

# **Impact of the Writing Fellows Model in the English 1010 Online Plus Program 3/8/2019**

## ***Brief summary of overall program:***

### **Fall, 2018**

- 15 sections of English 1010, 25 students each
- 3 tenure-track and 3 adjunct faculty
- 5 Writing Fellows
- 1 Lab coordinator who also tutors

### **Spring, 2019**

- 17 sections of English 1010, 25 students each
- 3 tenure-track instructors; 3 adjunct faculty
- 9 Writing Fellows
- 1 Lab coordinator who also tutors

The Online Plus (O+) Learning Lab for English 1010 is an innovative teaching structure that leverages the strongest elements of both online and face-to-face learning. This model capitalizes on flexible online discussions and assignments combined with weekly labs in a physical meeting space or online synchronous option to anchor student learning.

The hallmark of this program is its once-a-week individual and group meetings between students and instructors or Writing Fellows (WFs) in a “Learning Commons” atmosphere. These meetings offer students personalized, responsive feedback on their writing, and serve as a weekly touchstone to help students improve their writing and navigate the course. WFs serve a vital role in our Learning Commons by disrupting the traditional power structure of knowledge-making and authority. WFs are the literal embodiment of collaborative learning and teaching; their presence signal to the 100s of students in the English 1010 O+ program that we value their input and knowledge about writing.

Of note the English 1010 & 2010 O+ programs won the Diane Hacker Best Program Award for 2018-19. This was a competitive application-based award meant to recognize the most innovative and impactful initiatives in in two-year English departments across the nation. We believe the WFs model in English 1010 was an important factor in determining this award.

## ***Brief summary of the Writing Fellows Model***

The WFs model is a course-specific peer tutoring program for English 1010 O+. The program is run by the O+ team which works collaboratively with Clint Gardner, Program Manager of College Writing & Reading Centers, and Jarrod Barben, Lab Coordinator. The Lab Coordinator position is 60% funded by the WFs base funding. This position is vital because the coordinator trains WFs in small groups and individually, works on scheduling, collects data for the entire program, and participates in the O+ teaching team while also tutoring. The WFs model encourages and supports the development of effective student writing in the O+ program. As trained undergraduate tutors who have previously passed English 1010 O+, the WFs work with current O+ students on class-specific writing assignments and drafts. By reading, commenting

and explicitly focusing on long-term writing development, WFs contribute to the critical thinking and writing abilities of introductory composition students.

Starting in the fall of 2017 we instituted a tutor-track for students currently taking English 1010 O+. As part of this track students *may* participate in tutor related activities and assignments in fulfillment of the Self-Directed Learning assignment. These activities include reading articles about writing center pedagogy, observing tutor sessions, and further study of the O+ curriculum. These activities move current 1010 students into a more active and authentic learning environment, one where they are learning about writing while simultaneously being challenged to imagine themselves tutoring other students.

### ***Writing Fellows (WFs) Impact 2018-19: By the numbers***

Overall the impact of WFs has greatly increased since we received base funding. This has allowed us to hire more WFs and commit positions for successful tutors in subsequent semesters. During fall semester, 2018 the WFs met with a total of 761 students during 565 sessions encompassing 238 hours of lab time (see attached Excel document for full data set). The base funding has allowed us to double the number of WFs from the fall. As of October 21<sup>st</sup> 2019, WFs have *already* met with 552 students during 433 sessions encompassing 193 hours. We predict our overall numbers this semester will double the WFs output from the fall.

### ***Writing Fellows (WFs) Impact 2018-19: In their Own Words--Confidence, Student Success & Retention, Collaborative Learning, and Valuable Job Experience***

During a Q & A after a presentation, Clint Gardner (Program Manager at SLCC) a writing center colleague interjected that their community college students couldn't be effective tutors. In response to that claim, Clint collected data and conducted exit interviews with his writing tutors. And then he presented these findings at various regional, national, and international conferences which ultimately became an essay, [OUR STUDENTS CAN DO THAT: PEER WRITERS AT THE TWO YEAR COLLEGE](#), published in *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*. Clint concludes his paper,

When we at two-year schools take on pessimistic attitudes that resemble "our students could never do that" or that they won't be in the center long enough for it to matter, we are accepting the trite and misinformed perception of community college...We are not offering them the respect they deserve...We are falling into the trap of believing that students who attend community colleges are either victims of themselves or society, cannot take action that will effect change in their lives and their communities, and cannot decide for themselves whether or not such changes are needed. Our students *can* do this work. Our students *do* perform this work.

We follow Clint's approach in evaluating the WFs impact on education in the O+ program, the English department, and the college at large. While the O+ WFs work within a course-specific context, their work is very similar to the tutors in the Student Reading & Writing Center. We have not yet conducted exit interviews, but we will at the end of Spring, 2019. Yet we already have extensive numerical data and have asked our WFs to describe their experiences in the O+

program as a starting point for conducting these interview. This data clearly demonstrate Clint's contention: "Our students *can* do this work. Our students *do* perform this work."

