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# On the Write Track

**The need to write well is promoted across the University's curriculum.**

Story by **RACHEL HATCH**



**Curricular innovations aim to strengthen writing skills regardless of a student's major. (Above) Writing tutor Michael Henry '12, left, works with Alexandria Long '12.**

As he meets with alumni around the country, President Richard F. Wilson often asks them how they feel the University can better prepare students for their postgraduation lives. Writing, he says, regularly tops the list. "One of the central tenets of a liberal arts education is that students learn to be critical thinkers and effective writers," says Wilson. "Writing is not only vital to our students' success while they are in college, but also is essential to postgraduation endeavors." He cites a report from the College Board's National Commission on Writing, which concluded that writing ability is critically important to employment and promotion, especially among salaried employees.

"Whether the task is analyzing a problem, composing a report or communicating via email, the ability to write clearly, creatively and persuasively is more important than ever," Wilson says. While the need for effective writing skills is widely recognized, how to best develop those skills in a liberal arts setting has been an ongoing challenge. At Illinois Wesleyan, faculty and administrators have faced this challenge by launching a new program designed to improve students' general writing skills while helping them master writing tailored toward their individual academic interests and career goals. The creation of the Writing Program culminates a decades-long shift in how the University teaches writing. Through the 1980s, Illinois Wesleyan, like many colleges, delivered writing instruction through a single course for freshmen. English 105, "Expository Writing," was delivered entirely by the English Department, with 33 to 35 sections being taught a year, says Mary Ann Bushman, associate professor of English and director of Illinois Wesleyan's Writing Program.

By the mid-1990s, a new model called writing-across-the-curriculum had taken hold in higher education, arriving at Illinois Wesleyan in the form of the Gateway Colloquium. Like "Expository Writing," Gateways are required course designed to help first-year students gain proficiency in college-level writing. The difference is that Gateway courses can be taught by faculty from any department or school.

"It was a sweeping change," says Frank Boyd, who served as interim provost and is an associate professor of political science, "but we had no real mode of assessment to see how well it was being pulled off."

Illinois Wesleyan was one of seven Midwestern liberal arts colleges who formed a consortium in 2005 to measure students' civic engagement and intellectual development. Among the research projects funded by a Teagle Foundation grant was a direct assessment of writing skills among first-year and senior students. The study measured significant improvement in writing skills during students' first year "but much less improvement beyond that point," says Zahia Drici, a math professor and associate dean of the curriculum. A consensus began to build among faculty that "a writing requirement does not constitute a writing program."

Students shared similar concerns, according to Kelly Petrowski '08, a biology major and Student Senate president at IWU who is now a Peace Corps volunteer in Malawi, Africa. "To me, the largest concern of many students in terms of our writing program was the lack of a clear, standardized curriculum across all majors," she says. "In my discussions with other students I found it was clear that the amount of writing and research that actually occurred in their courses varied greatly."

In the summer of 2008, Petrowski was a part of a study group of professors, administrators and students assigned the task of providing a more focused vision on how to improve writing skills over the full period of undergraduate study. A study conducted by the group revealed that students often postponed taking required writing-intensive courses until their senior year.

To prevent this gap, the task force recommended that every student complete a writing-intensive course before the end of their sophomore year — a requirement that began with the incoming first-year class in 2010. "It was a prime example of why collecting information is important before making policy," says Boyd. "We thought we knew what was wrong — Gateway. In fact, Gateway was working. One of the problems was the gap in writing instruction between first-years and seniors."

As initiatives to strengthen the Writing Program developed, funding to support those changes was sought. A \$175,000 grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation "opened new doors for us," says Joel Haefner, coordinator of the University's Writing Center. "We could bring in outside speakers from successful writing programs across the United States and other experts to look at our Writing Program and analyze how it was developing."

In addition to appointing Bushman as Writing Program director, the University created a new Faculty Writing Committee to establish benchmarks for what constitutes strong writing across disciplines and to analyze and assess the effectiveness of the writing instruction overall. The Mellon Foundation grant also provided funding for faculty workshops on good practices and innovations in teaching writing.

"It is important University-wide for [faculty] who are involved with the Writing Program to know what we expect of one another," says Tom Quinn, a former member of the Writing Committee and assistant professor of theatre arts. "In every discipline, it is important to understand the norms and the goals, so we have a sense of our roles and responsibilities."

Bushman believes that students from all disciplines benefit from improved writing skills. For example, "chemistry majors all have senior thesis projects," she says. "They are publishing with

their professors in journals and in conference presentations. You can say the same for the arts. You don't think about the arts being fundamentally about writing, but, in fact, artists and musicians are called upon to write everything from artist statements to talking points to patrons and art galleries about their work."

R. Given Harper — the George C. and Ella Beach Lewis Endowed Chair of Biology — says he always included an element of writing in his "Introduction to Ecology" class, requiring students to gather data, analyze it and summarize the results in a paper.

"A majority of our [biology] students are headed to graduate or medical school," Harper says. "Both written and oral communications are vital for that next step."

"Introduction to Ecology" is one of more than 100 courses designated in the University's catalog as "writing-intensive." Those courses span the range of academic disciplines, from business and computer science to music, psychology and theatre. Several foreign language courses also have a writing-intensive component.

"Writing is as important as speaking when learning a first language, but also for learning a second language as well," says Carolyn Nadeau, the Byron S. Tucci Professor and Hispanic Studies chair. Hispanic Studies has been incorporating more writing practice, from introductory to upper-level courses, says Nadeau.



**Writing Program Director Mary Ann Bushman helps assess and assist student and faculty needs in developing writing-intensive courses.**

"The biggest change was the introductory class," says Nadeau of Spanish 280, "Reading and Writing Culture." "It's a writing-intensive class where students learn about information literacy, writing in our discipline and the standards that are applied there."

As a sophisticated infrastructure is developed to make writing-across-the-curriculum a daily reality at IWU, the Writing Program faces a new challenge.

With the Mellon writing grant now expired, "we need to figure out how to ensure the Writing Program has the resources to continue," says Boyd. "It would be a big mistake not to build on all the progress we've made."

Funding for the Writing Program is one of the goals of the ongoing *Transforming Lives: The Campaign for Illinois Wesleyan University*, as a component of the Endowment for Excellence.

“As a Peace Corps volunteer, writing is a surprisingly large part of my job in the form of clear and concise reporting and grant-writing,” says Petrowski. “I believe that my writing skills but, more importantly, the argumentative approaches learned at IWU will be beneficial to me in all of my future career plans.”

“In business, medicine, law or any field,” says Boyd, “what separates people who move into positions of leadership from those who stall is their ability to express themselves in writing. That kind of work develops the intellectual agility that our graduates should have.”

**To read more about Illinois Wesleyan's Writing Program, [click here.](#)**