

## Implementing Writing Intensive Gen Ed Seminars at a Small, Catholic University



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**Abstract:** This profile describes the first three years of initiating new writing-intensive seminars for the General Education curriculum at a small, career-focused, Catholic University. The primary reason for implementing the program was to initiate new writing-intensive seminars to replace existing writing-intensive General Education introductory courses that were not achieving hoped-for results of improving student writing skills, based on a faculty survey. It explains the strategies and theories used for involving faculty across the disciplines to teach theme-based courses each faculty member designs, the workshops that supported faculty efforts, and the administrative details of incorporating new seminars into the General Education program for students earning Associate or Bachelor degrees. Seminars are designed to be discipline-based and include writing-in-the-disciplines as well as writing-across-the-curriculum components.

### WI Program & Institutional Context

After eight years of a General Education curriculum designed to improve student writing across the disciplines, our faculty at Gwynedd Mercy University were issued a survey asking for their reflections on student writing and the improvement for which the curriculum had been created. The results of this survey showed that faculty were very dissatisfied with the level of writing skill exhibited across all disciplines, indicating that the eight-year-old set of courses was not achieving the hoped-for results. At that point, a Writing Intensive Initiative Committee of full-time faculty members was created to revise the courses or replace them with a new Gen Ed curriculum. The Writing Intensive Initiative Committee first set about to create the Writing Intensive Course Guidelines and Recommendations (see [Appendix \[PDF\]](#)) and consequently proposed a new seminar (SEM) style of course, one that would focus on a particular theme. Since we are a Sisters of Mercy (Catholic) institution, each SEM course was required to relate to the five concerns of the Sisters of Mercy International: 1) the earth; 2) immigration; 3) non-violence; 4) racism; and 5) women. Faculty across the disciplines could design and teach a course in their field that focused on one of these five Sisters of Mercy concerns. A series of workshops and training events for faculty was recommended in order to introduce or review concepts and practices for teaching writing across the curriculum, particularly regarding the writing styles and standards that vary within academic disciplines. We considered this freedom for faculty to design their own themed course crucial in engaging their interest and commitment. In fact, faculty who had never before considered teaching a writing-intensive course at our institution were expressing interest at an unexpected level.

In my initial presentation at the general faculty assembly earlier that year, I spoke to a roomful of professors weary of hearing conversations about why or how students should write more proficiently for their college classes, weary of having students who balked at the grades they believed should be higher, and weary of hearing that faculty need to teach writing more effectively in their classrooms. To this dispirited assembly, I introduced the concept of designing their own themed courses, while also beginning a conversation about their goals for their students, their goals for themselves as instructors, and several methods to teach and assess writing assignments that could be less onerous than they imagined and more fulfilling in engaging the students. Early questions for the faculty included those to encourage greater awareness—a mindfulness—of student-centered goals and instructor-centered goals; specifically, we asked not only what the instructor wanted students to get out of the course but also what the *instructor* wanted to get out of this course, even if they had taught that course many times, for many years. We emphasized that

designing writing assignments that helped achieve these goals without burdening the instructor with an excessive amount of grading was possible and achievable, whatever their students' background, in a theme-designed course in their discipline.

The most important element of our implementation of the writing-intensive initiative across the university was in applying and receiving an institutional mini-grant from the university president's office, given for projects that improve student learning and faculty teaching. The committee who wrote and requested the mini-grant included the faculty chair of the General Education Committee (a Religious Studies professor and Sister of Mercy), a tenured biology professor, and me, Associate Professor of English and Writing Program Coordinator. The mini-grant annual maximum request per application was \$2500, which is what we requested; the funds included honorariums for the two speakers we invited to campus from nearby universities, as well as monies for gift cards for faculty who participated in any one of the three workshops given by those speakers. The mini-grant objectives were to engage multi-disciplinary faculty in strategies and approaches for writing across the disciplines; to design assignments specific to the new writing intensive courses that were to replace the current writing-intensive Gen Ed courses; to set up a supportive, steady implementation process; and to design a peer-review process to implement the ideas and suggestions offered and to approve Writing Intensive Seminar (SEM) course syllabi.

