ELEVEN

Changing Students' Attitudes

Writing Fellows Programs

TORI HARING-SMITH

When I arrived at Brown University in the fall of 1980, the dean of the college (Harriet Sheridan) told me that my real task was to "do something about the problem of writing throughout the university." At the first faculty meeting, I listened as my colleagues offered unsolicited criticism of their students' writing, citing defects that ranged from poor spelling to inadequate research skills and weak critical thinking. How was I to address these concerns? How could I, as an untenured junior faculty member, ask senior colleagues to participate in a faculty development program—a foreign concept at most research institutions?

In my first year, I was able to accomplish two rudimentary but essential goals: I started a drop-in writing center housed in the library, and I saw that a column was added to the final grade sheets for all courses so that faculty could indicate those students whose writing they found inadequate. At the end of the year, then, I had a basic support system and a means of identifying students who needed help. Only a few people had to cooperate on these reforms: the space allocation committee (the dean approached them) and the registrar, who controls the printing of the final grade sheets.

Now all that was needed was a means of providing courses in which writing was emphasized and discussed. The English department writing courses were already oversubscribed—we turned away two students for every one we placed. Besides, the department did not want to increase its composition offerings for fear of disrupting the departmental balance between composition and literature. In short, it was clear that we needed a writing across the curriculum program. It was also clear that faculty outside the English department did not feel it was their responsibility to teach writing.

ASSUMPTIONS AND OBJECTIVES

To address this situation, we needed a program that was based on the two fundamental principles of WAC: shared responsibility among the faculty for helping students learn to write and the association of writing with learning. Because the reward system at research institutions does not focus as much on teaching as it does on research, we also needed to find a way of rewarding faculty who participated in this program. Finally, we needed a program that would address student as well as faculty attitudes toward writing. As Swanson-Owens has pointed out, working with faculty is sometimes not sufficient. Faculty, especially participating faculty, may see writing as part of the general culture of the community, inseparable from thinking. But for students, a WAC program can mean just a shift in terminology; instead of writing being the isolated concern of certain English classes, it is now the isolated concern of certain writing-intensive (WI) courses. (Indeed, not long ago I heard a student complain that a teacher should not have commented on his writing because the relevant course was not a WI course.)

It was important, then, to develop a program that defined and enacted a new role for writing, from both faculty and student perspectives. The program needed to do more than just increase the amount of writing that students did. Research suggests that merely increasing the amount without also attending to the students' writing processes does nothing to better their writing (see Haynes). The program needed to focus instead on the processes of writing

and revising, working to counteract the popular student myth that good writers never revise.

The program should stress feedback and, most important, peer feedback for revision. As Sperling and Freedman have shown, students who receive feedback on drafts from their teachers often misunderstand that feedback, and because of the authority of the teacher sometimes feel obliged to revise in ways that do not always improve the paper. Peer feedback helps writers retain authority over their own texts. Furthermore, students needed to be able to discuss and revise their work before it was graded, so that revision was a natural part of writing, not a response to failure. The Writing Fellows Program that evolved at Brown, then, had eight major objectives:

- To demonstrate that all faculty and students share responsibility for student writing
- To explore ways in which writing and learning are connected
- To change both student and faculty attitudes toward writing
- To make writing an integral part of the curriculum, not a feature of isolated courses
- To encourage students to practice good writing habits, including revision
- To involve all students, not just the weak writers
- To reward faculty for their attention to student writing
- To provide students with feedback for revision before their writing is judged and graded

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROGRAM

To address these goals, Brown's cross-curricular writing program relies on a core of trained undergraduate peer tutors called writing fellows. (This title is regrettably gender-specific, but it does combine the notions of honor and of fellowship I wished to convey.) These tutors are selected from diverse disciplines and then trained (and paid) to serve as first readers for papers written in selected courses throughout the curriculum. The tutors comment on students' work as a reader would, noting areas where they as readers are confused (they do not have responsibility for

factual or interpretive accuracy in the subject area of the course). They communicate with the writers they are tutoring through both written and face-to-face conferences, so that the writers have a chance to discuss and explain their intentions. Students need not take the advice of peer tutors (because, after all, the writer usually knows more about the subject than does the tutor); students retain authority over their texts. Ultimately, the faculty member receives two versions of the paper: the original with the writing fellow's comments and the revision based on those comments and on the conference. The faculty member reads and grades the final version, but the first version is available as evidence that the student has revised and that the tutor has neither misled the student nor served as ghost writer.

