Undergraduates at DU seem well on their way to producing the eight pounds of writing that Nancy Sommers famously found that Harvard students did during their four years. Of freshmen completing the fall quarter at DU, 67% reported producing more than 16 pages in their first year seminars. In all other courses combined, 55% indicated writing 21 or more pages.

If students were busy writing, their professors were surely busy assigning and responding. In reporting on a recent undergraduate course they taught, 25% of the faculty assigned more than 30 pages worth of writing, while a full 90% assigned at least 11 pages.

These are some early findings in two studies initiated by Doug Hesse and currently underway in the University Writing Program. One study asked all students enrolled in WRIT 1122 several questions about writing experiences in the fall quarter, as well as prior to DU. 694 out of 868 (79%) replied. Students also submitted a paper they had written for a course during the term.

A second survey asked 321 tenure track faculty who had taught at least one undergraduate course in 2005-06 about their assigning practices and writing impressions. 134 of them (42%) responded. Among other interesting findings from the faculty survey are:

- More than 50% assigned PowerPoint or oral presentations, 10% had students make websites, and 30% assigned audio or visual projects.
- About 20% had their students keep a journal or notebook.
- More than 52% had students write one or more short essays; about 40% had them write longer essays; about 17% had them write long research papers.

Of their own writing experiences, 28% of students reported spending 6 or more hours per week doing non-assigned writing such as email, Facebook, MySpace, or blogging. They overwhelmingly characterized high-school writing instruction as formalistic, emphasizing the five-paragraph essay, grammar and spelling, thesis statements, transitions, and paragraphing.

There’s something of a mismatch between what students experienced in high school and what faculty most value. When presented with 15 features of good writing and asked to choose seven they thought vital, faculty selected (in order): clarity (76%); quality of analysis (73%); logical development (72%); coverage of subject matter and depth of understanding (69%); and grammar/usage (57%).

These preliminary findings merely tip the iceberg of more extensive studies. Writing Program researchers will analyze the student writings gathered from the fall term and interview faculty. More ambitiously, the Program will begin a longitudinal study that traces the writing of 100 freshmen through four years at DU. –DH
A WRITER ON “THE LIST”

Dean Saitta, professor in the Department of Anthropology and president of the faculty senate, recently made David Horowitz’s list of 101 Dangerous Professors, along with such scholars as Frederic Jameson, bell hooks, Stanley Aronowitz, and Noam Chomsky.

Interviewer: So, how do you think this David Horowitz list relates to writing?

[David Horowitz’s researchers] clearly didn’t read my stuff before they put me on the list. I mean, they read the titles of my published work. His researchers just looked at titles of articles and assumed from those titles that I was a communist because I write about ancient “community”. So, the Horowitz thing relates to writing in the sense that critics who are going after professors aren’t reading our work. We’re being selectively prosecuted, or persecuted, based on superficial engagements with our work.

How would you describe your own writing process?

Writing used to be like pulling teeth, with much procrastination until the pressure came around. Now it’s gotten easier. I’ve learned to sit down and dump stuff out instead of agonizing right from the beginning. I’ve learned to love editing what I write, so I try to get to that stage as fast as possible.

[Being on the list] has involved me in a lot of blogging, where I’m writing off the top of my head so as to sustain a conversation. The blogging has actually been very useful. When you go online and discover that somebody’s taken a shot at you, you have to respond quickly in order to stay in the game. They’re asking you for your evidence for this, that, and the other, and you gotta deliver. You don’t have time to navel-gaze for too long if you want to stay in the thread and, hopefully, win some hearts and minds. . . . I’ve had to think on my feet and respond quickly and try to put together maximally coherent arguments in just a short amount of space. This teaches you to be really efficient [in trying] to encapsulate long arguments in short forms, and I think that’s been useful.

How do you use writing in your own teaching? In what ways do you use it?

I think I’m pretty conventional. I don’t know where I would fall on a continuum from basic writing to writing intensive courses, but I think I require a lot of it. I usually don’t require in-class exams. I assign students short take-home essay papers, like maybe four or five through the course of a term, and then a research paper. That’s a pretty standard requirement for department courses, with all-graduate student courses requiring a bit more. For the undergraduate foundations and core courses I tend to require three or four short analytical essays through the course of the term. I also try to give [students] practice writing Op Ed columns and letters to the editor. I like the letter to the editor thing, especially in the big foundations classes. . . . My course with Greg Robbins on science and religion is useful for having students write letters to the editor and position papers because the topics are so emotional and yet you have to be concise. So, I try to mix things up and give students practice with different kinds of writing.