I cannot emphasize enough the value of bringing in Composition and Rhetoric professors from local institutions as speakers, which validates the seriousness of the goals in writing instruction and brings a new approach to those faculty teaching the course sequence. The first speaker, Dr. Joseph Harris, an experienced scholar in Composition and Rhetoric and the Director of Composition at the nearby University of Delaware, presented a workshop entitled "Teaching and Assessing Student Writing in the Disciplines," which focused on grading strategies to make a writing course workload manageable, as well as incorporating instruction on writing for the faculty member's specific discipline. One example was to assign students a form of writing the professor does professionally, such as creating the text of a grant proposal. Dr. Harris also emphasized that it is important to explain to students the differences between drafting, revising, and editing. As he remarked to us, "Fifteen years ago, I realized that what I meant by a draft was not what the students understood as a draft; we were not speaking in the same code." Dr. Harris underscored that the act of revision rethinks or develops the ideas and evidence in a draft, altering the piece as a whole, while editing refines a draft, with changes that are local, discrete. Those attending were then given student essays to which they responded using his basic rubric; Dr. Harris suggested not complicating the grading rubric more than is practically useable, since it may also confuse the student. Overall, the feedback from attendees was very positive and led us to designing our next workshop on issues in creating syllabi, intended for those initially committed to taking part in the new writing-intensive seminars we were planning.

Two months later, our second speaker, another Composition and Rhetoric professor from a nearby university, conducted two workshops, which were more task-oriented and directed to faculty who were in the process of designing writing assignments to match the seminar syllabi they were required to bring with them to the workshop. Dr. Melanie Kisthardt, Professor of English and Writing Program Coordinator at Immaculata University, introduced to the attending faculty, including those from Business, Religious Studies, History, Music, and English, the writing standards set by other institutions, such as the College of New Jersey's Writing Intensive Course Guidelines. Dr. Kisthardt also articulated the differences between teaching writing to students and teaching a writing-intensive course in one's discipline to students, which was especially significant to the faculty who would be the first to teach the new theme-designed seminars we were planning. Most helpful, perhaps, was that her exercises included reviewing each other's syllabi for reading and writing assignments and the subsequent workloads for students and professor. Engaging established writing professors from other institutions can greatly strengthen the commitment that the home institution and faculty bring to a newly designed General Education program that is writing based, as happened here.

## **The Writing Intensive Initiative: History and Early Design**

In January of every year, a week before every spring semester, we have an assembly of all the faculty; it begins with an update by the president and soon after moves into break-out sessions on various topics intended to address pedagogical concerns and practices, including online components, such as Blackboard. I was asked to prepare a session presentation, "Managing Writing Assignments: Practical Approaches," and anticipated a variety of faculty from our Schools of Nursing, Business, Education, and Arts & Sciences in my talking points so that our discussion would be useful for all present. Seven faculty showed up, compared to the twenty-five or so in the other break-out sessions, and each faculty member was very vocal with complaints about writing assignments before I even began my presentation. These faculty represented many more who had opted for the other two sessions that morning, not because, I suspect, those sessions were necessarily more useful or interesting but because they were not about teaching writing. Nearly all of these faculty members had taught in our previous General Education sequence, a set of six introductory courses with a syllabus template for each discipline; we called them Signature Courses, intending

them as unique to our university and therefore not subject to transfer credits. Each student was required to take six of these introductory courses in their four years with us. After eight years, these courses had gotten stale, eventually taught mostly by adjunct faculty who were beginning to request other courses instead. The students did not seem to take the Signature Courses seriously anymore, and the faculty were weary of the original syllabus for each discipline, a syllabus created by their department. In listening to my colleagues that day, I realized that we needed to create a new approach to courses designed to be writing intensive and yet stimulating for our faculty and students, courses that were an effective solution to the problem of poor student writing quality, an issue highlighted by a survey of the faculty by the General Education Committee the previous year about our students not writing to professional standards in their discipline. (See [Appendix 1A \[PDF\]](#).)

