

# The Writing Intensive Program at the University of Georgia



Michelle Ballif

## General Description:

The University of Georgia's Writing Intensive Program began—as do many college-wide writing initiatives—with faculty concern about the quality of student writing at the university. Acknowledging that the responsibility for this quality—or lack thereof—belongs to all faculty, in all disciplines, not just to first-year composition instructors typically housed in the English department, the Writing Intensive Program (WIP) was founded in 1997 to strengthen student writing skills specifically in the context of disciplinary demands.

In so doing, The Writing Intensive Program works against several time-honored misperceptions about student writing. The first: faculty perception of a lack of quality student writing is based on the misperception that “good writing” transcends disciplinary differences: it is clear, concise, and grammatically correct. A second misperception is that there exists a proverbial set of “writing skills” that students should have “picked up”—sometime during their K-12 years, but, if not, then surely during their first-year composition experience. Both these misperceptions, argues Lee Ann Carroll, in her longitudinal study of college writers, are a function of a “fantasy” that “students should already know how to write for situations they have not yet encountered.” (xvi).

Carroll argues that faculty reports of “poor” or “fair” student writing skills obscures the reality that college students must developmentally mature as writers—not as necessarily “better” writers, but as writers who must write “differently,” as they are required from year to year, and from discipline to discipline, “to produce new, more complicated forms addressing challenging topics with greater depth, complexity, and rhetorical situation. What are often called ‘writing assignments’ in college are, in fact, complex ‘literacy tasks’ calling for high-level reading, research, and critical analysis” (xiv). “When professors assign ‘writing,’ and students are unsuccessful,” Carroll argues, “professors may assume that students don’t know ‘how to write’” (129-30), where in fact, students are being asked to complete increasingly complex and disciplinary-specific “literacy tasks,” which professors may be unable or unwilling to articulate.

I’m preaching to the choir, to be sure, but The Writing Intensive Program presumes that student writing “skills”—what Carroll calls more accurately “literacy tasks”—are inseparable from what Judith Langer terms the “ways of knowing” of a particular discipline, and therefore, “[w]riting (and the thinking that accompanies it) [is] a primary and necessary vehicle for practicing the ways of organizing and presenting ideas that are most appropriate to a particular subject area” (71). Further (and Langer would concur), writing (and the thinking that accompanies it) is the process by which disciplinary knowledge is constituted, the process by which one “comes to know” knowledge, and the process by which that knowledge is vetted. In short, writing *is* the academic dialogue that we, as educators, aim to introduce to our students. Hence, to teach writing is to teach the “ways of knowing” unique to any discipline: the methodology of inquiry, the conventions of evidence, the mode of presentation. Such a pedagogical goal, then, assumes that the most effective way to improve student writing is to do so within the context of disciplinary demands under the tutelage of committed faculty across the campus, who are willing and able to “articulate” those conventions.

Recognizing that such a pedagogical goal requires new responsibilities for and time demands on participating faculty, the program trains discipline-specific graduate students to serve as teaching assistants to support Writing Intensive Program courses. That is, each Writing Intensive Program course, competitively selected, is provided with a specially trained TA to support participating faculty—not as a “grader” but as a “writing coach.”

Currently only a College of Arts and Sciences program, but recommended for university-wide expansion by the *Report of the Task Force on General Education and Student Learning* at UGA, the Writing Intensive Program serves from 1000-1500 students in approximately 45 diverse courses across the college, ranging from art history, biology, classics, geology, mathematics, music, religion, sociology, and women’s studies. Most of these courses are regular-enrollment sections, but one or two courses each semester are large-enrollment classes. Most regular-enrollment sections cap at 30-35 students; large-enrollment courses range from 75 to 300 students. In the regular-enrollment

