

The First Year Writing Program at UMass Lowell

Freshman writing instruction at UMass Lowell has undergone dramatic growth and improvement in the past five years. The 2010 establishment of The First Year Writing Program as a distinct entity within the English Department reflects both the work of concerned faculty in the years immediately preceding its institution and the program's ambitions moving forward. The FYWP's central mission is to ensure the quality of teaching and learning in the freshman writing sequence; in service of that mission, we have recently made significant changes in curriculum, class size, personnel, and program oversight.

Curriculum

Two recent and notable revisions to the FYWP curriculum include the retirement of College Writing A and a complete restructuring of College Writing II.

The decision in 2009 to replace College Writing A, 42.100, a 3-credit course serving students underprepared for College Writing, was informed by the growing body of research on the acceleration of basic skills courses. The current UML model delivers support for emerging writers in a supplemental instruction format through a newly-designed course: 42.101SI, the Intensive Writing Lab. This 2-credit course, required of students who do not meet placement criteria for College Writing I, is taken concurrently with 42.101, and is taught in a hands-on, active style. Success rates of students taking the IWL and going on to College Writing II have held steady in comparison with the previous model, and students are able to remain in learning communities with their peers and on track with their degree programs.

We are especially enthusiastic about our overhaul of College Writing II, 42.102, which went into effect in Spring 2011. The FYWP undertook two years of planning and preparation, including multiple faculty training workshops and professional development opportunities, to re-create this course in such a way as to fully prepare students to plan, conduct, and write appropriate academic research papers. The transferrable research skills highlighted in this course (please see our learning outcomes statement for details) are scaffolded and practiced throughout the entire semester, and individual sections are designed to maintain the FYWP signature standard of academic freedom for faculty.

Class Size

In Fall 2010, the Provost mandated maximum enrollment caps of 19 for FYWP courses. This reflects a significant improvement over the past, when FYWP courses were capped at 25 or even 27 students. These lower caps are held firm; additional sections are added as warranted to meet demand. Smaller classes allow for more individual attention to students' writing processes and facilitate best pedagogical practices, such as workshop activities and conferencing. Caps of 15 have been maintained for ESL and supplemental instruction courses.

Personnel

The above changes have been complemented and are being maintained by the addition of 12 full-time faculty lecturers devoted to the First Year Writing Program in just the past two years. This remarkable investment has reduced the proportion of sections being taught by part-time faculty from nearly 100% in Spring 2009 to roughly 55% in Spring 2012. This faculty body contributes critical service to the FYWP and allows for new initiatives and activities that have invigorated the entire program and extended the service of the FYWP to University- and state-wide projects, especially those involving retention and assessment. Additionally, the program now has a designated coordinator and a steering committee comprising lecturers and tenure-track English faculty.

Oversight

The University's increased investment in First Year Writing has already enabled improvements in program oversight. The FYWP has capitalized on its pre-existing strengths in faculty communication and development, and is working to continually assess and enhance teaching and learning. In just the past two years, we have written or revised the learning outcomes for each of our courses, dramatically improved our course evaluation instrument, instituted practices for reviewing and giving feedback on all course syllabi, and created a web presence that coordinates our teaching and service. In Fall 2012, we will undertake, for the very first time, a program-wide assessment of student learning.

In summary, the First Year Writing Program at UMass Lowell is a vibrant site of continual improvement. Our pre-existing strengths—The Common Text Program; vigorous, program-wide communication; and our commitment to professional development and effective teaching—have been enhanced as the University has demonstrated its commitment to meeting the needs of first-year students.