9-2014

Closing the Communication Gap: How a Writing Center and PW Program Can Respond to STEM Demands

Tammy Conard-Salvo

Purdue University, tcsalvo@purdue.edu

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Recommended Citation

Conard-Salvo, Tammy, "Closing the Communication Gap: How a Writing Center and PW Program Can Respond to STEM Demands" (2014). Purdue Writing Lab/Purdue OWL Presentations. Paper 8.
http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/writinglabpres/8

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At Purdue University, the Professional Writing Program and the Writing Lab have a history of collaboration dating back at least a decade. The handout we’ve provided lists some key events in both programs’ histories, events that have involved direct collaboration on specific projects or events that have required some level of cooperation or discussion for future initiatives.

I’m providing the perspective of the writing center administrator in this programmatic relationship, and I’m here to describe how our Writing Lab is continuing to work with Professional Writing to respond to increased demands from STEM disciplines. My talk sets up the rest of the panel, and the remaining speakers will provide more details about specific projects, complexities, discussions, and questions that have emerged as a result of our ever-deepening collaboration (to reference Bob Johnson’s 2004 piece).

I’d like to provide some background to what led to the most recent discussions between the Writing Lab and the Professional Writing Program. In addition to its one-to-one consultations, the Writing Lab also offers a series of general writing workshops open to anyone and workshops that faculty can request for their courses. Over the last few years, requests for in-class workshops have risen dramatically, particularly from STEM courses, and topics ranged from addressing an audience, supporting an argument, and research to genre conventions and sentence-level concerns. Some faculty even requested four or more workshops per class (in a single semester), and others requested that multiple topics be merged into a single, hour-long session.

The Writing Lab couldn’t meet these demands for several reasons. Not only did we lack the resources to offer as many workshops as were requested, we realized that faculty were expecting a semester-long writing course be condensed into one or more hour-long sessions. We wondered what led to this sudden increase in requests and why many of these departments didn’t seem to be aware of the Professional Writing program’s expertise in STEM writing curricula or the Writing Lab’s role in supporting campus writers.

Recent and previous discussions with PW revealed a trend: STEM departments were approaching the Writing Lab for assistance when their demands for courses weren’t being met elsewhere or to their satisfaction. STEM departments either didn’t understand that Writing Lab workshops were designed to supplement or refresh existing writing curricula, or they didn’t understand the resources and time involved in teaching writing. Fewer still understood the relationship between the Writing Lab and Professional Writing within the context of the larger Writing Programs and the English department.

Instead of undermining the efforts of our PW partners and offering stop-gap support to STEM, we decided to remain in conversation with PW to consider more sustainable writing across the curriculum projects. We wanted to present a united front demonstrating shared values about writing instruction. In other words, we didn’t want our STEM colleagues to equate the Writing Lab’s services with replacements for or cheaper alternatives to writing courses.
Furthermore, we needed to decide what the Writing Lab could feasibly offer (and what fit within the scope of its mission and strategic plan) and what would require more systematic, larger cross-programmatic and cross-departmental initiatives. Which of the Writing Lab’s existing services could support STEM? What else would the Writing Lab need to implement for STEM outreach, and how much of that required a partnership with Professional Writing? And as always, where would resources such as time, money, and staffing come from? These questions remain even as we have begun responding to STEM in small ways.

One of the simplest responses was to open a satellite location in the Materials and Electrical Engineering Building last academic year. A writing specialist in Electrical Engineering approached us about opening this new location, and we saw this as a good opportunity to begin direct outreach to STEM students. In many ways, this location represents low hanging fruit that generated goodwill with Engineering. Also, the Writing Lab continued something it was already doing—that is, maintain an evening, drop-in satellite location—and shift resources from a location that wasn’t doing as well for various reasons.

But starting this new location required more than finding a space, staffing it with tutors, and advertising it. It required additional conversations with the PW Program to ensure our tutors were confident with STEM writing and to identify other ways our programs needed to work together. The satellite has filled a small need, and more sustainable and systematic responses are necessary; however, the new location and our conversations have renewed our commitment to cross-programmatic collaboration.

The next speakers will discuss a range of related issues that have risen during our last two years of conversation, along with considerations and implications for both the Writing Lab and the Professional Writing Program.

Jeff Gerding, who serves as a graduate instructor in the PW program and as the Writing Lab’s Business and Professional Writing Coordinator, will address tutor training, recruitment, and identity and how those may be impacted by STEM demands, as well as changes to the Professional Writing curriculum.

Patrick Love, a graduate tutor in the Writing Lab who previously served as the Professional Writing/Writing Lab Collaboration Intern, will describe his project cataloging writing across the curriculum work done by both programs. This project allowed us to begin developing a complete picture of STEM demands, and how we were already responding.

Finally, Charlotte Hyde, a graduate instructor in Professional Writing and former Assistant Director of PW, will offer Professional Writing’s perspective within our partnership, focusing on how our programs can maintain a cohesive and collective rhetorical identity while also productively responding to STEM.