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The Source of Our Ethos: Using Evidence-Based Practices to Affect a Program-Wide Shift from “I Think” to “We Know”



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Abstract: This program profile demonstrates how the first-year writing program at Oakland University has engaged contingent faculty in research, assessment, and program development over the years, employing evidence-based practices to improve individual classroom instruction and to redesign the entire first-year curriculum. The authors describe their efforts to develop an inclusive model for research and professional development, a model that seeks to empower the faculty to join disciplinary conversations about the teaching of writing. Overall, the profile contributes to existing scholarship on large college writing programs by illustrating how faculty may collaborate to develop and assess curricula, to conduct and publish research, and to build a program that shifts the conversation from what individual instructors may believe about writing instruction (“I think”) to what the department may collaboratively know about best practices (“we know”).

Not long ago, one of our contingent first-year writing (FYW) instructors was given an official warning for ignoring our department’s long-standing prohibition against direct instruction in standardized English grammar. When challenged on her pedagogical practices, this instructor dismissed our Writing Program Administrator’s (WPA’s) invocation of decades of research into the inefficacy of decontextualized grammatical instruction. Despite our program-wide focus on rhetorical instruction and evidence-based practices, this instructor’s classroom practices were based on her opinion that direct grammar instruction was important for her students. Cases like this one, familiar for many WPAs, illustrate a systemic issue in FYW that pits an instructor’s uninformed good intentions and assumptions about writing against what research leads us to know about what works best for students in the FYW classroom.

As this anecdote about an “all about grammar” instructor suggests, writing programs like ours may sometimes struggle with faculty reliance on lore and on those “false, harmful, simplistic, and limiting” tales (Johanek 87) about what works—“for me”—in the writing classroom. We maintain that evidence-based practices—not just instinct or opinion—should shape our writing program because, “if we continue to rely on belief [...] we do no better to support a case for” our FYW practices “than what most detractors do support cases against them” (Anson 11). The larger implication of evidence-based practices, both for the field and for writing programs, is to not fight “belief with belief” but to make certain that what works is that which can be tested via a “culture of research” (Anson 31-32).

In this profile of our first-year writing program at Oakland University (OU), we demonstrate how a program-wide emphasis on research can help to professionalize and unite our faculty. Ultimately, we would like to do more than have contingent instructors only acquiesce begrudgingly to approved methods. Such acquiescence may lead to frustration if our contingent faculty are unaware of established research in writing studies because they either rely on lore or are specialists from related fields (e.g., literature, linguistics) or broadly connected fields (e.g., education) who lack a specific background in writing pedagogy. These instructors may also rely on generalized attitudes about writing expectations that are further complicated by their own field’s assumptions and lore about writing pedagogy. Such approaches may exclude process, genre theory, and rhetoric; instead, they may assume general writing skills instruction: the idea that writing can be taught without any specific content and that those general writing skills effortlessly transfer to other contexts (see Petraglia). With an increasing call for credentialed composition faculty (see Lamos, for example), our program’s approach focuses on the promotion of professional

development and opportunities for engagement in the field of writing studies. Elizabeth Wardle's 2013 program profile makes a similar argument. In that profile, she outlines the disconnection between the larger field's research of best practices and the "micro-level" of individual composition programs where faculty, often from other disciplines and untrained in composition pedagogy, are teaching the bulk of FYW courses. Wardle argues that in order to implement the macro-level knowledge in the field, writing programs must offer "sustained, scaffolded support for composition teachers from all backgrounds," be they contingent, full-time, or graduate student, to help those teachers become experts in the research on teaching writing (Wardle).

From our perspective, it is not enough to create a standard curriculum and expect instructors to adapt. As writing studies faculty, we must persuade with a goal of achieving a department-wide understanding and appreciation of current pedagogical approaches and research. Such a shift means moving from a dependence on individual perceptions about how to teach writing and "I think" proclamations to a reliance on collaborative research and assessment experiences and the resulting assertions of what "we know" about how our students learn to write. Our approach to program development focuses on recognizing expertise among our faculty, building on and expanding that expertise, and promoting collaborative projects to make the most of that expertise.

Our approach to these issues involves two threads: faculty development and active research in the program. For us at OU, scholarly research and program assessment are inextricably connected and contribute equally to curricular development. In other words, we recognize the need for scholarly research and formal assessment to improve the program, seeking funding to assess the program using rigorous research protocols and building on those initial assessment projects to develop a climate where both research and assessment are valued and rewarded. As we discuss in the next sections, we have engaged in extensive program assessment and research over the last five years at OU, involving the majority of our faculty on every level in this essential intellectual and practical work. A focus on evidence-based practices and program development has made it possible for our program to professionalize contingent faculty and to demonstrate our respect for first-year instructors as knowledge-makers within the department and within the field. Indeed, the important step between "I think" and "we know" is the process of identifying research questions—what we need/want to know—and conducting local research projects that allow us to make claims as reflective practitioners and knowledge-makers. We view program and faculty assessment not just as a means of providing "institutional accountability" for our work with students (Gallagher 452), but also as a way to improve teaching and learning within our program through a disciplinary research process that can be leveraged for instructor buy-in and professional development.

How We Got Here: History of the First-Year Writing Program

In 1957, Oakland University was established as a small liberal arts college^{1} that was initially affiliated with Michigan State University. Oakland aspired to attract faculty from Ivy League universities and to provide local students with an exceptional and rigorous educational experience. While the faculty had Ivy League aspirations and expectations, the university's student population was comprised then, as now, of good students from local families, hard-working and ambitious young men and women who, nevertheless, were not as prepared for university study as their faculty had hoped and as the university's advanced curriculum had anticipated.