I wish I could require more rewrites of work. That’s always something I’ve wanted to do. You know, have [students] submit a paper, then give them feedback, and have them turn in a re-write before they get a grade. But I’ve discovered that ten weeks is pretty short, and depending on the class size and content it’s not always feasible to do that. But that’s always something that I’ve wanted to do. . . . I think students would learn better from correcting their mistakes and they would cultivate a better writing discipline.

I understand that some students have inquired about the university establishing individual blogs for them. [Blogging] with the students would be a good idea. . . . a great way, I think, of improving their written work. They can submit short pieces to you electronically and then you can immediately provide feedback in the “comments” section. Such a format would allow the kind of rewriting and discipline cultivation that would serve us all pretty well.—Rebekah Schultz Colby, PhD
EVEN GREAT UNIVERSITY NEEDS A WRITING CENTER

Why does a great university need a writing center? Some might think it’s to work with struggling writers, and while this is sometimes true, the Writing and Research Center serves a larger purpose at DU. For experienced, professional writers, writing is a social process. Consultations at the WRC allow undergraduate and graduate students to do what experienced writers do: incorporate a sense of audience into their writing by testing their ideas and receiving feedback. All writers need a place and time to talk through their writing—what’s working for them and what isn’t—and to get ideas for new strategies.

The Writing and Research Center not only meets with students in individual consultations, but creates communities for writers in other settings. We provide classroom workshops and workshops for creative writers at all levels. The consultants and I are enjoying watching the DU writing community, from business students working on memos to creative writers crafting poems, grow and flourish as students take advantage of having a group of engaged peers to respond to their work.

So why does a great university need a writing center? Because a great university has writers and writers write most happily when they find communities.

—Eliana Schonberg, PhD, Director, University Writing and Research Center

MEET THE CONSULTANTS: ANNIE GREENFIELD

Consultants in the Writing and Research Center are a mix of graduate and undergraduate students, all highly trained in writing pedagogy and one-on-one consulting and drawn from departments all across campus. This year we have doctoral students from the Department of English and the Graduate School of Interdisciplinary Studies, as well as undergraduate students with majors or minors in Psychology, Religious Studies, English, Political Science, Marketing and Music. We asked one of our graduate student consultants to reflect on her consulting, teaching and writing practices.

What’s your background and your hobbies or interests?

I attended the University of Wisconsin – Madison as an undergraduate and got my B.A. degree in Philosophy. At Western Washington University, I then obtained my Master’s degree in English. I’m currently working on my Ph.D. in English. As for hobbies, reading, bicycling, and lava-tag are at the top of my list. I also play a mean game of foosball.

What are your plans after you finish the PhD?

After completing my PhD, my plan is to become a professor of English in a university. This especially appeals to me because (ideally) this job would allow for a balance between working on my own research and teaching. Both of these pursuits are important to me professionally.

Can you describe your writing process?

Once I have some idea of what I’d like to write about, I try to start writing as soon as possible. The process of articulating my ideas on the page (as undeveloped as they may be at first) helps me to think through them most effectively. That is, my ideas become most interesting and complex once I’ve adapted them into language. Quite often, this process of inquiry changes my line of analysis, which is fine by me, because it will invariably be better for it.

I used to relate to Dorothy Parker’s words: “I hate writing, I love having written.” But now, I feel the opposite is true. I take pleasure in the act of writing, which is just what I need in order to say something that is, hopefully, valuable and smart.

How would you describe your philosophy as a writing consultant?

I believe that students should maintain control of their writing during consultations. This is one of the most challenging aspects of my job. Often, I find that it would be easy for me to instruct a writer as to how I think their paper should be. But it is always better if a writer can make those decisions on his/her own. I try to facilitate these conscious choices through conversation rather than lecture.

