

PROGRAM PROFILE 4.

A FOCUS ON EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Over twenty years ago, I took the two-semester “Teaching of Writing” sequence with Anne Beaufort in the master’s program at American University. Now I am teaching that course and directing the writing studies program. The sequence is, in its broad scope, unchanged; it remains a thorough and thoughtful preparatory experience for teachers of first-year writing. Moreover, it balances conventional graduate education with professional development, as students take a traditional master’s-level pedagogy course but then spend a semester as interns in a writing course, followed by possible adjunct employment. At no point do we refer to them as “TAs”; they learn to be faculty, and then we treat them as faculty—and perhaps most importantly, the writing program doesn’t depend on their labor, so we can focus on their education and development.

AU’s Department of Literature doesn’t have a Ph.D. program; students can earn an MA in Literature or an MFA in Creative Writing. Students from both groups take “Teaching of Writing,” some because they fully intend to teach first-year writing and some because they want to discover whether they want to teach. The course sequence can meet the needs of both groups.

The strengths of this preparation lie in its breadth and depth. The program spans at least two semesters. In the first semester, students take a three-credit course in pedagogy. The parameters of the course are largely left up to the instructor. I’ve chosen to emphasize a “teaching for transfer” model, in which students read, write, and discuss texts centered on practice, research, and theory, drawing connections among them and to their own experiences through metacognitive reflection. Through persistent reflection, connection, and application, I hope to avoid at least some of what Reid et al. described in their article: new teachers falling back on past experiences instead of looking to what they’d learned in their pedagogy course. Students get a broad survey of writing studies practical advice and scholarship, with the opportunity to delve more deeply into topics that interest them via the major projects.

Students must apply to participate in the second semester, the practicum; this written application is reviewed by me and the chairs of the program’s Mentoring

Committee. For the practicum, the Mentoring chairs and I pair each accepted student with a mentor teacher who has volunteered to participate. For the spring semester, students attend every class meeting of a College Writing class, gradually increasing their participation by, for example, working with students during group activities, circulating during writing time, contributing to discussions, and meeting with one or two students for office hours; they also must teach at least a couple partial and full classes and “shadow grade” at least one assignment. Throughout, they meet with their mentor teacher regularly to discuss the class. They meet with me once every two weeks to talk about their experiences and to prepare their teaching portfolio, the culmination of the semester’s work.

At the end of the spring semester, students can submit their portfolio in application to teach as an adjunct-faculty member in the fall. A small hiring committee (the department chair, the Mentoring chairs, and I) reviews their portfolios and conducts interviews. The interviews are meant to be learning experiences for students—more supportive than challenging—but they are also genuine; not every student is hired. (In these rare cases, we sometimes ask the student to do another semester of internship, with no guarantee of employment.) If they are hired, they come in as adjunct faculty in the fall, with no distinction from other adjunct faculty other than a slightly lower salary if they have not yet finished their degree. Over the summer, I conduct a syllabus workshop with them, and I provide individualized support in course development.

These new faculty do receive one more round of support, though—but it’s support that all new faculty receive. Our Mentoring Committee assigns faculty mentors to all our new faculty, including these recent or current graduate students. The mentors (all term—full-time, non-tenure-track—faculty) answer questions, review materials, observe classes, and make themselves available for observation. And all adjunct faculty are welcome to participate in the Writing Studies Program’s faculty-development opportunities, including a full day of workshops before the start of classes in the fall; they are also encouraged to participate in the university’s new-faculty orientations and other faculty development.

I believe that this treatment of graduate students not only as students but as potential—and then actual—colleagues helps to make our program successful. We recognize that students have a great deal to learn; we don’t throw them into the classroom with little preparation. But we want them to feel supported as students and as professionals. Throughout, the “Teaching of Writing” preparation communicates that first-year writing instruction is important work, part of a body of disciplinary knowledge and worthy of institutional respect. The extent of the preparation demonstrates our beliefs that our work deserves study, time, and effort.