Given this context, when OU was founded, there were no first-year writing courses because the university's students were expected to be adept writers by the time they arrived on campus. However, by fall 1964, the university established its first writing center to address faculty complaints about student writing. And by 1965, the university's new general education curriculum was designed to address student writing through the inclusion of a two-semester seminar or "Freshman Exploratory," a course designed to be taught by faculty across the university, who focused the course on topics of their own choosing to explore with like-minded students (UC Courses 1). Writing instruction was institutionalized more formally at OU in the early 1970s with the creation of a Department of Learning Skills. Writing faculty formed their own Department of Rhetoric in 1982, and this department was later combined with programs in communication and journalism to form a third, more powerful, departmental configuration—Rhetoric, Communication, and Journalism or RCJ (see Andersen; Ostergaard and Giberson). At that time, our writing program was administered by a program head who served as the writing program administrator within the triad RCJ department housing writing, communication, and journalism.

In 2008, reacting to developments in the field and to the improved status of writing at Oakland—as evidenced by the creation of our new writing center and the development of general education writing requirements at the first-year and beyond—the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences removed our program from RCJ. We then became an independent Department of Writing and Rhetoric, and our BA degree in Writing and Rhetoric was approved, providing the department with a dual focus: first-year writing and a new major.^{2} Because of support from the college dean and the provost, we established an administrative structure that includes more robust

participation and sharing of administrative duties among faculty.

Where We Are Now: Program Description

Demographics

Today, OU is a doctoral research university. Located about 25 miles north of Detroit, MI, the university has a student population of 20,000, drawing students primarily from both impoverished and affluent local communities. Approximately 3,000 students enroll in our first-year writing classes every year. A majority of these students are commuters, and most will work a minimum of 17 hours every week (“NSSE”). Most of our students are drawn to the university because of its reputation as a “good school,” because they can live at home while earning their degrees, and because our tuition is among the lowest for Michigan public universities.

Despite the economic downturn that has hit Michigan and the rest of the country, OU continues to grow and prosper. We have seen tremendous growth in the number of undergraduate and graduate degrees and programs over the last decade, with complementary growth in full-time faculty lines across the university. In fact, our new department has nearly doubled in size over the last six years, with the addition of five new assistant professors. With only thirteen full-time faculty, we have relied on our new colleagues to help us strengthen both our writing and rhetoric major and our first-year program through new course development, faculty development activities, and assessment. The department also employs 39 contingent faculty who teach first-year writing, business writing, and creative non-fiction, and who fill a number of important roles serving on department committees and coordinating ongoing initiatives.

Program Theories

Over the last five years, we have revised our first-year writing program to better aid our students in developing the rhetorical skills, composing processes, and information literacies necessary for writing in the 21st century. The first-year curriculum, which includes Basic Writing, Composition I, and a required Composition II class, strives for engaged classroom communities where our students are introduced to rhetorical strategies for writing in process-oriented, 4-credit-hour courses.

Social constructivist and rhetorical theories also inform our classes, which emphasize revision, rhetorical understanding, and collaborative work, and which require community/civic engagement, new media composing, and writing in the academic disciplines. We expect students to understand that they are scholars involved in academic dialogue rather than reporters summarizing the experts. Our classes encourage real research writing for a particular purpose/audience, where students engage with their topics as contributors to a discussion of key issues and ideas. We view academic research as a process of ongoing inquiry—not simply as a matter of locating appropriate secondary sources—and we believe that our course structure and instruction should emphasize process at least equally with product.

Program Objectives

By the time they have completed our first-year writing courses, we expect our students to have gained some understanding of rhetoric, critical analysis, and discourse conventions. Our classes seek to provide students with basic rhetorical knowledge, which includes

- an appreciation of how rhetorical contexts shape reading and writing,
- an understanding of a variety of rhetorical appeals and approaches,
- an ability to analyze a particular writing situation rhetorically, and
- an ability to put that rhetorical analysis to use by producing texts that are appropriate to and effective within that situation.

Our students are also introduced to some critical analysis, which requires that they

- understand how to negotiate and integrate diverse perspectives;
- read print, visual, and electronic sources analytically and critically;
- become familiar with the principles of locating and evaluating information; and
- develop flexible strategies for generating, revising, editing and proofreading their texts.

Finally, our program introduces students to discourse conventions, helping them to recognize how

- discourse conventions may be affected by shifts from print to digital modes,
- expectations about citation and source use may change from one audience to another, and
- source selections, citations, and use may impact a writer's ethos.

Because we recognize that our classes serve academic communities beyond our own, we teach the use of two academic styles in our first-year writing courses. Students in Basic Writing are introduced to basic MLA citation practices, students in Composition I compose their papers using MLA style, and students in Composition II learn APA style. Our rhetorical approach to teaching these academic conventions emphasizes the epistemic values, research methods, and assumptions about knowledge construction that are inherent in different academic citation systems. In this way, our treatment of citation practices is similar to our treatment of grammar: both are context-dependent aspects of writing that require rhetorical awareness and responsiveness to a particular situation and audience, not just a reliance on strict rules or personal preferences. Of course, the teaching of academic conventions goes beyond familiarizing students with citation systems. Rhetorical understanding of citation styles points us toward the ethos of an academic community, those guiding beliefs, values, and attitudes of any particular community that govern its writing practices and discipline-specific genres.