I also find that one of the most helpful things I can do for a writer is to fully engage with his/her writing and thinking. By taking a writer’s ideas seriously, he/she is given a space to extend his/her intellectual conversation in a way that is not confined to the page. —RSC

I used to relate to Dorothy Parker’s words: “I hate writing, I love having written.” But now, I feel the opposite is true.

Eliana Schonberg, PhD, Director of the University Writing and Research Center

Annie Greenfield
Writing and Research Center Consultant and DU Literature PhD candidate
WRIT 1122: Academic Writing teaches rhetorical strategies vital for well-educated readers in academic and civic situations. It emphasizes justifying positions, and the course features sustained practice with systematic instructor feedback.

WRIT 1133: Writing and Research teaches rhetorical strategies needed for research-based writing in diverse academic and nonacademic situations. In addition to sustained writing with sources, the course requires students to work in two academic traditions, including interpretive (the analysis of texts or artifacts), qualitative (analyses based on observations or interviews), or quantitative (analyses based on measurement).

Writing Intensive Core Courses meet four criteria: Students will: 1. Write a minimum of 6000 words; 2. Complete at least three writing projects distributed over the quarter; 3. Have the opportunity to revise; 4. Experience some instruction in Writing. See www.du.edu/writing for more info.

Neal Lerner, writing scholar at MIT, gave a fascinating inaugural lecture entitled “Science Labs, Writing Centers: Provocative Parallels” on Thursday, Nov. 4 in Mary Reed. Speaking on the occasion of the Writing Program’s grand opening, Lerner discussed how the educational philosophies of progressive educators such as John Dewey, Helen Parkhurst, and John Kenedy foreshadow much current writing center theory and practice, even though much of this educational philosophy was banished to relative anonymity in its time.

These practices included treating the writing center as a sort of laboratory or studio in which students drafted and experimented with language, learning about language and writing from the firsthand experience of writing, in much the same way that laboratories give students firsthand experience with science and scientific phenomena. —Rebekah Shultz Colby

Our world drips writing. Never, and I mean since the first pictographs and cu-reiform, have so many people been producing so much text. Never have so many words circulated so widely and so quickly.

Recently a reporter asked me to comment on the implications of all this, the effects of MySpace, IM, and text-messaging on students’ writing abilities. I think she expected me to bemoan an insidious assault on literate civilization. I imagine I disappointed her by offering that these media actually bode well for writing, which finds new forms in blogs, wikis, and the whole range of multimodal texts that conmingle words, images, and sounds.

In celebrating these new media, I’m hardly naive that the skills and strategies they require tidily transfer to traditional academic and civic discourses. There are different skills and standards for success in creating an effective PowerPoint slide vs. an effective research report for a sociology course, and a deft blogger isn’t necessarily an adroit essayist.

Perhaps the biggest favor that the new media have provided is to make starkly clear that good writing varies according to situation and circumstance, something we’ve always known but rarely foregrounded. What exemplary chemistry lab reports, history term papers, popular magazine articles, and business memos have in common is familiar enough: clarity, organization, evidence for claims, and so on. But these qualities look quite different in each instance, and a writer’s facility with one kind of writing doesn’t automatically transfer to others.

The new media dramatically remind us that successful writers adapt, using the strategies expected in different readings and discourse communities. The consequence is additive. On top of traditional skills that continue to be important, student writers need to develop others.

Perhaps this moving literacy target is “unfair.” But unless we acknowledge the multiplicity of writing, those of us who teach it risk marginalization. Students are most cynical when they encounter universal admonitions that clearly conflict with the world they regularly encounter: never use first person; always “tell them what you’re going to tell them, tell them what you told them;” always use active voice; avoid emotional appeals; and so on. The challenge is showing students that we understand the relationships—and the differences—between writing as it exists in the academy and writing as it exists in various spheres beyond.

A writing education must, then, build a deep and flexible repertory of skills. A 2005 report from the National Commission on Writing shows that writing is an integral part of professional life for two-thirds of American salaried workers. We ignore those needs at our students’ peril. But writing serves needs beyond the instrumental and vocational.

DU aspires to be a great private university dedicated to the public good. Our society depends on individual’s abilities to articulate and deliberate ideas, to impart information, and to understand when others are being sloppy or narrowly self-interested. —Doug Hesse