courses, one TA is assigned to assist; in the large-enrollment courses, we have employed alternative arrangements: one alternative is to have several “break out” sections of the entire course, each assigned a WIP TA, that are designated as “writing-intensive”; students are lured into these sections with guarantees that exams will be replaced by writing assignments, for example. That is, in this instance, only a portion of the students enrolled in a large-enrollment course participate in the writing-intensive aspect of the course. Another option is to have the assigned, trained Writing Intensive Program teaching assistant serve as an oversight TA for the other TAs assigned to assist the course, creating appropriate assignments and instructing the other TAs how to best (and most efficiently) respond to student writing. One experimental large-enrollment introductory Biology course used a great deal of peer-review (guided by a peer-review-calibrated computer program) to handle the student writing. Open to new ideas and approaches, The Writing Intensive Program does not stipulate what kinds/amounts of writing are to be assigned, and faculty have tried various options. Although the program has some baseline criteria (see [“WIP Course Guidelines and Criteria”](#)), I like to argue that the Writing Intensive Program is not “writing exhaustive,” but rather it aims to provide for students an “intense” engagement with writing—its processes and its conventions—and participating faculty are inventive in their methods of doing so.

A compelling majority of students enrolled in these courses consistently report that the pedagogical aim of the program has been realized. Student evaluations collected over a nine-year period report that their experience with the Writing Intensive Program introduced them to and gave them experience with writing within their discipline; additionally, as a result of the program’s emphasis on revision, students report that their writing processes improve along with their writing. Not surprisingly, they also report that their Writing Intensive Program courses force them to keep up with the readings and to be better prepared for class discussions—in short, to be more engaged in the learning process. As well, they report that their critical and disciplinary thinking has improved. Here are some survey results: when asked if the WIP course strengthened their writing, a majority of students responded “yes” (ranging from 70% to 78%), with students commenting: “The multiple drafts allowed me to take time and revise my paper several times”; “It helped me to see different *possibilities* to use in the organizing of a paper, and I realized there is not necessarily one way that is *most* correct”; and “I did not truly know how to write an in-depth Art History paper before this class”; and “Once we get to these upper-level courses, it is expected that we can write, and this is not always the case. Having a TA to meet with specifically about writing a paper is very beneficial” (Fall 04 Student Responses). When asked if the writing assignments stimulated their critical thinking, a majority of students answered “yes” (ranging from 75% to 89%), with responses such as “I have to think as to *why* to solve a [mathematical] problem instead of plugging in formulas”: “The writing assignments forced me to read the texts with a degree of critical thinking far greater than I normally would when reading for my classes” (Fall 04-Spring 05).

Faculty survey responses show that their Writing Intensive Program courses increase student engagement and improve student writing; additionally, faculty report that their participation in the Writing Intensive Program has strengthened their own teaching practices. Here is a sample of faculty responses: “WIP courses force you to ask, ‘How do you design an intellectual experience?’ They give you touch points, make you teach more slowly, allow students to incubate, and strengthen the connections they make.” Another responds, “WIP courses force you to plan more from the beginning”; and another: “The WIP allows me to provide a level of contact with students that, frankly, I would have been unable to provide. Before WIP, it was sink or swim” (Spring 04).

## Theory informing the program:

Before designing the Writing Intensive Program, an Arts and Sciences Senate ad-hoc committee on writing researched several other writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) and writing-in-the-disciplines (WID) programs. As chair of the committee, I was most taken with Cornell’s Knight (“Writing in the Majors”) Program, now-named the John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines, because of its emphasis on the *disciplinary* nature of writing. Jonathan Moore, director of the program, argues: “Although WAC and WID are sometimes used synonymously or interchangeably, and both terms usefully suggest the importance of writing in all fields, these two approaches have very different implications for the role of writing instruction in higher education. While WAC emphasizes the commonality, portability, and communicability of writing practices, WID emphasizes disciplinary differences, diversity, and heterogeneity. That is WID emphasizes what remains incommensurable and irreducible in writing practices both within academic fields and from one field to the next” (“Writing and the Disciplines” 4).

Not only a big fan of the idea of the heterogeneity and incommensurability of language games, I also was drawn to the assumption that writing is inseparable from the production of knowledge—in a way more complex than the “writing-to-learn” adage. Writing, then, as I articulated above, is the conversation of scholars. As Monroe states it, “Once they have begun college-level work in writing, students have also begun, in earnest, the work of the university” (“Writing” 5). The work of the university, then, is the work of scholars, producing knowledge. (I realize the privilege of

being at a research institution, where students—of privilege, typically—come to participate in the academic dialogue, some to continue on to become academicians themselves, others to document their privilege with a degree.)