The Brown program might at first glance seem similar to peer tutoring programs based in writing centers (see Harris, this volume). There are, however, some differences. Writing fellows are not located in one central spot on campus, waiting for students to come to them; they are instead part of a course, coming to class to introduce themselves, collect and return papers, and arrange conference times. These conferences can take place all over the campus, interjecting discussions of writing into the dormitories, libraries, and snack bars as well as in classroom buildings. Furthermore, all students in a given course work with peer tutors, regardless of their abilities. No student needs to identify herself or be identified by a faculty member as needing help in order to participate in the program. Finally, the program differs from many housed in a writing center in that it assists individual faculty members with assignment design and models for them in a direct and immediate way methods of responding to student writing. (Because tutors work exclusively with one course they often learn how the mode of analysis for the discipline is evident in its discourse, and can help faculty see that connection.) Although this program serves only a selected number of courses each semester, these courses are selected from all levels throughout the curriculum, from freshman seminars to graduate courses; classes range in size from 6 to 350 students. Because more faculty want our services than we can help at any given time, we move our resources around; thus no one course becomes permanently identified as an enclave for concern about writing. There are currently 80 writing fellows working with about 2,400 students, out of a total undergraduate body of 5,000.

Faculty members wishing to have writing fellows in their courses apply to the program. In selecting among these applications, we are first concerned that the course satisfy our basic requirements. The course must include at least two significant writing assignments (significance is measured not only in terms of length—usually five to seven pages—but also in terms of role within the content of the course and weight in the final grade). In addition, faculty must agree that all students in the course will participate in the program, and that they, the faculty, will not change due dates for the papers without giving the writing fellows as well as the students fair warning. We try to maintain a balance among the disciplines to which we assign fellows; we put about 65% of the writing fellows in courses serving lower-division students, and the rest in upper-level courses.

If they are accepted, faculty are assigned one writing fellow for every 15 students in the class. Only with courses relying heavily on technical vocabulary or with foreign language courses must the writing fellows have particular expertise; the writing fellow in most courses acts as an educated lay reader, who can honestly report when she's confused by what a student is trying unsuccessfully to say. She does not need to "forget" what she knows about a subject to "feign" confusion. The lack of particular expertise also ensures that the writing fellows will not be confused with graders or teaching assistants. (For institutions that place writing fellows in courses in their major fields, it is important that faculty understand this distinction.)

We have found that large courses (more than 75) with no discussion sections do not work well; large courses in which small groups of students have a separate identity (as in a laboratory or discussion group)—so that writing fellows are working with the small groups—are fine. In the case of large courses, one or two writing fellows are designated head fellows and are paid a slightly higher stipend for their work. These head fellows run the program on a day-to-day basis within a specific course. Head fellows meet with the faculty before the semester begins to discuss the role of writing in the course and to look at the writing assignments the faculty plan to use. They ask faculty how students typically succeed and fail at their assignments and elicit information (like faculty preference for objective summary or for interpretation and argument) that will be helpful in their tutoring. These head fellows then