How We Empower Our Faculty: Description of the Program's Structure

Administrators

Currently, the first-year writing program at OU is administered by three of the co-authors of this article: the department chair, Marshall Kitchens; the writing program administrator (WPA), Lori Ostergaard; and the associate writing program administrator (AWPA), D.R. Hammontree. A First-Year Writing Committee (comprised of the WPA and AWPA, at least one co-chair of the department's assessment committee, the department's chief advisor, one other full-time faculty member, and two contingent faculty) advises the WPA on most matters related to course assessment, curricula, textbooks, and professional development. The department chair also plays a key role in administering the first-year writing program: coordinating the various committees; managing a \$200,000 annual budget for first-year writing and the major; seeking additional funding through internal grant proposals for technology and program development; working with the WPA to hire, train, and schedule part-time faculty; troubleshooting personnel issues and student complaints; and liaising with the dean's office, office of the provost, and the first-year advising center.

Full-Time Faculty

The department is comprised of one full professor, four associate professors, six assistant professors, and two special instructors (full time, job-secure instructors whose primary responsibilities are teaching and service). All of the tenured and tenure-track faculty who have been hired within the last decade hold doctoral degrees expressly in Composition-Rhetoric or Professional and Technical Writing.

Special Lecturers

Most faculty in the department, including tenured and tenure-track faculty, teach in the first-year writing program, although every year more than 90% of our first-year writing courses are instructed by 39 contingent faculty. Our contingent faculty are designated Special Lecturers (SLs) by the university, and they hold various advanced degrees in related fields, including master's degrees in communication, journalism, literature, and creative writing. Six of our SLs have master's degrees in the teaching of writing and four have PhDs in Composition-Rhetoric. Special Lecturers teach a minimum of four courses per year—although most of our part-time faculty teach 3/3 or 4/4/1 loads—and they are paid more per course at OU than at any of our neighboring universities or community colleges. Our newest Special Lecturers are paid \$1,061 per credit hour (\$4,244 per 4-credit course) and our most experienced SLs are compensated at a rate of \$1,284 per credit hour (\$5,136 per 4-credit course). Thus, our newest SLs are paid 17% more per credit hour than the national average, and our most experienced SLs are compensated 42% more (June and Newman). Our Special Lecturers also receive partial payments for group health insurance (60-65% depending on years of service), up to 65% payment for optical insurance, and 8 credits in Oakland University tuition waivers per year.

In an effort to further professionalize our contingent faculty and provide opportunities for them to learn more about the field of writing studies and the teaching of writing, beginning in 2008, we started offering our graduate-level courses in Teaching Writing and Teaching Writing with New Media to complement the Invitational Summer Institute that we offer each year as part of our site of the National Writing Project. Our SLs are invited to participate in the Invitational Summer Institute every year, and they may earn up to 8 graduate credits for their participation. SLs may enroll for free in up to two courses a year, which has allowed a number of our part-time faculty to pursue PhDs in Reading and in Educational Leadership. An impressive number of our contingent faculty have also used their tuition waivers to enroll in our department's graduate-level pedagogy courses. To date, half of our SLs have completed at least one of our program's graduate-level courses in the teaching of writing. Of these, 7 have completed two courses, and 4 have completed all three. Many of our faculty have presented the research they conducted in these classes before national audiences or expanded their graduate course projects into more extensive research agendas in new media composition, teaching with technology, and oral history.

As we illustrate in the sections that follow, all of our SLs regularly engage in professional development throughout the year and many are also engaged in assessment, curriculum development, and research activities within the department.

How We Respond to Institutional Pressures: Assessment as Research

When the Writing and Rhetoric department established itself as an independent academic unit in 2008, we faced immediate pressure from our institution to assess our required Composition II course. Composition II had last been assessed in 2005 by rhetoric program faculty in the RCJ department. Unfortunately, that assessment was based only on an indirect measure: students' self-reported evaluation of their learning in the course as determined by a 10-question Scantron survey attached to the existing end-of-semester course and instructor evaluations. This procedure had been recommended by the university's assessment committee because there was no funding available for the kind of labor-intensive direct assessment of student writing that had previously been done, and which would have necessitated paying contingent faculty to read and rate student papers. In hindsight, bowing to this institutional pressure was an example of what Chris Gallagher calls a "'trage' mentality" (32), but at the time, we were not in a position to enact Gallagher's principle of writing assessment as "collective inquiry" that "promote[s] teacher leadership for assessment within (and perhaps beyond) their programs" (36).

While that less-than-ideal assessment was taking place, the university's general education program was being completely restructured, and Composition II became the required "writing knowledge foundations" course. Shifting from the university's program assessment schedule to the general education assessment schedule meant that, as a key course in the new general education curriculum, every three years Composition II would be due for assessment. Consequently, the general education committee expected that a baseline assessment of Composition II would be completed at the end of the first general education assessment in cycle in 2008—the year that we became a new department. Due to the limited number of full-time faculty and a number of pressing issues for curriculum and program development that demanded immediate attention, the scheduled assessment of Composition II was postponed.

In 2009, we hired two new full-time faculty, co-authors Elizabeth G. Allan and Dana Lynn Driscoll, who took on the challenge of co-chairing the department's assessment committee. The committee's first priority was to assess Composition II, which had not been thoroughly assessed since 2003. We viewed this task not only as a foundation for future departmental assessment of the other first-year writing courses, but also as a baseline for eventually assessing writing in our newly-established major. As tenure-track faculty with expertise in qualitative and quantitative writing research methods, the assessment co-chairs approached assessment first and foremost as a research problem.

Following Linda Adler-Kassner and Peggy O'Neil's strategy that writing assessment should be conducted using discipline-specific research methods practiced in the field of writing studies, we developed a research-based, mixed methods assessment protocol that involved triangulation of several sources of data: instructors' syllabi and research paper assignments, students' research papers, and students' responses to a reflective writing assignment that the assessment committee designed. To analyze these materials, our assessment committee developed several rubrics based on the goals of the FYW program and the university's general education program. These assessment tools included a rubric for reflective writing, a rubric to examine syllabi and assignments, and a rubric to examine the quality of student writing. After the development of the rubrics, three part-time faculty and four full-time faculty spent two-and-a-half days norming to the rubrics and assessing student work.