In any event, at an institution such as The University of Georgia, “The writing issues our students confront, from entering students to advanced undergraduates, to graduate students, to the most distinguished scholars, remain in fundamental respects the same issues, including especially the process of socialization or acculturation into a particular field that may have recognizable beginnings . . . but has no end in sight for as long as one continues to be committed to the production of knowledge in that field” (Monroe, “Introduction” 8). And, hence, the Writing Intensive Program was founded: to improve student writing skills by providing them with multiple opportunities to acculturate themselves into a discipline and to learn the “ways of knowing” unique to their field and to engage in both through writing.

## **Mechanical description of the program:**

Funded by the Offices of the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, the Provost, and the Vice President for Academic Affairs, the program typically supports from 15-18 graduate teaching assistants each year. The budget consists entirely of TA-lines. Early each Spring Semester, I distribute a call for course proposals to faculty in the college, which details Writing Intensive Program course criteria and guidelines (see “WIP Course Guidelines and Criteria”). Courses are then competitively selected, and graduate student teaching assistants from the appropriate departments are chosen to support the selected course offerings. (In rare, but appropriate circumstances, a WIP TA might be assigned to a course outside of his/her immediate discipline: a Comparative Literature graduate student might be assigned to a cross-cultural Speech Communications course, for example—but only if the participating faculty agrees; in this instance, in fact, the faculty wanted a non-disciplinary TA.) The graduate teaching assistants are nominated by department heads in consultation with graduate coordinators (some departments use the Writing Intensive Program teaching assistantship as a recruitment tool). I interview the nominated graduate student to ascertain the TA’s suitability for the role and explain the program and the TA’s responsibilities. Typically, each TA supports four courses—two each semester, or alternately, each TA supports three courses—one for one semester and two for the next or vice versa. For example, four Art History professors submit successful proposals for regular-enrollment (35 students or so) courses, and I then hire an Art History graduate student to support these four courses during the academic year. As another example, School of Music faculty support several successful course proposals, two of which are for large-enrollment History of Music classes. I will then hire and assign several teaching assistants to support the large-enrollment courses as a team, but each will also support, individually, a regular-enrollment Music course. The process is complex but is meant to allow flexibility in course design and offerings.

Once all the faculty, courses, and teaching assistants are selected, I begin the process of introducing the participants to the principles of the Writing Intensive Program and training them in the most effective ways to assign and to respond to student writing. Participating faculty, a good number of whom have been involved in the program since its inception, are invited to a series of orientation sessions. Faculty who are new to the program attend a session at the beginning of the Fall Semester; veteran Writing Intensive Program faculty join the new faculty for an informal discussion about how they structure their courses, how they divide responding responsibilities with their supporting TA, what kinds of writing assignments they use, etc. I also host a couple of colloquia each year, featuring experienced faculty presenting their best practices.

The selected teaching assistants attend a week-long pre-Fall Semester orientation session, as well as enroll in, during Fall Semester, WIPP 7001, “Pedagogy of Writing in the Disciplines,” which I teach, where they are further introduced to the research on and best practices of conferencing with students, responding to student writing, guiding the writing process, etc. During Spring Semester, we meet less formally, about every other week as a group to problem solve: What do I do if a student says “I don’t *do* drafts.” What do I do if a faculty member changed a grade I gave without consulting me? (Each WIP faculty negotiates with his/her WIP TA as to the grading responsibility of the TA. In some instances, the WIP TA handles all of the grading; in other instances, although the TA responds to all the work, the faculty member assigns grades. I have witnessed a range of successful arrangements. The key to success, however, is to have the faculty member and the TA work out before hand the roles and responsibilities of each, and to stand by this agreement, not allowing a “good cop” and “bad cop” scenario to emerge.)

I must admit that my favorite part of directing this program is working with these teaching assistants. Although inevitably the only time that is free in all 18 TAs’ schedules is late Friday afternoons, I never feel put out by spending the last part of the work week or delaying happy hour to spend the time with them. I always leave inspired, energized, and recommitted. Although the program was constructed to help undergraduate students—and it does, it has had the happy side effect of revitalizing me each Friday afternoon. The TAs benefit, too.