This demonstration has benefited the Writing Studies Program’s position in the Department of Literature, too. Literature faculty see the rigor of this

preparation as giving lie to the bad idea that “anyone can teach writing” (Kahn 363). Students in their classes talk about the difficult readings and the challenging writing assignments; they serve as ambassadors of our discipline to our colleagues in literary studies. And the “Teaching of Writing” has had consistent support from the department and its chairs throughout its history. Even as the MA and MFA curricula have changed, the two-semester “Teaching of Writing” sequence has never been questioned.

“Teaching of Writing” has benefited, too, from the perhaps somewhat unusual characteristics of the Writing Studies Program (WSP). The WSP has about 65 faculty, half of whom are term and half adjunct (part-time) faculty. We do not rely on graduate students for their labor; instead, we have a professional faculty, with the term faculty expected to engage in service and governance, and the adjunct faculty fully welcomed into all programmatic activities. The students from the “Teaching of Writing” sequence comprise a very small minority of our total faculty. For this reason, we can focus more on supporting and developing these students as teachers because they aren’t essential to our workforce; there’s no imperative to train them quickly and get them into the classroom.

The success of these students is demonstrated in a couple of different ways. I supervise all the adjunct faculty, and part of that supervision requires review of course materials and class observations. Faculty who come out of the “Teaching of Writing” demonstrate pedagogical decisions in line with current practices in the field, including an emphasis on rhetorical choice and flexibility, instruction in metacognitive reflection, and a focus on information literacy. This is not to say that adjunct faculty with different preparation don’t include these elements, but as brand-new teachers, our graduate students demonstrate remarkable sophistication and fluency.

In terms of employment beyond graduate school, multiple students who have wanted to continue teaching have found full-time employment, including at AU. Others have opted for different full-time careers but have chosen to continue teaching one section per semester as adjunct faculty. Some, too, have used their preparation at AU to benefit them in teaching assistantships in Ph.D. programs.

The employment outlook isn’t entirely rosy, however. A number of our term faculty—including me—came out of the “Teaching of Writing” and got full-time jobs with our master’s degrees. However, we increasingly get applications from experienced teachers with Ph.D.s in rhetoric and composition, and it’s becoming clear that applicants with an MA or MFA might be at a disadvantage in comparison. While I include a unit on academic labor in the “Teaching of Writing” class so that students understand the constraints they might face, I suspect that in the future, our department will need to consider the ethics of

master's-level teacher preparation. The preparation sequence is a meaningful and rigorous educational experience, in which students learn practical approaches to teaching but also the knowledge and values of a discipline that is new to most of them: writing studies. We'll continue to be transparent with students about what this preparation might mean for their future employment in higher education, and we'll continue to keep our ethical obligations to them in mind.

As we continue this work, our program will also need to attend to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The WSP faculty is not sufficiently diverse; we have attended to this problem in our hiring, but with little turnover among the term faculty, it's a slow process. Therefore, we don't always have faculty of color who volunteer to work with a teaching intern, which means that students of color encounter little demographic diversity in faculty they observe and work with. Although we engage with important issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion in the survey of research and theory in the pedagogy course (including anti-racist pedagogy and linguistic diversity), and although students have chosen to pursue individual projects that allow them to explore these issues more deeply, I'm dissatisfied with the students' opportunities to encounter a diverse range of faculty. What I've been able to do—although it is insufficient—is pair students with mentor teachers who can support them in their own intellectual and professional inquiry and growth; I can offer them pedagogical diversity that will allow them to develop their professional identities.

These two areas of continued growth—ethical preparation for the academic job market and diverse representation—will present ongoing challenges. I'm grateful, though, that we have a firm foundation in the structure of the program—one that will allow us to continue to challenge and support students even as my colleagues and I challenge ourselves to do better by our students.

WORKS CITED

- Kahn, Seth. "Anyone Can Teach Writing." *Bad Ideas About Writing*, edited by Cheryl E. Ball and Drew M. Loewe, West Virginia University Press, 2017, pp. 363-368.
- Reid, E. Shelley, et al. "The Effects of Writing Pedagogy Education on Graduate Teaching Assistants' Approaches to Teaching Composition." *Writing Program Administration*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2012, pp. 32-73.