it as a sort of checklist before they turn in the paper.
- Show students examples of comments you make on papers and tell them your pet peeves.

Practice minimal marking:

- Resist the urge to edit. Research suggests that it does students more good to find and fix their own errors. Focus on two or three kinds of errors you see recurring. Put a number by the mistake the first time you see it and explain the error. When you see the same mistake, put the same number beside it. No need to re-explain. Syntax errors are harder to categorize (and for students to fix). You can explain what a syntax error is, fix one or two sentences, and mark others for the student to fix.
- Edit one paragraph thoroughly and explain the errors. Tell the student it is his/her job to edit the rest of the paper the same way and resubmit. If you know the errors are due to carelessness, give the student a late grade when he/she resubmits.
- If you don't allow students to revise and resubmit papers, ask them to include a cover memo on the next paper explaining what they have paid particular attention to in this paper based on your comments on their last paper.
- You don't need to grade all writing the same way, e.g: mark "completed/not completed" or "acceptable/unacceptable" or "professional/unprofessional"; use a simple rating scale; comment only on the items you've focused on in the unit. Be sure to tell students what these ratings cover.
- Check out Star Muir's Spring 2003 *Inventio* article on response macros: <http://www.doiit.gmu.edu/inventio>

The final comment:

- Appreciate what the student was trying to do by restating the paper's main point and discussing some strengths.
- Don't give students so many comments they don't know what to do first. Prioritize and limit your critical comments and explain why they present problems for readers.
- Give students some tips for the next paper. If this is the only or last paper they will write for you, give them some tips for improving their writing overall for future courses.
- Control the size of your handwriting (my handwriting gets larger the more annoyed I get at the writer).

Finally, don't grade shoddy work. Just fail it or require it to be resubmitted for a lower grade. If you don't want to let the student resubmit the paper, give a grade that reflects your anguish and/or annoyance, and explain briefly your reasons for giving the grade, being direct but also courteous, recognizing that students too must set priorities.

From Terry Zawacki, Director, Writing Across the Curriculum, University Writing Center

Issue Papers

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When I first began using the assignment, I assigned issue papers to all students to be turned in at each class. Given our teaching loads and our commitment to scholarship, this all but killed me. So I've come up with a compromise. Now, at the beginning of each semester I pass out an issue paper sign-up sheet with the syllabus. Each student must sign up for five issue papers. The syllabus describes the issue paper requirement as follows:

Identify an issue in the reading that you find particularly interesting or problematic or important (or whatever) and:

1. Clearly explain how the issue is presented and situated within the text/thought at hand;
2. Explain your interest in the issue; why you find it important. You should be concerned with presenting at least two arguments regarding the chosen issue: The argument provided by the author and your argument, with a maximum 5 pages each paper. You should be prepared to discuss your paper on the day it is due.

In lower-level courses, it takes some time before students get the hang of choosing their own issues. They would rather answer study questions. But eventually they get it, and since they choose the issue, not I, they have a stake in it. Further, since only some of the students are turning in an issue paper at each class, they know that they will be called on to present. This is a powerful incentive to be prepared. They may not care that much about the grade they receive from me in private, but they do not want to look dumb in front of their peers.

At the upper level and in graduate courses, these papers, because they involve a class presentation, allow me to play the role of the Socratic interlocutor. At the lower level, this may not be the case. At all levels, however, the issue paper assignment means that at least some of the students are prepared for class and have a stake in the material. That means that there are at least five times during the semester when the person who signed up for my course is a "student" rather than a consumer.

OWL

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sentence should be immediately clear. She could address in the second example the disconnection between the modifying phrase "Not wanting to lose valuable data" and the main

clause "the initial interviews ended," which could lead to an explanation of the concept of passive and active sentences and how the main clause lacks the subject upon which the modifying phrase seems to be acting. With the idea of subject/verb/object explained, the tutor could then ask the client to identify each of those components in the first example sentence, logically transitioning from one concept to another even in the absence of larger patterns.