Faculty are often weary of being on the receiving end of advice, strategies, tips, and solutions for more effective strategies to teach and assess student writing. I told the Chair of our General Education Committee that if I were required to present one more “workshop” to our faculty about teaching writing, I would use any word for these sessions except *workshop*. And I would emphasize to the faculty members that one of their primary concerns should be to take care of themselves as teachers and graders, to accept less of the traditional burden of teaching one of the most difficult skills to teach by reconstituting the assignments, and to plan better how to stimulate themselves in the classroom by teaching writing alongside the subjects that fascinate them, subjects for which they may have not even designed courses yet.

The phrase “writing intensive” has been in the lexicon of writing instruction for at least twenty-seven years, but implementing the kinds of courses that incorporate this practice remains an ongoing event. As Robert Boice notes in a 1990 essay, “Faculty Resistance to Writing-Intensive Courses,” most faculty across the disciplines have been reluctant to teach such courses primarily because of their concern that writing assignments will add an extra work load in reading and grading papers; the second reason cited by Boice’s surveys declare that “the classroom time is already fully scheduled” (14). Anticipating these two objections as those that are still of concern today, a faculty committee at our university, a career-focused institution of about twelve hundred students, gathered to design a variety of General Education curriculum courses in order to improve our students’ level of academic writing and, just as important, to increase the faculty’s involvement in teaching writing intensive courses across all schools of our university: Arts and Sciences, Business, Nursing, Education, and Allied Health. In the spring of 2014, we identified the need to encourage the general faculty across the disciplines to assist students in improving their academic writing; this came about because of assessment data leading up to the Middle States Accreditation report and the subsequent review of our General Education program in the two years prior to that. The assessment data collected since 2011 indicated that our senior-level students’ writing was not at the standards expected by program faculty. For the programs that were assessed for writing quality measures in AY2011, eight out of the ten found over 25% of the writing artifacts were below the standards of their disciplines. In addition, the current “writing intensive” courses—the introductory courses then required in the General Education Program (Signature Courses)—were not uniformly implemented or defined. The following year, members of the General Education Committee assessed random samples of course syllabi and determined that there was uneven evidence provided for meeting the standards for writing intensive.

## The First Courses Offered

Five new writing-intensive seminar courses were launched in the 2016 spring semester: Sustainability (Environmental Science), The Rise of the Atlantic World (History), The Psychology of Spirituality (Religious Studies), Literature and the Environment (English), Personal Finance (Business), and Divas of Music: From Bingen to Beyoncé (Music). Each course ran with a full or nearly full student class load (eighteen). The faculty met in informal conversations throughout the semester to discuss the progress of the new seminars and plan for a gathering of more faculty who would be interested in teaching the seminars in the following semester.

In May, the three of us on the mini-grant committee led a roundtable discussion not only for our own faculty who had taught or who were soon to teach a SEM course but also for faculty at nearby institutions who wished to join the conversation about new ideas for teaching writing-intensive courses. Our goal was to review our experience of teaching the new seminars and to encourage a conversation in our own institution and others about designing and implementing such courses. The conversation was robust and productive, with professors from the fields of Criminal Justice, History, Nursing, Chemistry, Philosophy, Physics, Education, English, Mathematics, Education and Music, all faculty from institutions of twelve-hundred or so students. Responses in a follow-up survey sent to those who attended highlighted the importance of collegiality in designing and implementing writing intensive courses. In a question asking what was most helpful about the workshop, attendees responded with: *just hearing people's challenges was helpful; hearing how other faculty approached their writing intensive course, especially that they felt that content still comprised the majority of the course; hearing other faculty's stories; hearing the challenges faced by*

*all of the developers and the ideas they had in preparing/presenting the course; hearing how others incorporated both writing assignments and writing instruction into class structure; discussing the various perspectives, and getting ideas on revising the course to try to involve the students more effectively, among other similar comments.*

This past year, the number of writing intensive seminar courses has expanded to include new offerings from the schools of Education and Nursing, as well as others: The Many Faces of Imprisonment (Sociology), Middle East Conflict: Exile and Belonging (History), The Bible as Literature, with a focus on women (English), The Role of Women in the Graphic Novel (English), Embracing Individuals with Special Needs: Professional Practice (Education), Caring and the Human Experience in Human Society (Nursing), and Global Learning: Why Does it Matter? (Nursing). Without the ongoing conversations and workshops to bring together faculty from a variety of disciplines and institutions, the program would not have expanded or succeeded as much as it has. Our goal was to create not only the new writing intensive courses but also, and as important, a vibrant community of writing instructors supporting each other and whom we in administrative positions could best serve on an ongoing basis. Workshops and visiting experts in the field initiated this meaningfully for us.