We collected two pieces of student writing for this assessment because we believe that “one piece of writing—even if it is generated under the most desirable conditions—can never serve as an indicator of overall writing ability” (CCCC Committee). Following the recommendations of the “NCTE-WPA White Paper on Writing Assessment in Colleges and Universities,” we sought to assess our required course using “multiple measures” and engaging the “multiple perspectives” of our full-time faculty and Special Lecturers (NCTE-WPA 2). We were especially interested to see how our students assessed their own progress in the class, which is why we chose to assess a reflective essay along with the research paper. In “Looking Beyond Judging and Ranking,” William Condon describes a writing test prompt that asks students to reflect on their own learning in the college’s curriculum and extracurriculum. Reflective prompts, Condon suggests, may provide “testers with a rich set of data about the learning contexts that the test-takers describe,” and he suggests that the value of such prompts extends beyond an assessment of the writer to encompass an assessment of the university or program itself (145). Our students’ reflective essays provided an additional sample of their writing that not only contextualized their research papers but also gave us insights into what our students valued in our instruction and what they believed they had learned in our classes. More importantly, these reflections illuminated what we valued as a program and helped us to identify some much-needed changes to our curricula and our pedagogy. [3](#)

This first research-based writing assessment effort as an independent department began to create a culture of writing program research that has made ongoing assessment of writing courses an integral part of the life of the department. Since this first assessment, faculty in our department have assessed our one-credit Supervised Study writing tutorial course, our revised Basic Writing curriculum, and a redesign of our Composition I course. But it has taken careful planning and communication on our part to ensure that both full-time and contingent faculty recognize the value of assessment as a tool for identifying evidence-based best practices. Xueli Wang and Sarah Hurley’s recent survey of full-time and contingent instructors’ attitudes toward student learning assessment across the curriculum suggests that “faculty autonomy” and “the desire to improve their own teaching” are key factors in their willingness to engage in assessment; furthermore, “faculty are more likely to be willing to engage if assessment is viewed as a scholarly activity” (9). With our first assessment, we anticipated that our contingent faculty would be anxious about assessment procedures that might expose weaknesses in our curriculum, especially because we encourage our Composition II instructors to develop their own assignments and course themes within the framework of departmental goals and the general education student learning outcomes. We also knew that getting buy-in from our instructors would require good communication.

From the beginning, we made a deliberate effort to be transparent about the assessment process. We held professional development meetings to explain what we were doing and why, to answer questions, and to address instructors’ concerns, and we included several SLs as assessment readers, paying them a stipend for their participation. We emphasized that our research-based assessment protocol (described above) would protect instructors’ confidentiality by de-identifying instructors’ materials and students’ papers, and we explained that an accurate, detailed picture of student performance—even if it included bad news—was crucial to our ongoing efforts to improve our writing program. Involving our first-year writing instructors in this research-based approach to assessment has helped us to bridge the traditional gap between full-time and contingent faculty (as we describe in the next section).

Our department embraced Kathleen Blake Yancey and Brian Huot’s philosophy that writing assessment is “as much about faculty development—about how faculty develop and monitor their teaching and about how their understanding of learning changes—as it is about student development” (11). Based on our Composition II assessment results, we identified several issues that we could address with simple changes to our faculty handbook, such as clarifying our departmental policies about requiring revision and scheduling individual conferences. We then prioritized the student learning outcomes that required more sustained intervention and designed a series of faculty-led workshops to address those concerns collaboratively with our first-year writing instructors. Our investment of time and resources in this first assessment effort as an independent department set a precedent for how we would present ourselves to the university at large. We were able to demonstrate that a relatively small amount of funding for research-based assessment paid big dividends, not only in terms of more nuanced assessment results, but also in terms of professional development and scholarship.

How We Build Professionalization and Inclusion: Faculty Improvements

As we have begun to assess the program, we have also initiated some substantive revisions to our curriculum, bringing more consistency across individual sections of our courses and institutionalizing best practices. We have made a point of including SLs in this program development work as a means of getting buy-in from our course instructors and as a way to tap into their considerable expertise and enthusiasm. For example, in 2011, the WPA

chaired a committee to redesign our Basic Writing course to better prepare students for rhetorical instruction and academic research, and to encourage help-seeking and reflective behaviors. The committee was comprised of the WPA, a co-chair of our assessment committee, one additional full-time faculty member, and two contingent faculty. Committee members were compensated for their time working on the Redesign Committee through a grant our department chair and WPA secured from the university's First-Year Experience Committee. Our Redesign Committee researched Basic Writing curricula over the summer of 2012, developed a new curriculum that was shaped primarily by the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* (CWPA, NCTE, and NWP), piloted the course in fall 2012, and assessed this curriculum during the spring semester of 2013 to make additional revisions to the course before rolling it out officially in fall 2013.

Because the old Basic Writing curriculum was never assessed, we have no baseline assessment to use as a comparison. However, institutional data suggest the new curriculum is working. Prior to the redesign, 70% of Basic Writing students earned grades of 3.0 or above in their Composition I classes, but after the redesign that number jumped to 90%. More importantly, we think, prior to the redesign, our Basic Writing faculty worked primarily in isolation from one another, never knowing if their instruction had any impact on their students. After the redesign, our Basic Writing faculty have a community of instructors they can turn to for support and advice, but they also have access to assessment data that illustrates where the program needs to focus its efforts and institutional data that suggest "we know" something about how our Basic Writing students learn to write. We will continue to develop, assess, and refine this course, but the Basic Writing Redesign Committee has also begun sharing their work with a wider community. This spring, the committee presented on their work at the 2014 Conference on College Composition and Communication [CCCC]. They also recently had a chapter describing the redesign accepted for publication in a forthcoming edited collection. These are, we hope, only the first of many efforts this committee will undertake to add their voices to the national conversation about Basic Writing.