They not only receive intense instruction in the most effective ways to aid student writing practices, but they also receive what amounts to the *only* training they will receive in their graduate careers in effective teaching. As many of our TAs are interested in pursuing faculty positions elsewhere, they value this instruction in basic pedagogical strategies. The TAs receive not only pedagogical training but experience, as well, as they work with faculty to instruct students in the course content as well as in the writing conventions of each discipline. The Writing Intensive Program TAs report an additional benefit: their *own* writing practices and writing efforts improve. A significant number of TAs have reported that their experiences as a Writing Intensive Program TA have enabled them to compose successful grant proposals, for example. Other TAs report that their experience as a Writing Intensive Program TA has supported their job searches, as many institutions (academic and otherwise) have noted and appreciated their WIP expertise. Additionally, the program affords the TAs an opportunity to interact with TAs from across the college, forming an intense comradery in the service of student learning.

## **Institutional/Budgetary detail of restraints guiding or controlling the program's growth and development**

During the past several years, the University of Georgia has, as have most institutions, experienced very serious, slashing budget cuts—indeed, it is a testament to the success of the program that our budget has been protected and has even witnessed a slight growth. Indeed, in response to a not-so-flattering survey on student engagement at UGA, a task force convened to study the undergraduate experience at UGA recently recommended that the program expand. The upper administration has indicated an interest to do so, but has not (yet?) allocated funds for such a university-wide expansion. I have not sought, to date, external funding, although I have been encouraged to do so by the Associate Dean of the College, as I do not want the program's growth to depend on "soft" money that may disappear and never be an institutional commitment. (I would be interested to hear from any of you who have received external funding.) The most basic institutional restraint is simply a lack of funds, as I am committed to providing support to those faculty who participate, and I do not want the mandate, as the Task Force Report suggested, "incorporate more writing into the curriculum" to become an unfunded mandate. Further, I do not want faculty to just assign more writing without the guidance of principled practices, based on solid research in rhetoric and composition scholarship.

## **What I've Learned, or If I knew then, what I know now:**

From the very beginning, I would have argued for, even insisted on, a line for an academic professional to serve as an Assistant to the Director. I do receive a line to hire a TA to help me with administrating the program, but the stipend (and no benefits) is in no way proper recompense for the work and professionalism required by the position, which requires one to collaborate with the Director on faculty and teaching assistant recruitment, training, and retention, as well as to create program materials—from teaching messages to assessment surveys to reports, including the program's website. (Indeed, the extraordinarily qualified assistant I had for some time, Parker Middleton, was lured away, understandably, by a more lucrative and secure position.)

Also, in terms of wished-for funding, I would have argued for faculty development funds, given the need to educate, support, and inspire participating faculty with visiting speakers and specialists from other universities. In the program's early years, I did receive funding to host visiting writing scholars, such as Pat Bizzell, and later John and Tilly Warnock and Anne-Marie Hall for university-wide workshops, which drew a large number of faculty and sparked the original enthusiasm for the program. But, due to budget cuts, such funding quickly dried up.

But I suppose these are present and future issues.

As for the past? I would have named the program differently. The "intensive" in the title continues to frighten students, even though I insist that the program is "intensive" not because it requires an overwhelming amount of writing, but because it offers an *intense engagement* with the writing process. It's a tough sell to students. It doesn't help that our program's acronym, as a long-time faculty supporter in the School of Music pointed out to me, is pronounced "whip." An intense whip—sounds like a whuping with writing with or without black leather.

In retrospect, I should have written and published about the program. I have almost 10 years of data, stories, and hindsight—clearly a rich resource for publishable material. My primary research interests lie millennia away (in classical Athens) and are theoretically incommensurable (poststructuralism/postmodernism). However, there may still be an article or a book in the offing.

## In Conclusion:

Despite its limited and controlled funding, the Writing Intensive Program—with its devoted faculty and teaching assistants—has delivered on its initial challenge to “do something about student writing.” And it has done much, much more: it has created an atmosphere of commitment to student writing in all disciplines. As has Jonathan Monroe, committed WIP faculty have aimed to create a “sense of shared responsibility for the teaching of writing, and above all for the enhancement of learning through writing, across all disciplines and at all levels of the curriculum” (“Introduction” 11). I wish to acknowledge the commitment and dedication of my colleagues at UGA—across the disciplines—who have shared this vision and responsibility, and I wish to thank Associate Dean Hugh Ruppensburg for his continued administrative support.

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