Occasionally a client will be disappointed to learn that OWL is not, in fact, an editing service. Though proofreading can and does serve an important function in certain levels of writing, it is not the aim of OWL. What OWL does strive for—more than dotted i's or crossed t's, more than a polished paper—is a writer able to take the next steps on his or her own.

**We refer to our tutees as "clients" since we work with writers at all levels, including faculty and staff.*

Critical Data Analysis

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We then begin to create new questions and formulate new hypotheses, e.g., If 8,704 deaths are recorded, why are 9,535 burials recorded? Who are the other 831 buried people? Is *the 122 parishes* significant only to the increase in the number of buried or to the whole sample?

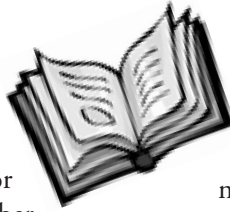
- Are only data for Christians presented?
- If 266 fewer people died of plague in 1632 than in 1631, what does that mean?

Students are often quick to jump to conclusions about some new hypothesis, but a quick lesson in alternative explanations tempers these conclusions, and they learn to couch their interpretations in caveats. As we discuss both what the data would say and how the data would be represented today, students can explore contexts, statistical standards, and classification systems.

Through this exercise, students ask more questions about the numbers and descriptors they see in any figure or table and learn that data *does* tell a story, not just about numbers and descriptors, but about their contexts and relationships over time and place. Graunt's data tell about life and death in London in 1632 *and* how life and death have changed over the centuries. After this exercise, which takes approximately 45 minutes, I ask students to write about either life and death in mid-17th century London or what similar data would look like today. More often than not, students' later encounters with data are met with more critical analysis and interpretation, and their writing tells a more complex and compelling story.

Librarian's Corner

by Kevin Simons



Welcome to the Librarian's Corner. I'm Kevin Simons, Instruction Coordinator for Mason's University Libraries, and a member of the Writing Across the Curriculum Committee. I'm pleased and grateful for the opportunity to address Mason's faculty about issues that relate to incorporating research, library skills, and information literacy instruction into your writing courses through this recurring column. Examples of topics you may see in this space include tips on using specific databases, ideas for incorporating information literacy instruction into your courses, and new (or old) resources and programs from your University Libraries.

For this inaugural column, I'd like to provide you with information about the University Libraries' Liaison Librarian program. Each academic department/program has a librarian who will work with you to select library

materials, help you integrate library skills and information literacy instruction into your course, consult with you (and your students) on conducting effective research, and guide you through the numerous library resources and services available to the Mason community. To find your Liaison Librarian go to the University Libraries home page at <http://library.gmu.edu> and click on the "Help with Research" link. From this page, you can use the "Find a Librarian" link to see a list of the Liaison Librarians by department, program, school, or institute.

In addition to your Liaison Librarian, please consider "Librarian's Corner" as way to ask questions about how the University Libraries can help you teach the writing process. You can contact me via email at ksimons@gmu.edu or phone 993-2247 for general questions about research or to let me know what topics you would like to see addressed in this column. In the spring issue of *Writing @ Center*, "Librarian's Corner" will present "The Principles of Database Searching," the "Word Game" and the "Math Game." Best of luck with your courses and enjoy the holiday seasons. See you in the spring.

WIN TWO TICKETS TO A CENTER FOR THE ARTS SPRING 2004 PERFORMANCE!

Send an email with the subject line: "raffle drawing" to Terry Zawacki, tzawacki@gmu.edu.

Identify your Mason affiliation and tell us: What article was most interesting and/or useful for you?



We'll randomly select and notify the winner by December 15.

(Special thanks to Rick Davis, CVPA, for supplying this prize)

GRAMMAR CORNER TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

Very few grammatical sticking points divide the pragmatists from the purists as quickly as the difference between "who" and "whom." When you were first taught the rule (if you were ever taught the rule) you might have been told that "who" is used as a subject or subject complement and "whom" is used only as the object of a sentence.