## **Theory Informing the Program and the Impetus for Revising Our Writing Program**

In researching the writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) and writing-in-the-disciplines (WID) programs so as to decide which would best inform our plans for the new seminar courses, I was especially impressed by the scope and clarity of Purdue University's OWL (Online Writing Lab) and its merging of two concepts: Writing-to-Learn (WTL) and Writing-in-the-Disciplines (WID). I had long used this website as an online resource for students in my English courses, so I returned to it for definitions of WTL and WID that I would subsequently share with my committee and with our writing seminar faculty. The Purdue OWL's description of writing-to-learn as one way that students "often comprehend and retain the information better" and that such a practice could "help students work through confusing new ideas and apply what they learn to their own lives and interests" affirmed the WTL concepts that all our faculty essentially believed. However, while the nursing faculty cited instances of students gaining maturity in writing reflections of their clinical rotations, supporting the WTL model, for example, they and faculty from other schools, especially the sciences, remarked that the WID concept was also crucial, that is to say, "that to participate successfully in the academic discourse of their community, students must be taught discipline-specific conventions and should practice using these conventions," as the OWL website maintains.

In Michelle Ballif's *Composition Forum Program Profile* (2006) about the Writing Intensive Program at the University of Georgia, she explains that Cornell's John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines emphasizes the disciplinary nature of writing, citing Jonathan Monroe, former director of the program: "While WAC emphasizes the commonality, portability, and communicability of writing practices, WID emphasizes disciplinary differences, diversity and heterogeneity" and "emphasizes what remains incommensurable and irreducible in writing practices both within academic fields and from one field to the next" (Ballif 3; Monroe 4). Because academic writing is the conversation of scholars, as Ballif remarks, our committee concluded that a WAC and WID combined design would work best for our students, nearly three-quarters of whom are nursing majors and nearly all the rest of whom are in strongly career-directed programs. The John S. Knight Institute (<http://as.cornell.edu/john-s-knight-institute>) was certainly worth exploring, for our committee, most especially because it emphasizes upper-level courses in writing; noted on their website is the fact that as well as first-year writing courses, it also includes an upper-level program, Writing in the Majors, noting that more than thirty-five academic departments and programs offer courses associated with the Knight Institute's programs. This was most helpful in our planning of the new writing seminar courses as envisioning them for students of all levels, sophomores to seniors.

A WAC/WID program could achieve two goals: 1) elevate the scholarly focus of our students to balance better their approach to college and its intellectual demands (instead of college as simply vocational training); and (2) improve the faculty's engagement with other schools, such as Arts and Sciences, Education, and Business, in conversations about pedagogy and writing. We found that our design of a WAC/WID combination affirms respect for each discipline's professional writing methods and projects, while also respecting the importance of writing as a connecting thread through all academic learning communities.

Another theory informing our program was in exploring a focus on service-learning with the seminars. Because of our university's identity as a Sisters of Mercy institution, which emphasizes service-learning applications, the remarks of Cornell's Knight Program's current director, Paul Sawyer, resonated with our committee in considering the new seminar courses. Specifically, Sawyer writes, "I argue for precisely such a systematic, institutional approach--a strategy from the center that underwrites flexible tactics in the field--by considering the case of the writing in the majors program at Cornell University" and adds that "the example is of use to service-learning theorists as well as