collect student drafts and distribute the papers to other writing fellows assigned to the course. If the faculty member wishes to talk with all the writing fellows assigned to her class, she contacts the head fellow, who will assemble the group or pass on information. Head fellows also monitor the work of the writing fellows assigned to them, ensuring that all papers are returned on time and troubleshooting as necessary. From the faculty member's point of view, the program does not alter a course much at all. Although it immediately doubles the amount of writing students do (because each paper is written twice), it does not change the number of papers that faculty must read and grade. Furthermore, faculty can read the papers with greater ease because students are less likely to write disorganized, ill-conceived papers the night before the due date. This allows faculty to deal with substantive rather than surface features of student papers. The program does require, however, that faculty impose two due dates for each paper. Usually papers are due to the writing fellow from one to two weeks before the final drafts are due to the faculty member. During the first half of that period the writing fellows make written comments on the drafts; during the second half they meet with students in conference, and the students revise their work. This schedule sometimes requires that students draft their work before all the reading and lectures for a given unit of study have been completed. But as faculty soon discover, this procedure need not cause difficulties, because students' knowledge of the subject will grow as they work on their papers—as they write, they learn what they need to know, and as they learn more, they can rewrite. In a given semester, most writing fellows at Brown work with 15 students on two to three papers of five to seven pages each. Clearly, for a program like this to work, the writing fellows need to be selected and trained carefully. At Brown, writing fellows must be at least at the end of their second semester to apply for one of the 35 or so positions that are open each year. Applicants provide a list of courses they have taken, a list of extracurricular activities, a description of previous teaching/counseling experiences, and three samples of their writing (at least two of which must be critical or analytical). They are interviewed by two current writing fellows, after which both the interviewers and the applicants complete written evaluations. All these materials are reviewed by a committee of writing fellows and the two program

administrators in order to select new writing fellows. When we make the selection, we are looking for certain characteristics. Successful writing fellows are students who can lead their peers without threatening them. They are articulate about their own writing processes and insightful in their analysis of others' writing. Their own writing shows the ability to write well in several different styles or rhetorical situations. They may not be the best writers in the institution, but they are dedicated to helping others write well, much as an editor who is not herself a superb writer can nevertheless give other writers helpful feedback.

Concurrent with their first semester in the program, all writing fellows at Brown take a full-credit course, Seminar in the Theory and Practice in Teaching Composition; the course is taught in three sections of no more than 13 students each. (During this time the writing fellows also carry a full tutorial load, a design which has proved difficult for some tutors. At Swarthmore College the Writing Associates in Training [WAITs] work with only three students during their first semester, assuming a full load in the spring. While this arrangement reduces stress during the training period, Thomas Blackburn, who runs Swarthmore's program, says that it delays the moment of "panic" when tutors must handle a full load of students.) The seminar addresses the role of the peer tutor, the issue of authority in education, the ways in which an academic audience and academic evaluation practices can affect developing writers, various methods of investigating and describing differences among disciplinary discourses, and the influence of gender and culture on the peer tutoring and writing processes. During the training course, writing fellows write and comment on each other's writing and practice commenting on student papers. Writing fellows are specifically trained to respond to papers as readers rather than to make judgmental comments. Instead of calling a paper "poorly organized" or "inadequately thought out," writing fellows are taught to pose questions or offer observations: "How is the discussion of X on page one related to the discussion of Y on page three?" "You say A on page three and B on page five. These seem like contradictions. I'm confused." (See the distinction Peter Elbow makes between criterion-based and reader-based comments, 237-63. For a full description of the course, see Haring-Smith.) When they have finished the first-semester training program, writing fellows work more autonomously, although they are still

monitored by head fellows. They are also required to discuss each set of papers they comment on with the program director, associate director, or student assistant director. This provides the administrators of the program an opportunity to keep in touch with the writing fellows and to point out areas that they might ignore as they move away from the training period. The entire group of writing fellows meets once a semester for a retreat and refresher on responding to writing, as well as for a program evaluation.

In the first decade of the program's existence, word of it has spread to other institutions. By the most recent count there were more than 100 schools with some version of a writing fellows program. Even though it began at a research institution, the program works in many different settings: from two-year colleges like Monroe Community College in Michigan, to small liberal arts colleges like Swarthmore, Georgia Southern, and William Jewell, to large state institutions like Western Washington State and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Neither the size of the institution nor the selectivity of its admission criteria seems to affect the success of the writing fellows program.