This rule is easy enough to apply, especially when applied to questions:

- *For whom was the quiche baked? Who baked the quiche anyway?*

But there's a problem: When "whom"—an object—begins a sentence, taking the traditional place of a subject, it can very often sound and look just plain wrong despite being just plain correct:

- *Whom did the boss fire yesterday? Whom do you think will be fired next?*

Most people now replace "whom" with "who" in such cases when speaking, and those who would point out the error can sound less helpful than stuffy and pedantic. Standard English grammar still demands that you resist this replacement in writing, but don't be surprised if this formerly firm rule continues to melt away. In the meantime, teachers, when "whom" begins to read as awkward or unnatural in certain types of sentences, you'll need to decide for yourselves if it's time to close the gate against the ungrammatical barbarians outside or if this is one syntactic custom best observed in the breach.

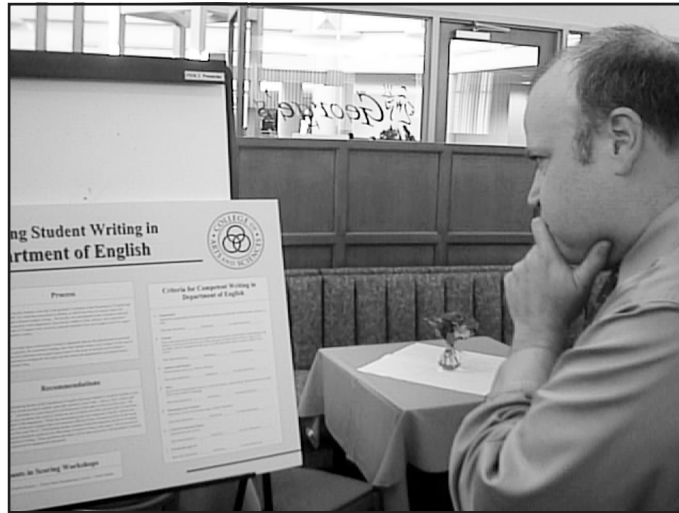
by Scott Berg, Assistant Director, Writing Center

Celebration

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The reception was sponsored by the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program, the Writing Assessment Group (WAG), the Office of Institutional Assessment (OIA), and the Office of the Provost, and occurred as part of the “Fall for the Book” festivities (unfortunately cut short by Isabel).

The reception began with congratulatory remarks by President Merten and Provost Stearns, both of whom commended faculty for their collective accomplishments in promoting and enriching the writing of students. In particular, Provost Stearns recognized the **College of Nursing and Health Science** for their consistent and persistent commitment to teaching with writing, evaluating writing, and designing writing activities that engage and motivate students. He stated that the CNHS “has been and remains a leader in the programs for writing across the curriculum.” He also noted the ongoing commitment of the **Department of History and Art History** to assessing its student’s writing, especially for “reevaluating its senior thesis program and working up a very careful statement of writing expectations.” Further, he recognized **New Century College**, which “has emphasized writing and writing competence from its early days and remains an important leader in the conveying of information about writing expectations in the assessment of writing.”



Rick Davis, CVPA, ponders one of the ten assessment posters on display for the reception.

The reception also featured various displays highlighting the hard work of faculty across the university. Megan Kelly, graduate research assistant for the OIA, created ten large posters for the occasion, one general poster naming all those who participated in the assessment process thus far, and nine posters describing the assessment process of each unit and the criteria they developed. At the request of President Merten, the posters were later put on display in the Mason Hall atrium for the Board of Visitors meeting and will eventually be given to each unit to use for special events like Admissions open houses.

In another impressive display, the College of Nursing and Health Science presented a visually elaborate “roadmap,” created by Professors **Georgine Redmond, Susan Durham, and Jeanne Sorrell**, demonstrating the many ways CNHS faculty have worked with student writers over the years. The College had been chosen by the WAC committee to be the first recipient of an “outstanding commitment to student writing” award, which the committee hopes will become a tradition. The Department of History and Art

History and the New Century College also presented posters documenting their achievements.

A big thanks to everyone who attended, including those being recognized, and the deans and chairs who affirmed their efforts. A special thanks to the departmental liaisons listed below who organized the assessment efforts in their departments:

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