Following this course redesign model, in the summer of 2013 the WPA constituted a committee to redesign the curriculum of our Composition I course, a course that lacked a unified approach because it has been transformed a number of times over the last few years to make room for a variety of departmental and university initiatives. This new course redesign committee, chaired by the WPA and including contingent and full-time faculty, spent the summer of 2013 researching rhetorical approaches to this course and designing a new curriculum to pilot and assess during the next academic year. The assessment committee, with help from full-time and contingent faculty, is now in the process of assessing the previous Composition I curriculum and the redesigned curriculum to compare the two approaches. And both committees will collaborate on professional development workshops and presentations, introducing the new curriculum to our colleagues in the program and to national audiences.

Including contingent faculty in the work of researching, designing, piloting, and assessing current and new curricular approaches has been essential for our program for a number of reasons. First, such inclusion allows for more faculty participation in decision-making. Specifically, the approach toward investigating and implementing the course redesign was not seen as a "top down" mandate that would have led to resistance. The SLs on the redesign committee serve as ambassadors while also facilitating faculty professional development meetings. Such inclusion of our SL faculty made the redesign transparent and open to additional input. Hallway discussion became useful for informal feedback, as concerns that some instructors felt hesitant to say in front of full-time faculty were conveyed to the redesign committee via SLs. In these small ways, SLs who were not directly involved in the committee had the opportunity to express their views.

As well, these curricular revisions have served as a means to further professionalize our faculty, introducing them to current research and best practices and encouraging them to participate in meaning-making within the field (Lamos 55). Finally, because we actively pursue a variety of opportunities to make visible our contingent faculty's contributions to program development through presentations, publications, and reports, we are better able to articulate the value of the work they do in the first-year writing program and to highlight the considerable expertise that all of our faculty bring to this endeavor.

Unfortunately, faculty development, research, and service are rarely included in the job descriptions of our part-time colleagues and are only very rarely compensated. So while our department sought to include our contingent faculty in assessment and program development work, to tap into the considerable professional experience and expertise of the majority of our faculty in the department, we also had to acquire additional funding to compensate our colleagues for their time and service. Over the years we have been able to secure funding through a number of internal grant proposals to the provost, the university's general education committee, an ad hoc retention committee, the dean's office, and the office of the president. These grants ranged from \$5,000 for smaller projects to \$10,000 for major curriculum overhauls, paying participants \$200-\$2,000 per project, depending on their time investment.

New Faculty Designations

As we discuss above, retention and course development funds from the university have provided us with the means to compensate some of our contingent faculty for their time, but the department also tapped into a “special pay” budget line to compensate additional faculty for work on special committees and on special department and university initiatives. We did this through the development of new, unofficial, faculty lines. These lines are considered unofficial because they are not recognized in the faculty union contract, but they are essentially the standard Special Lecturer lines—a two-year contract, some medical benefits, and a guaranteed 4-course load every year—with some added benefits, including an opportunity to teach more courses with us and a small stipend for service. These new enhanced Special Lecturer positions were designed to provide some of our faculty with a greater sense of job security and to help them to foster deeper connections to the program, department, and university. Special Lecturers who applied for these 4/4/1 positions agree to Monday-Wednesday-Friday and Tuesday-Thursday teaching schedules, agree to spend four days on campus every week (allowing for some online class meetings), and are paid a stipend for performing service for the department (presenting at professional development meetings, judging Writing Excellence Award essays, implementing campus Writing Marathons, and working with other units on campus including orientation, Disability Support Services, and the University Retention Committee).

In exchange, these contingent faculty receive additional resources to support their work, including guaranteed 4/4 course loads, a guaranteed summer course, a \$1,000 stipend to cover their work on various committees or on various department or university initiatives, and an iPad 2 to aid their instruction and service work. We have also sought to support these contingent faculty members’ research and teaching by providing some department funding for our SLs to present their research at regional and national conferences—CCCC, Michigan’s Lilly Conference on College and University Teaching and Learning, and the annual Teaching and Learning Conference co-sponsored by Oakland University and the University of Windsor—or to attend pedagogical workshops like Michigan State University’s Writing in Digital Environments and Ohio State’s Digital Media in Composition Institute.

We have expanded this 4/4/1 Special Lecturer program to offer more of these positions for our faculty who wish for better job security and a more significant connection to the program, department, and discipline; however, the number of positions that we are able to offer is dependent on enrollment and on the amount of incentive funding we receive for offering off-campus courses. We currently have twelve SLs in this position teaching approximately 50% of the first-year writing courses. Each SL who applies for this position undergoes an interview process and must maintain superior teaching evaluations and high campus visibility. Because of the high demand placed on these instructors, these faculty are encouraged to commit to teaching only at OU.

Professional Development and Contract Review Procedures

While we worked to improve the working conditions for all of our program faculty, we also instituted additional professional development, developed additional resources for faculty, and initiated new faculty review procedures.

In 2010 we transformed our four annual staff meetings, which typically covered policy and procedural issues, into professional development meetings. Topics for these meetings have addressed specific program needs, and the majority of our meetings are facilitated by SLs with expertise in these areas: writing more effective and thorough assignment descriptions; teaching process from invention to revision; teaching effective secondary research skills such as incorporation, analysis, and synthesis of sources; introducing some primary research into students’ research project requirements; designing more effective peer reviews; and conferencing with students outside of class.

