

Mellon Grant for Evidence-Based Teaching Innovations

PLUS Course Mentor Program
for Wellesley PLUS students enrolled in a First-Year Writing Course

A. Project Description and Pedagogical Goals

The Writing Program would like to pilot a project that offers peer-based group writing mentorship to students enrolled in the first-year writing courses designated for Wellesley PLUS students.

Our proposal is to assign two peer writing mentors to each of the three writing sections we offer during the fall semester. We expect to hire six students for this position. The writing mentors will be selected from previous Wellesley PLUS cohorts - rising sophomores, juniors, or seniors who were formerly enrolled in our Wellesley PLUS writing courses.

Each mentor will meet with the same small group of students (five or six students per group) on four or five occasions during the semester. These meetings will be scheduled during the weekly Wellesley PLUS/Wellesley First lunchtime meetings on Thursdays. Each mentor will also be expected to hold one drop-in “office hour” during most weeks of the semester. The mentors will undergo approximately five hours of training with Anne Brubaker, and will meet several times as a group to debrief or prepare for mentoring sessions. The mentors will be asked to meet with the faculty member teaching their designated group of students and attend one or part of a class meeting.

Each mentor meeting will be organized by a particular writing topic or theme. These may include, for example: drafting and revising; office hours and one-on-one meetings with faculty; getting started and breaking down assignments; receiving and processing feedback. The meetings will involve some writing reflection, sharing experiences and strategies, and/or working through an exercise together. Students in our Wellesley PLUS writing courses will be expected to attend these group sessions as part of their fulfillment of the writing course requirements.

The PLUS course mentors will play a different role than the peer writing tutors. Writing tutors are trained to work with students on particular writing assignments for any course across the curriculum; sessions typically focus on issues of structure, argument, analysis, citation, and grammar and style. The mentor’s role will be to guide students to think more about process than product – including, for example, developing effective writing habits, feeling greater confidence in themselves as writers, navigating setbacks and challenges, and navigating the transition between high school and college writing. As faculty teaching writing courses, we often don’t have enough in-class time to focus on these important elements and neither can a tutor take significant time during a session to focus on these topics. However, developing healthy writing habits and a greater sense of self-efficacy are crucial aspects of academic success and engagement.

Our hope is that this project will help students in the following ways:

- 1) Normalize and destigmatize the process of seeking guidance and feedback on their writing
- 2) See their development as writers as a shared experience and themselves as co-learners and contributors to this process
- 3) Further support the building of community within the Wellesley PLUS program

There is a growing body of research on the value of peer mentoring and group or community-based learning models. Developing writers often assume their writing struggles are particular to them, or a sign that they are a “bad writer,” and this can pose challenges to developing a growth mindset about writing. Writing challenges can easily activate stereotype threat and inhibit the seeking of guidance, feedback, or support – particularly so for students who are first-generation, English Language Learners, or who are coming from under-resourced school systems.

1. There is evidence that learning communities, and specifically writing groups, can help develop greater self-confidence, engagement, and overall satisfaction with college.

See: Mlynarczyk, R. W., & Babbitt, M. (2002). “The power of academic learning communities” *Journal of Basic Writing*, 21(1), 71.

Zhao, C. M., & Kuh, G. D. (2004). “Adding value: Learning communities and student engagement.” *Research in higher education*, 45(2), 115-138.

2. There is also evidence that writing groups and group tutoring can lead to a greater sense of camaraderie and self-confidence and can destabilize power dynamics that sometimes exist in traditional dyad tutoring (expert vs. novice dynamic).

See: Wilmot, K., & McKenna, S. (2018). “Writing groups as transformative spaces.” *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37(4), 868-882.

Scharold, Dagmar. “Challenge Accepted: Cooperative Tutoring as an Alternative to One-to-One Tutoring.” (2017) *The Writing Center Journal*, 36 (2), 31-55.

3. Peer mentorship has been shown to improve academic performance, facilitate a greater sense of belonging within a community, and to reduce disparities in achievement between certain groups (e.g. those with high anxiety or learning disabilities).

See: Rodger, S., & Tremblay, P. F. (2003). "The effects of a peer mentoring program on academic success among first year university students." *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 33(3), 1-17.

Lewis, Cathering. "Creating Inclusive Campus Communities: The Vital Role of Peer Mentorship in Inclusive Higher Education." (2017) *Metropolitan Universities*, 28 (3).

Walsh, J; Fulmer, S. & Pociask, S. (forthcoming). "Cross-Peer Mentorship in Introductory Philosophy Classes: The "Home Base" Mentoring Program." *American Association of Philosophy Teachers Studies in Pedagogy*.

Learning outcomes will be assessed from a few different angles:

1. Students will be given a survey at the beginning of the semester and at the end of the semester. The first survey will ask questions about their experiences and perceptions of their own writing and their confidence in themselves as writers. The survey will also ask students about their writing process, including, for example, their perceptions about their ability to manage their time, draft and revise, and seek or respond to feedback. The second survey will assess their perceptions about their development as writers over the course of the semester, including their confidence in their writing abilities and the effectiveness of their writing process. We also want to know if the mentoring sessions influenced or changed their use of campus resources – e.g. making appointments with the writing tutors, connecting with classmates, or reaching out more often to their faculty members.
2. Mentors will be interviewed for feedback on their sessions and their relationships with the students. We want to know how many students reached out to the mentors on an individual basis, as well as their impressions of the kinds of issues, challenges, and successes students shared. We also want to know what they learned about themselves from the experience of acting as mentor.
3. We also want to talk with the faculty about their impressions of the mentors and their students' achievement and attitudes toward their writing.