writing program administrators attempting to build progressive Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) programs in their institutions”; he concludes by declaring that, “I argue that although many challenges remain, this type of alliance can combat the chief threat facing service-learning today: not institutional power but rather institutional neglect, which exacerbates what Michel de Certeau calls ‘the erosion of time’” (68). With Sawyer’s words in mind, our plans opened up new ideas of creating courses that not only taught effective writing methods but that also highlighted our institution’s commitment to service-learning. Writing-intensive seminars with a service-learning component could engage more faculty interested in connecting their discipline to the needs of the community or of those further afield in such programs as alternative spring breaks, infusing the service-learning goals with a fresh connection to the strategic plans for colleges seeking to enhance their students’ learning and career-preparation through a writing intensive curriculum. Plans to incorporate this component will be in the next stage of further developing the SEM courses at our university.

## **Mechanical Description of the Program**

The new SEM courses are under the General Education Program and are required for all new, existing, and transfer students, as of the spring 2016 semester. These courses will gradually replace the previous Signature Courses mentioned above, which were a reconstituted version of an introductory course for each discipline. Students who matriculated before 2016 were previously required to take six Signature courses anytime during their degree program, but these were since reclassified as elective courses, so the Signature Course requirement ended in 2017. As of the fall 2016 semester, all students at our university who are pursuing a Bachelor’s degree are required to take two SEM (writing intensive seminar) courses, not concurrently, in any year of their degree program.

The process by which a faculty member designs a course, receives feedback in the review system by the General Education chair and a faculty member in that discipline, and then offers the course on the schedule the following semester usually is completed in the semester before the course is offered. All SEM courses are capped at sixteen students, with allowance for a one or two student overload, only with the instructor’s approval, and firmly limited to eighteen. The General Education Committee negotiated this particular number with the administration of the university over many weeks, strongly believing that it maintained the integrity of the program coherence and workload for the faculty involved across the disciplines. At such a small institution as ours, there are no such things as Teaching Assistants to shoulder any portion of the workload in teaching, lab review, or grading. Consequently, it was imperative that we design a writing intensive seminar template that incorporated the goals of the university’s writing standards for the students, as well as the goals of the faculty in the course design and execution. Current SEM courses offered include The Divas of the Music World: From Bingen to Beyonce (Music Theory); Sustainability (Earth Sciences); Caring and the Human Experience in Society (Behavioral Sciences); Psychology of Spirituality (Religious Studies); The Bible as Literature (English); Personal Finance (Business); The Rise of the Atlantic World (History); Middle East Conflict: Exile & Belonging (History); Women in Science (Nursing); Spirituality of the Child (Education); Conflict and Peace in Science Fiction (English).

## **Institutional and Budgetary Constraints**

The new General Education requirement of the SEM courses relies on each school’s budget to hire adjunct faculty to relieve the teaching load on full-time faculty who design and teach a SEM course. So far, this has only resulted in two adjunct faculty, one course per semester. In addition, to support faculty of the new writing intensive seminars, our institution purchased a three year subscription to the proofreading and editing online service, Grammarly®, for which a three-year license currently cost us \$4800. While we will reassess our plans for renewing this service next year, having an online and free proofreading and editing service for students was greatly supportive to both students and faculty alike, enlarging conversations about what is effective writing, on several levels beyond a grammatical one. If not Grammarly®, another proofreading and editing service that is free and easy for students to access and use is a recommendation I know that our faculty would make for anyone teaching a writing intensive seminar, whatever their experience in such a course.

## **Lessons Learned and Reflection**

Lesson #1: Take care of your writing faculty by addressing their concerns.

Lesson #2: Validate the initiative for new writing courses by requesting administrative support.

Lesson #3: Maintain ongoing attention to writing faculty’s issues and concerns in the new program, not just after the

first year.

One of the most complicated aspects of generating a new series of General Education courses into the curriculum is in communicating the concept and planned execution of it to the faculty at large, who must be invested for it to succeed. In reflecting on what the committee and I might have done better, I would have had a series of conversations at our General Faculty meetings, instead of an announcement at one meeting, followed by subsequent emails of descriptions of the program and invitations to become involved in the planning or teaching. The faculty had witnessed the last eight years of the previous Signature Courses deteriorating into those primarily taught by supplemental faculty who were less and less interested in teaching a course with an inflexible syllabus, which can grow stale. There are still concerns that the new SEM courses could eventually become less vibrant and the faculty less invested; with the demand for the number of sections increasing each semester comes the urgency to fill the slots, which can exacerbate this apprehension about maintaining the quality of faculty investment and teaching. Our continued task is to keep the newly established faculty conversations across the disciplines active, in addition to being attentive to the need to check in with those currently teaching these courses.

