

## **Report on the Disciplinary Communication Grant Department of Anthropology Writing Assistant Center Program**

This is a final report for a Disciplinary Communication Grant to support the Department of Anthropology Writing Assistant Center Program. In 2016-17, we received \$15,000 to continue and expand this existing program, which has had very strong and positive results for students taking anthropology courses.

### **1. Purpose of Writing Assistant Center Program**

The Anthropology Writing Assistant Center Program was created to address several critical problems experienced by our undergraduate students. Because the discipline of anthropology is a writing-intensive field that requires integration of data, methods, and theory, and because we are a discipline that encompasses the qualitative social sciences, humanities, and physical sciences, our courses require students to learn and master diverse writing skills in such genres as lab reports, ethnographic field data, proposal writing, critical analysis, and extended research essay. Faculty were concerned that students' low levels of competence in writing, ranging from basic expression to more sophisticated critical thinking, were greatly impeding their ability to learn effectively, master the material satisfactorily, and succeed in the program and in their future post-graduation careers.

In response to these problems, the WA program was created to train peer undergraduate writing tutors to support fellow students in improving their writing and attain a sufficient level of writing proficiency to succeed in college-level anthropology coursework.

### **2. Structure of Program**

The WA Program is supervised by a Faculty Supervisor and supported by an advanced graduate student who serves as a Teaching Fellow and teaches the WA training course. Each year five to seven of our best undergraduate students (typically juniors and seniors) are selected through a rigorous screening process to be Writing Assistants (WAs). The department recruits WAs through self-nomination and faculty nomination. Nominated students submit an application statement and a portfolio of their writing. The Faculty Supervisor and the Teaching Fellow solicit recommendations from faculty and then conduct one-on-one interviews with finalists before making the final selection. Criteria for selection include: performance in upper-division, writing-intensive anthropology courses; faculty assessment of writing skills and ability to mentor other students; personal philosophy about writing and mentoring; and desire to help fellow students. Through this process, we strive to recruit a diverse group of students who represent not only our strongest writers and most empathetic students, but also students with a range of experiences that mirror those of our department's students more generally.

In Fall quarter, WAs complete a one-quarter intensive training course, ANTH 113, which introduces WAs to the peer-engagement process, mentoring, and a variety of writing and developmental editing (not copy-editing) assistance techniques. WAs read widely on topics pertaining to writing techniques and strategies for engaging their peers in discussion and reflection. Department faculty provide guest workshops on topics such as proper citation, topic development, and their own writing and mentoring strategies.

After their training, WAs staff a drop-in center where they work with students at a variety of stages throughout the writing process, from initial brainstorming of ideas to polishing final drafts. Students can, and often do, return at multiple stages of the writing process or to work on additional

assignments. Each WA provides approximately five-seven hours per week of open, drop-in office hours support for students who want help on their papers. Students come voluntarily, although faculty often recommend that students of any level use the WA services.

The WA program has generated a robust collection of materials, including training materials for WAs, logs and reporting sheets, and writing resource materials for students.

### **3. 2016-17 Summary of WAP Activities**

During the 2016-17 year, five WAs held regular weekly office hours for student meetings (623 hours during the academic year, just over 200 hours per quarter). The frequency and timing of student visits reflected normal rhythms of the academic term, with the greatest number of visits shortly before midterms and final papers, and visits less frequent at the beginning of the quarter and between midterms and final papers. Students visited the WA program for a range of issues: topic development, structure and organization, synthesis of materials and sources, proper use of citations and source attribution, senior seminar essay drafts, scholarship proposal essays, and graduate school personal statement essays, among others. Numerous students who were ESL students or exchange students came for assistance to ensure that their written English was correct and comprehensible. Students who came for assistance with exam essays or help understanding course content were referred to their instructors. The WAs also reported that students from other departments came for assistance with papers for non-anthropology courses (students were referred back to those other departments for assistance).

As noted in a previous report, inclusion of readers and tutors under the UAW/ASE collective bargaining agreement prevented faculty from requiring students in need of assistance to use the WA program. This forced us to make participation in the program voluntary and has resulted in a decline in rates of students seeking help. It also resulted in students only using the WA program when deadlines were looming and they were feeling desperate and anxious. Although the program is clearly of great benefit to the students who do make use of it, we would like even more students to use the WA services. Hence, going forward, we will explore ways to encourage more students to visit the WA Program.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The Anthropology department is gratified that our WA program continues to be a successful model for building a lateral support structure to support student writing. We are encouraged that students continue to visit the WA program and that high-performing undergraduates are eager to serve as WAs. In the future we will continue to experiment with ideas to reach even more students and expand our ability to support all courses across the subfields in our department. Despite our success, CEP is no longer funding the Department's Writing Assistant Program. While we continue to apply for grants and take part in crowd raising ventures like UCSC's Giving Day, writing support programs are among some of the most difficult to fund. While there are several federal and private initiatives that support writing in the sciences, the broad nature of anthropology limits what and where we can apply. Although the WA program will function through the 2017-18 academic year, we expect this to be our last unless we can come up with alternative revenue streams.