The department has an online space where faculty can post teaching resources, including professional development handouts, national position statements, and current research about teaching first-year writing. Faculty also post their first-year-writing syllabi to this space at the beginning of every semester, and individual sections of our eSpace are devoted to different aspects of the program and department: links to electronic classroom resources such as wiki servers and software, an electronic archive for course syllabi, and handouts and resources from our professional development meetings.

While our first-year program has always provided professional development activities and resources for faculty, we have only recently begun formalizing our contract review procedures for contingent faculty. Every fall, new faculty in the program undergo informal training with the WPA, and their teaching is observed and documented during their first semester. The WPA and AWPAs review all first-year writing course syllabi before the start of every semester, and course evaluations are reviewed by the department chair, WPA, and AWPAs at the end of every semester. Faculty whose course syllabi and evaluations suggest their pedagogy is not in line with our program

objectives meet with the WPA and AWPA to discuss ways to improve their teaching to better reach our program outcomes.

Faculty who are up for a renewal of their two-year contracts develop teaching portfolios in the second year of their contracts. These portfolios contain

- at least one classroom observation conducted by the WPA or AWPA,
- the WPA's description of the quantitative and qualitative pieces of the Special Lecturer's course evaluations compared to the department averages for each course they teach,
- a summary of the Special Lecturer's course GPA compared to department averages,
- a letter written by the Special Lecturer discussing his/her professional development and teaching over the previous two years,
- a curriculum vitae, and
- sample course syllabi.

These portfolios are evaluated by the department's Faculty Review Committee (comprised of all tenured and job-secure faculty), which advises the chair regarding the renewal or release of the Special Lecturer's contract. While the FRC advises the chair in these reappointment decisions, it is the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences who makes the final decisions about both hiring and non-renewal of contingent faculty.

In the section that follows, we reflect on the program-wide culture that has emerged from our dual focus on evidence-based practice and faculty development, examining some of the expected and unexpected benefits of including part-time faculty in the research, assessment, and development of the courses they teach.

How We Are Creating a Program-Wide Climate of Research

As the material described in the previous sections has indicated, through assessment, program development, and professional development we have strived to construct a program grounded in evidence-based practices. As part of this effort, in the last five years, we have worked to create a program-wide climate of research so that all of our faculty can build and share knowledge with each other. Creating a program-wide climate of research is also in line with principles from the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, a broader movement in higher education that seeks to recognize that teaching is scholarly work and to encourage faculty to conduct research on their own pedagogical practices (Hutchings, Huber, and Ciccone). A program-wide climate of research further aids us in making the shift from "I think" and lore-based, individual understandings to "we know" and collaborative, research-supported understandings. This process helps our contingent faculty legitimize, question, and support their growing knowledge while encouraging them to participate directly in the making of new knowledge that is of benefit to their teaching, our program, and our field. This section describes several of the ways that we are developing this climate, including through our spring conference, textbook publishing, the formation of research teams, and the dissemination of knowledge from the program.

One way that we are creating a climate of research is by organizing a biennial spring conference where all faculty have the opportunity to propose and present workshops. After our spring term has concluded, our faculty meet for a full day of FYW-centered professional development. Previously, our full-time faculty would develop and lead the event through discussions and presentations each year. Two years ago, we instead offered the first Spring Conference, which functions more like a professional conference than a departmental professional development day. Special Lecturers were encouraged to submit proposals for workshops and panels; their proposals were blind reviewed and selected by our first-year writing committee. The first Spring Conference was a great success with our contingent faculty taking the lead in providing research-based professional development, and we held our second conference this year. The Spring Conference works to recognize our contingent faculty as writing studies scholars and to provide excellent low-stakes presentation experiences (see [Appendix](#)).

Another way that we are encouraging a research climate and recognizing the authority of our contingent instructors is through the production of *Grizz Writes: A Guide to First-Year Writing at Oakland University*, our new textbook for first-year writing. Rather than selecting essays written from the broader field and creating a custom reader, we chose to draw upon the expertise of our own faculty by developing our FYW textbook and publishing our faculty's original works for use in our program. Using the proposal and blind review process we developed for the Spring Conference, the first-year writing committee distributed a call for chapter proposals that would emphasize our program's goals. The production of this textbook accomplishes several key objectives. First, it draws upon local knowledge and local approaches to the process of learning to write. Second, the *Grizz Writes* publication process recognizes the expertise of our SLs and provides them with an opportunity for professional development through

the drafting and chapter revision process.^[4] While we have kept the cost low for students, proceeds from the sale of *Grizz Writes* also support our research climate by providing funds for SLs to travel to professional conferences and for two new departmental awards given to SLs for teaching excellence and for developing innovative assignments. In the case of both the Spring Conference and *Grizz Writes*, we are providing our part-time faculty with entry points into the professional activities surrounding writing studies scholarship, but doing so in a way that has lower stakes and more firm support structures than they would find in the broader field. Furthermore, *Grizz Writes* has become a cornerstone of our conversations at professional development events; at our most recent Spring Conference, several panels and informal workshops included discussions of how faculty were using their colleagues' chapters from *Grizz Writes*.

Another way that we are nurturing a climate of research is through the formation of research teams that study various aspects of teaching and learning to write. These research teams, consisting of both full-time and SL instructors, meet regularly and choose an area of focus to engage in evidence-based study. This process helps shift our contingent faculty from a passive, lore-based role to an active, knowledge-producing role, where they can become leaders in our efforts to better understand aspects of our practice at a program level and can contribute to broader conversations. Our first research team spent a year piloting a Writing-About-Writing (WAW) curriculum (first described by Downs and Wardle) and connected that work to a larger multi-institutional project that was studying the transfer of learning as a part of the Elon University research seminar on "Critical Transitions: Writing and the Question of Transfer." During that year, both full-time and contingent faculty members contributed to methodological and pedagogical discussions on teaching WAW approaches, asking students to engage in reflection and metacognition, and discovering how to measure our success. Stemming from the success of our WAW research team, a second team is currently focusing on instructors' responses to student writing. A group of thirteen faculty members meets monthly to discuss their approaches to providing feedback, to conduct research on how instructors throughout our program respond to student writing, and to determine how students incorporate their instructors' suggestions into their revisions.