Writing faculty at most institutions includes both full-time and part-time instructors, those whose specialty is Composition and Rhetoric and many who have no such specialty. Neither often gets the attention from administrators and program coordinators that could enhance their quality of life as writing instructors; more often, as in our case, both kinds of instructors lost interest in writing courses that were predetermined and inflexible, requiring writing assignments that did not much reflect the students' or instructors' engagement. Many of our faculty began to request to be excused from teaching our previous writing courses, and several in our adjunct pool requested the same. Consequently, our new writing intensive seminars began with a focus on the instructor's methods, pedagogical topics, and particular interests as much as possible. Even so, our new program would have been better served if I had met with each instructor separately to discuss issues that arose after the first semester of our new courses; we had workshops about it, but an individual meeting with each would have better supported the faculty as they looked ahead to teaching that course in the next semester.

Soliciting the support of our administration by requesting and receiving a mini-grant for workshops and visiting professors added influence and consequence to our newly designed writing seminars; I am not sure that the seminars would be thriving as much as they are today if not for that kind of support and profile on our campus. I would encourage any such administrative support for new writing programs by writing program coordinators at any institution.

Especially with our writing faculty, I would have kept more actively in communication with them as they designed and taught the new courses so that their thoughts and reflections could have been more fully developed in a conversation with me, which was not possible in the workshops we conducted. Otherwise, our goal for developing a community of writing instructors from across the disciplines was definitely successful and is our best hope for the ongoing success of our new SEM courses. If we can continue to listen and respond to our writing faculty throughout these first years of our new writing seminars, we can keep the program flexible enough to maintain the vibrancy that a theme-based approach to writing courses requires in order to engage faculty and students for years to come.

## Final Thoughts

I have no doubt that there exist many faculty members sitting in meetings each semester, listening to professors and administrators bemoan student writing skills and the deterioration therein, faculty who are expecting to hear such complaints extend throughout their teaching career without much resolution, if any. However, through our new writing seminar courses, we have demonstrated that solutions are possible with a fresh perspective and new goals that include what is not only most effective in the teaching of academic writing but also what is most interesting to the faculty member teaching academic writing. In truth, the deepest issue and responsibility in creating a new writing intensive program at any institution is in engaging the faculty and students in a sustainable, developing program, supported by an enthused faculty and administration—a program that offers transformational experiences for both faculty and students.

From my experience, the most heartening thing about initiating a new WI program involving faculty across the disciplines has been knowing that so many faculty who agree with the complaints of those colleagues in my early presentation welcome collaboration with other faculty on solving their students' writing issues; they are weary of doing it alone and with the same methods, even though students today are not best taught in the same way as students ten years, or even five years, ago. Involving faculty across the disciplines at our institution, as well as those from similar institutions, activates the kind of collaboration within which is embedded the message that solutions to the issues of writing instruction, effective learning, and clearer communication with our students and colleagues are

achievable, to the satisfaction of faculty and administration. Subsequent meetings with our most recent seminar instructors have revealed that our faculty's goals for student writing have been clarified and incorporated more effectively into their syllabi; the results of that are promising. I would encourage any such venture at institutions that are concerned with student writing quality and the pedagogy conducted to improve it. In short, the enthusiasm expressed by all involved continues to add a vibrancy to our meetings and our plans for the new writing intensive seminars across the disciplines. I am grateful to my colleagues on the grant committee, as well as to our former president, for their unwavering commitment and support in bringing this most significant curriculum revision to our university in over a decade. Even as a Writing Program Coordinator with twenty-eight years of experience in teaching writing, I never would have achieved these results through my efforts alone.

## [Appendix \(PDF\)](#)

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