Each of the programs is, of course, different from the one at Brown, adapted to the situation at a particular institution. Some schools try using writing fellows as their first attempt at designing a WAC program, while others come to it after other approaches have failed. La Salle University's program emerged from an already established WAC program begun with faculty development seminars. The writing fellows program there was proposed by faculty from finance, biology, and economics who had been through WAC faculty workshops. Some institutions, like Williams College, do not attach the writing fellows to courses but affiliate the program with the writing center and coordinate the drop-in and the curricular support activities closely. Some institutions have associated the program with a particular group of students. At the University of Delaware it is the honors students (who live in the same dormitory and take most of their classes together) who serve as writing fellows; the funding comes entirely through the honors program. Knox College uses Ford Fellows as a group from which to draw writing fellows. Some institutions pay their writing fellows with university credit; most pay a fixed honorarium. The variations are as numerous as the schools involved. For anyone who would like to talk with those involved in these programs, the

National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing is a good place to start. There are also regional meetings, for example the New England Regional Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing.[1]

HOW TO INITIATE AND MAINTAIN A WRITING FELLOWS PROGRAM

Because these programs are not very costly, they can be started easily and unobtrusively. (At Brown the program was first publicized as "a method for administering the writing requirement" and was not discussed by the faculty until it had been in place for one year.) All you need are a few willing students, someone to train them and administer the program, and most important, the cooperation of an administrator who will provide funding for the program. The funding need not be magnificent; at Brown the Writing Fellows Program was funded during the first three semesters through the same contingency fund that covered unexpected heating costs. (As the program matures and proves its success, it may be possible to find funding from other sources; businesses and corporations that hire your graduates and who are interested in employees who communicate well are good sources to approach. We recently received funding from Citibank, a company that had hired a number of our former writing fellows.)

As with all writing across the curriculum programs, you should work first with those key faculty who are open to innovations in teaching, respectful of students, and trusted by colleagues. Those faculty will be analytical and helpful as you develop the program. Many of them will be campus leaders; other faculty will listen when they talk about the program. After a year or so, you will be ready for more trigger-happy skeptics to be involved, but at first you will want to work among friends. As the program evolves, be aware that it will grow and that you will need help. When the program at Brown started up, I was the only administrator. But as it grew from 20 writing fellows the first semester to 40 in the second and 60 in the third, I found that I needed extra hands. You will find that you can ask the writing fellows themselves to do some of the work; the head fellows program was developed to involve students in the day-to-day administration of the program. The students need to own the program at several levels, and when

students are involved in administration as well as in tutoring, the program runs more energetically. The director must still maintain as much control as possible over the larger aspects of the program, however, because the politics of student-run programs can be difficult. Few people in higher education look to undergraduates as possible administrators; those who collaborate daily with students look to them first. You may find, however, that even after enlisting students for administrative tasks you need help on a more permanent basis. I continued to work with only student assistance until 1986, when we hired a very well qualified staff member as associate director. She alternates in teaching the training course and splits with me the work of overseeing the writing fellows. There is also an assistant director for our program, a position filled by an experienced writing fellow.

Most institutions that have initiated writing fellows programs find that both the writing fellows and the faculty with whom they work are positive—indeed, enthusiastic—about the program. Be aware, however, that the students affected by the program can have more mixed reactions. During the first few years when there are still students who remember a time before writing fellows, some may resent the additional work involved, especially if they are already confident about their writing and feel that good writers do not need to revise. After about three years, however, most students at Brown saw the program as a part of campus life, and came to think of revision and consultation with peers as a natural part of the writing process.

PITFALLS TO AVOID

Once the program is well established, other concerns emerge. The position of writing fellow can become coveted and highly competitive; while you want the program to carry a certain amount of prestige, it is important not to let the writing fellows become campus celebrities and lose the ability to relate to other students as peers. No institutionally recognized and authorized tutors can be true peers, of course, but there are a number of ways to combat the forces that would make them into a student version of instructional staff. Tutor training should make students aware of the possible status difficulties, and campus outreach programs can

continually define and redefine the program for the campus community. Faculty advisors should be made aware of what the program entails and what the writing fellows do. On a residential campus, the director should be in touch with the student advisors who live in the dormitories, to ensure that these trusted student guides know the intentions behind the Writing Fellows Program.

Tutor burnout can also be a problem, especially after the first semester of training when tutors are no longer meeting together regularly. Retreats and other social events that bring the writing fellows back together are very important (Friday afternoon coffee breaks, for example, or brown-bag lunches). Writing fellows need to keep thinking about issues of peer collaboration and writing and have an opportunity to discuss newly published and relevant research. They might be encouraged to publish their own work locally, or in a publication like a writing center newsletter or journal. Most of all, they need a forum in which to talk to each other and to keep in touch with the director about their concerns.