Our SLs also participate in our assessment processes, which allows them to learn about research and assessment methods, provides additional professional development through conversations about norming and program goals, and gives them an important role in the understanding the broader picture of our program. When we assessed our Composition II course, three SLs were part of the team that met to norm and rate student work. The norming process brought about substantial conversations about—and resistance to—the idea of reflective writing. After seeing the variety of reflective writing appearing in student work, however, some of those who were initially resistant became champions for reflective writing in FYW. This experience allowed them to deepen their own understanding of student writing on the macro-level, to understand and help enact change broadly in our program, and to share their knowledge and experiences with others. Several SLs participating in various assessments in this past year, including in our Basic Writing and Composition I redesign assessments, suggested that all of our SLs should participate in such a process.

A final way we promote a research-based culture is by encouraging our SLs to participate in the broader research community of writing studies. The WAW research team produced several outcomes worth noting that went beyond the practices we took back into our classrooms. First, we produced a panel of original research focused on WAW and reflective writing that was presented by three SLs at CCCC 2013. In addition, we proposed and received an internal grant for running a day-long professional development workshop on teaching reflective writing prior to the start of our fall term. This workshop was led by four SLs and one full-time faculty member. At CCCC 2014 in Indianapolis, our Basic Writing Redesign Committee presented on the research informing their curriculum development project and on the outcomes from their first assessment of our newly designed Basic Writing course. Our Response Research Group presented the results of their research examining best practices in responding to student papers. Because we have worked hard to build professional development opportunities through research—and to support those opportunities with funding—our SLs have become successful writing studies researchers. They have attended or presented at regional, national, and international conferences. Workshops, presentations, and research projects and conference experiences like these have empowered a good number of our Special Lecturers, who have set an example for other contingent faculty in our department and who help us to promote teaching with evidence-supported best practices.

These efforts to create a program-wide research culture serve several critical functions. By situating our own practices in the research of our program and the support of our faculty, we can empower faculty to better understand their own classroom practices through research. Through this process, SLs also understand how those practices might build into larger projects that give our program, and our field, greater insights into teaching and learning. By recognizing that our SL faculty have expertise, and asking them to provide that expertise, we build a stronger program and work to diminish the perceived distance between contingent and full-time faculty.

What We Wish We Had Known Earlier

There are, of course, a number of things we wish we had known and done earlier in terms of developing our first-year program through evidence-based practices. First, none of us anticipated how much we would come to rely on our contingent faculty's knowledge and growing expertise in the teaching of writing. When a new SL asks one of us a question about service learning, new media composition, primary research, copyright, or plagiarism, we are now able to direct them to the department's experts on these topics: our SLs who have done the research and applied what they have learned from that research to their own teaching.

While this is obviously a positive development, there are a couple of things that we should have done differently. For example, we wish we had engaged the entire program in an assessment of all of our first-year writing classes before we began making changes to those courses as soon as we became an independent department. In addition to providing us with a clearer record of where we were before we redesigned these courses, a thorough program assessment would have given us more opportunities for conversations with our faculty about what roles they felt each course should play in our course sequence. Taking the time to assess the entire existing FYW curriculum first would have given us more time to reflect on and prepare for the changes we wanted to implement. It might also have prevented our hard-working FYW instructors from feeling overwhelmed by changes occurring simultaneously on a number of fronts at once: new curricular goals, new retention and first-year experience initiatives embedded in FYW courses, and a new department structure.

Finally, given the amount of research our SLs are currently engaging in—both informally through their participation in the Invitational Summer Institutes offered by OU's site of the National Writing Project and formally through IRB-approved projects—we wish we had designed some optional professional development workshops introducing classroom research methods, IRB approval processes, and conference proposal writing to our entire faculty. In our enthusiasm, we may have underestimated the difficulties and challenges that some of our colleagues would encounter when they took on the role of researchers. Although we have provided informal mentoring of SL colleagues through this process, more formal training would have benefited all faculty involved.

Conclusion: We Used to “Think,” But Now We “Know”

The opening lines of this profile illustrate the kinds of challenges many first-year writing programs face: instructors too often base their classroom practices on what they “think” is best for their students because they are unaware of or resistant to research-supported evidence to the contrary. Over the last five years, our program has sought multiple ways to address those challenges by embracing evidence-based practices as a part of our ongoing program development. As a result, the story we told to open this article is now the exception rather than the rule at OU. We conclude this program profile by highlighting just one of the positive ways a colleague's research has impacted our entire program.

One Special Lecturer's Story

Over the years a significant number of our SLs have enrolled in the Invitational Summer Institute hosted by our local site of the National Writing Project. The summer institute provides our faculty and area teachers with an opportunity to research and develop a project related to the teaching of writing. One of our SLs, Cornelia Pokrzywa, who was concerned that the university had just cancelled its subscription to Turnitin.com because of a lack of use, decided to research plagiarism during the institute. She began her research believing that Turnitin.com was a valuable pedagogical tool, but she revised this position over the course of the summer as she researched the issue of plagiarism in general and the use of online tools to identify plagiarism in particular. Pokrzywa reflected on these experiences recently:

At the time, I was one of a few instructors using Turnitin.com. I felt I was using it responsibly, and I had students submit their own work so everything was in the open. I had a number of students who self-corrected unintentional plagiarism in draft stages, but I also had some who just let it go and those were the ones who faced the dean [of students] at the end of the semester. When OU canceled the subscription, I was unhappy. I felt Turnitin was a tool to manage work in an increasingly digital environment. [...]