The national research on how students, those tutoring and being tutored, benefit from peer tutoring is extensive (see attached bibliography). Several key outcomes emerge in this research as summed up by the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project:

- **Boost their confidence**
- **Feel intellectually engaged in the educational mission and thus closer to the 'center' of their institutions**
- **Understand and value collaborative learning**
- **Improve writing and critical thinking skills**
- **Acquire job application, interview, and people skills"**

WFs are able to continue their study of writing which they started in English 1010. This allows tutors to become more **confident writers**.

As Clint Johnson, an O+ Adjunct Professor, has observed, "many times, students laden with self-doubt transform at my simple suggestion that they consider preparing to apply for a Fellowship. That can change the course of a semester, and I'd like to believe a person's educational trajectory far beyond our class." And this bears out in the WFs statements about their experience: "Living with social anxiety, there are certain things that I thought I'd never be able to do. One of those things was helping others in a personal educational way. It was not until I was challenged by the Writing Fellows program that I realized how wrong I was" (Sarah Ann McDowell, WF since fall 2018). Or Erin Robbins who started this spring, "I was incredibly nervous at first and figured that feeling would last a couple weeks. It lasted only one day. My confidence in helping students learn and understand writing is second only to my enjoyment of it."

In addition many of our WFs have commented on how the experience in the program has **increased their success at SLCC while also deepening their understanding of collaborative learning**. Citing Erin Robbins again, she explicitly makes this connection,

Years ago, I struggled to complete courses at SLCC. My fear of failure prevented me from going to class, participating in class, and generally doing the work. Today, it feels like everything fits together. I'm making connections between unrelated courses to enhance my overall learning, and I have no fear of speaking up in class to participate. I wholly attribute this success to the Writing Fellows program.

In a related vein, the evidence indicates that the students taking the course benefit from meeting collaboratively with their peers who have recently navigated the course. It is a unique learning opportunity which is not filtered through an instructor. As Jessica Mckelvie, a new writing tutor this semester, reports, "As a Writing Fellow, I see students that need the same help that I once needed. Some have told me they are on their second round with English 1010 and I can tell that they are discouraged. I enjoy sharing the story of how far I have come." We believe this dynamic is at the center of the English 1010 O+ program--creating a learning commons

environment where we work as a team of FT & PT faculty and WFs. As Clint Johnson eloquently states, "Fellows trouble students' problematic notions of authority and delineation between instructor and student, helping our writing commons become more akin to an association of writers." Again the sentiments and views of faculty members closely align with what our WFs report,

It was refreshing to know that a lab could be done with someone that was my peer. It resonated with me when I was told: "I know how you feel and this is how I overcame it." When I first started [as a WF], I believed I had to have all the answers and speak elegantly to make a difference, but now it is truly allowing the students to find the answers themselves. Even if they think or were conditioned to believe that they were "poor" writers, it was satisfying to know that these negative feelings were gone by the time the lab session was over (Jaeden Rohde, WF since 2017).

Jaeden's insight about "elegance" is a crucial insight into the value of the WFs model and illustrates the deep learning associated with peer-tutoring or what we might call direct application of what they have learned. Several studies, in various disciplines, have found that peer tutoring increases self-efficacy which supports "pedagogical recommendations," aligning perfectly with the WFs model, "that teachers spend as much time working with students on their *perceptions* of competence as on developing *actual* competence" (*Researching the Writing Center: Towards an Evidence-Based Practice* by Rebecca Day Babcock, Terese Thonus, 2012).

As writing instructors, we have experienced this increase in self-efficacy on numerous occasion with our WFs. It's rather striking when we encounter this change in student behavior and affect. Even though we know and expect this to happen, it still feels like magic, some sort of "spooky action at a distance" as Einstein stated about quantum entanglement. We too have to come to terms with the lightning speed shift in writing development of our WFs.

Part of this self-efficacy process is akin to seeing oneself in a mirror from a different angle or point of view. Stacie Weatbrook, an adjunct professor, fleshes out this process, "When we explain the Writing Fellows program to students at the beginning of the semester and as position openings are announced, it helps our Online Plus students see that *students just like them* completed the course and are now giving other students feedback. It is empowering to know that you don't have to have an advanced degree to give valid feedback and instruction" (italics mine).

Ultimately, inviting students into our teaching spaces to be collaborators is central to the mission of community college and an English department both concerned with life-long learning, Guided Pathways, and overall public literacy.

Lastly, several WFs have entertained and some decided to major in education after their experience as a WF. Exploring a career in a class is, of course, helpful but research and common sense demonstrate that working in a discipline can quickly eclipse classroom learning in a just a few weeks,

“Even as my schedule has tightened up and become more stressful, I now view meeting with students as a release from everyday life. I have always liked teaching, so maybe this will someday lead to something bigger and better” (Jaeden Rohde). We are particularly struck by Jaeden’s contention that meeting with students (working!) is a “release from everyday life.” If only all education opportunities would resonate so deeply. Another tutor builds on this theme and, we believe, deserves the last word on the impact of the WFs model:

“Being part of the Writing Fellows program has been one of the greatest opportunities of my life. That’s not hyperbole. I’ve never before felt like I might have a calling... I’ve never known a job to be so fulfilling” (Erin Robins).