The director also needs to keep in touch with the faculty involved in the program, because sometimes they want to place the Writing Fellow in the familiar role of teaching assistant (TA) or grader. As you involve faculty, you need to make sure that they understand the program and the distinct role of the writing fellow. Sometimes faculty need to be reminded of this role, since it is one unfamiliar to them. Faculty may also need assistance from the director with revising assignments to fit the program, setting the two due dates for each paper, or rethinking the ways they use writing in the classroom.

Finally, it is important not to let the program stagnate. Success can be paralyzing. The training course will need to change as the program matures; the administrative structure will need to change to accommodate growth. Sometimes the program will sprout new initiatives that must be fit in. For example, Brown (like several other institutions) has begun working on the integration of speaking with writing across the curriculum. We now offer additional training for some writing fellows so that they can provide feedback on students' oral assignments—formal debates, seminar paper presentations, leading class discussions. These "rhetoric fellows" are becoming increasingly popular and are encouraging faculty to reintroduce speaking into their curricula. The new focus has also revitalized those of us working with the writing fellows program

(for more information on integrating speaking with writing across the curriculum programs, see *SAC*).

EVALUATION OF WRITING FELLOWS PROGRAMS

Like all WAC programs, writing fellows programs need to be carefully and consistently evaluated in order to remain vital. But program evaluation, as others have pointed out, is a tricky business (see Young and Fulwiler; Fulwiler; Witte and Faigley). Because writing fellows programs involve not just students but also tutors and faculty, evaluation measures should involve all three groups. At Brown, for example, every student who works with a writing fellow completes an evaluation form that asks for feedback on both the individual writing fellow's work and on the program as a whole. After we review the student evaluations, we send a report to each faculty member participating in the program and they may respond with a letter of evaluation, noting strengths and weaknesses of both individual writing fellows and of the program and responding to any concerns we may have raised. Writing fellows evaluate their training program and also evaluate their own work, noting what they concentrated on in their response to student writing, how well they worked with students and faculty, and evaluating the program's interaction with the course in which they worked. About every three years we undertake a more complete evaluation, interviewing students who work with writing fellows, the writing fellows themselves, and the faculty the program serves. Twice we have involved outside evaluators. Finally, we keep in touch with graduates of the program to see if the skills they learned as writing fellows affect them after they leave college. We have found that wherever they go (law school, medical school, the Peace Corps) our graduates frequently end up teaching in some capacity. We take this as a sign of the success of the program.

It is difficult, of course, to prove in an empirical sense that any writing program "works" (see White ch. 10). But if faculty, tutors, and students continue to tell you that it works, then something must be happening. Schools that institute these programs often

find that faculty stop complaining about student writing. If a particular teacher takes a semester off from the program to let another class be involved, he or she will often invent ways of soliciting peer response because they had found the writing fellows procedure so valuable. Another measure of success is that the program often serves as a model for similar initiatives. At Brown, for example, we now have "science mentors" to help students through laboratories, "foreign language fellows" who are fluent in a second language and work with students in beginning language courses, and a program that allows faculty and students to collaborate to redesign or develop new courses for the curriculum. As one Writing Fellow put it, students have become not just peer tutors, but "disciples for curricular reform." Why might a would-be WAC director prefer this model over some of the others described in this book? Like all WAC programs, writing fellows programs aim at altering the role writing plays in the curriculum by redefining the writing process and linking it to learning. Writing fellows programs have the added virtue of providing writing instruction that is divorced from evaluation, and making that instruction available to all. Students learn a model for peer response and collaboration that extends beyond the usual vague commiseration, a model that is helpful not just in their writing, but in all their learning. It is also enormously rewarding for the tutors themselves; when students join the instructional ranks and take responsibility for advising one another, they learn as well. The program rewards faculty by helping with the paper load and letting them make better use of their time in commenting on papers. In short, these programs encourage faculty and students alike to feel like members of a community of writers. In this respect, a writing fellows program might be called not writing across the curriculum but rather writing throughout the community.

NOTE

1. For more information on peer tutoring conferences, contact Muriel Harris, Purdue University. See also Harris, this volume.