I undertook research on plagiarism with the intent of requesting a department license or at least an individual license. [... But] drawing heavily on the work of Rebecca Moore Howard, [I] concluded that patch writing and “plagiarism” was more about the assignment parameters and insufficient scaffolding

than student shortcomings. [. . .] To this day, I still find that faculty have widely varied definitions of common knowledge. As a result, the research demonstrates that students are often unclear about citation requirements. I do teach students to be proactive; they must take an audience-centered approach and determine common knowledge for every writing context to avoid questions of authorship. While this complicates the definition, the research suggests that it better prepares them for the complex demands of college writing. [...]

One final outcome of the research: I never take any instance of plagiarism as a personal affront. When students take language from a source without attribution, it may be an error or it may be a shortcut for them, but it's clearly never about their desire to cheat me in any way. The research experience allowed me to look at this objectively, and I think many writing instructors aren't able to do that.

After four weeks of research—examining position statements by the CCCG-Intellectual Property Caucus and the Council of Writing Program Administrators, and synthesizing research and theory regarding plagiarism in writing courses—Pokrzywa moved from “I think” to “we know” and modified her position on Turnitin.com dramatically (while still maintaining a sense of nuance in her own position). Since that time, she has developed professional development modules around plagiarism, new media, and detection tools, and she is now considered the department's expert on plagiarism, common knowledge, and copyright/fair use. Pokrzywa has expanded what each of us in the writing program can now claim to know about this complex topic. And the only thing our program needed to do was provide this motivated instructor with the resources she needed to develop new knowledge on this subject.

In conclusion, what we have learned from creating an inclusive model for research and professional development is that many of our contingent faculty members are eager for participation in program development and pedagogical research. They are also more willing to buy-in to program development if they feel invested in the work they are doing and are offered opportunities to engage in meaningful research that contributes to our writing program's policies and curriculum and that helps all of us to improve our own classroom practices. This strengthens our program and encourages all of us to use more evidence-supported practices in our classrooms and curricular decision-making. By shifting our department culture from “I think” to “we know,” we are also modeling the values we seek to instill in our students: sustained inquiry, active collaboration, critical analysis, and a rhetorical approach to writing. These evidence-based practices are the source of our ethos both as individual faculty members and as a program.

Appendix: Spring Conference Programs

Spring Conference Program

May 1, 2012

Oakland Center, Oakland Room

8:30-9:00: Coffee and Conversation

9:00-10:30: Morning General Session
(WRT 160 Assessment Findings)

10:40-11:30: Panel Presentations

SOGI Issues and Composition
Cornelia Pokrzywa and Craig Smith

Arts and Sciences Theme and Book: Creative and Critical Thinking
Alice Horning, Catherine Haar, and Kathy Skomski

Open Trouble-Shooting Session for Current Obstacles
Ben Bennett-Carpenter

11:30-12:15: Lunch

12:25-1:55: Workshops

Learning about Learning and Habits of Mind: Teaching Metacognitive Reflection in the FYW Classroom
Dana Driscoll and Tina Hall

Video Composing 101
Timothy Briggs

Creating Engaging Online and Hybrid Classes: Diverse Class and Instructor Interaction
Christina Fontana and Shaun Moore

2:10-3:00: Afternoon General Session

Spring Conference Program

April 29, 2014
Oakland Center, Gold Rooms

8:30-9:00: Coffee and conversation

9:00-10:30: Morning General Session
(WRT 150 Redesign; New MWF Online Class Policy)

10:40-11:40: Panels and Roundtables

Teaching Writing Students How to Become Consumers of Scholarly Research
Laura Klein and Cindy Mooty

Usability 101: An Introduction to Implementing Usability in the Writing Classroom
Felicia Chong

Creating an Effective Curriculum: Roundtable Session
Cathy Rorai and Pamela Todoroff

11:45-12:45: Lunch and Presentations

1:00-2:30: Workshops

Professional Writing at OU: Roundtable and Workshop
Jim Nugent, Josephine Walwema, and Felicia Chong

Reading and Annotating: Why and How?
Alice Horning, Kasia Kietlinska, and Cornelia Pokrzywa

Student Website Production: An Open Space for Conversation with a More Global Audience
Marilyn Borner

2:35-3:00: Closing General Session

Notes

1. Institutional lore and other profiles and histories of Oakland University suggest that the university was originally designed to be the honors college of Michigan State University, but in an article that is currently under review, our colleagues Felicia Chong and Jim Nugent refute this commonly accepted historical claim. ([Return to text.](#))
2. For additional information about the history of Oakland University's first-year writing curriculum and major, see Wallis Andersen's chapter in *What We Are Becoming*; additional information about the formation of the new department and major is also detailed in Lori Ostergaard and Greg Giberson's program profile in this journal. ([Return to text.](#))
3. See Elizabeth G. Allan and Dana Lynn Driscoll's article in *Assessing Writing* for a discussion of the findings from this research-based assessment study of our Composition II course. ([Return to text.](#))

4. Special Lecturers whose chapters are published in *Grizz Writes* receive a small stipend for their contributions. *Grizz Writes* is not our department's first collaboration between full-time faculty and SLs. Our colleague Alice Horning has published two edited collections featuring chapters composed by our Special Lecturers, *Revision: History, Theory, and Practice* and *Reconnecting Reading and Writing*. ([Return to text.](#))

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