

Howe Center for Writing Excellence
Final Report
Department of Sociology and Gerontology
“Writing Across the Masters of Gerontological Studies Curriculum”

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Background of the Project

Need. A team of faculty in the Department of Sociology and Gerontology (SGA) received a Department Development Grant for the 2007-2008 academic year (subsequently extended through the fall 2008 semester) to work with the Center for Writing Excellence (CWE) in order to incorporate more effective writing instruction into the department’s Masters of Gerontological Studies (MGS) program. One of the most crucial skills graduate students can learn is how to write effectively. Although faculty members in SGA do personally mentor Gerontology (GTU) students, many MGS students benefited from a systematic departmental effort to impart the practical skills necessary for effective communication of gerontological knowledge. The development team’s goal was to integrate writing assignments throughout the GTU core courses in order to enhance to scholarly quality of writing in courses, in student academic portfolios, and in critical inquiry papers. The development team felt that better acquisition of writing skills would enhance student’s ability to communicate effectively, translate into increased academic or applied publication, build faculty-student mentor relationships, and increase the profile of the MGS program.

Goals. The development team had several specific goals. First, we wanted to articulate clear objectives for the MGS program. Writing clear goals phrased as student learning outcomes facilitated the design of writing assignments that allow achievement and assessment of these goals, and also aided in identifying opportunities for writing assignments that bridge multiple courses. Second, we wanted to clarify the relationship between course objectives and MGS program objectives. Gaining a better understanding of how individual courses fit into the broader program objectives allowed us to identify courses where writing assignments may be most appropriate, beneficial, and best assessed. Our third goal was to develop and implement a set of connected, cumulative writing assignments throughout the core courses, designed to advance MGS program goals. Finally, we desired to disseminate findings from our project to a broader audience via presentations to MU and GTU scholars/professionals.

Team Members and Other Participants. Dr. Paul Anderson from the Howe Center for Writing Excellence served as the group leader. A number of faculty members from both the sociology and gerontology programs participated in this project. Dr. Glenn W. Muschert and Dr. Jennifer Roebuck Bulanda were the department facilitators for the project, and Dr. Robert Applebaum, Dr. Jennifer Kinney, Dr. Suzanne Kunkel, Dr. Jean Lynch, Dr. Gina Petonito, Dr. Stephen Lippmann, and Dr. J. Scott Brown were all active program participants. Dr. Lisa Groger and Dr. Kathy McGrew also contributed to the group’s work as part of larger discussions with the gerontology faculty about the MGS program goals.

Accomplishments (What We Did and What We Created)

For the fall 2007 semester, we decided to first focus on writing assignments in individual courses, and then work on building writing assignments across courses. The group met approximately every three weeks, and the team leaders met with Dr. Anderson between these sessions. The team examined student writing in a course on gerontological theory required for first-semester MGS students, and faculty discussed the wide range of writing ability evidenced in student writing for this assignment. Dr. Anderson gave a presentation to the group on ways to design assignments that maximize student writing, the benefits of integrating clear student learning objectives as part of an assignment, and the need for connecting writing assignments to the overall course goals. Following this presentation, the group met to review an example of a writing assignment in the required research methods course for first-year MGS students. Participants discussed ways in which this writing assignment could be revised in order to aid students in learning to write effectively. Following this discussion, participants worked to revise a writing assignment they are currently using in a course they teach. At a subsequent meeting the group divided into dyads and each participant read and critiqued their partner's assignments. Each group member then completed a final revision to their course writing assignment. Dr. Anderson also gave a presentation on rubrics for grading writing assignments. Team members examined a variety of rubrics other instructors are using in their courses, and discussed the advantages and disadvantages of each. Dr. Anderson aided participants in understanding the ways in which rubrics can help students to improve their writing prior to handing in an assignment, and the ways in which it can help faculty in assessing student writing. Team members each developed rubrics to accompany their revised writing assignment.

During spring 2008, the group shifted their focus from individual course assignments to a broader examination of how writing assignments corresponded with the overall MGS program objectives. As the team members examined the objectives, it became clear that some revisions were necessary. The gerontology faculty worked to revise the MGS objectives, making them more consistent with the focus of the program and writing them as student learning outcomes that could be directly assessed. Dr. Anderson provided guidance and information as to how to write effective learning objectives as well as feedback on the content of the revised course objectives. As part of the grant, the team brought renowned gerontologist Dr. Joe Hendricks to campus as a guest speaker. Dr. Hendricks is recognized as one of the top gerontological researchers in America by the Gerontological Society of America in 2008, and he has expertise in gerontological education, curricular development, and writing. On April 16, 2008, Dr. Hendricks gave a talk titled "Gerontology Is what You Make It: The Multidisciplinarity of Gerontology," that encouraged attendees to think beyond disciplinary boundaries in their research and writing. While on campus, Dr. Hendricks also met with our team to discuss the revised MGS objectives. He encouraged team members to consider whether the objectives accurately reflected the areas of emphasis of the program, and his suggestions proved extremely beneficial in the revision process.

At the completion of the year 2007-2008 academic year, team members had each created revised writing assignments, rubrics for assessing the assignments, and had aided in the development of the new set of objectives for the MGS program. Team members chose to extend the project through the fall 2008 semester, in order to complete further work to link program objectives with writing assignments in individual courses. As part of this work, team members

identified specific course assignments that corresponded with overall MGS objectives, and also discussed the role of the MGS portfolio in demonstrating writing across the curriculum.

Assessment

To assess the efficacy of our approach, the team will examine student writing assignments as indicators of how the assignments achieve the objectives of the MGS program. Since the Critical Inquiry document stands out as the ultimate indicator of the effectiveness of the MGS curriculum, the GTY faculty members have expressed a desire to continue the project by examining Critical Inquiry papers from past, present, and future students. Planned assessment will follow a pre-test/post-test format, examining student writing prior to the intervention and comparing it with student submissions generated after the team implemented changes in curricular goals and course assignments.

Impact of Project

Impact During Time of Grant. Involvement in the team had an impact on individual participants, the gerontology faculty, and students in team members' courses. Faculty felt that they gained important knowledge on developing writing assignments in courses, ways in which to improve student's writing in their courses, and hands-on experience developing and using rubrics for assessing student writing. The grant also impacted the MGS program more broadly, as it led gerontology faculty to revise the program goals, revisit the purpose and structure of the MGS portfolio, and identify how individual courses contribute to the program objectives. Further, individual students were impacted as faculty used their revised writing assignments in their courses, increased the use of grading rubrics, and asked students to hand in multiple drafts of their paper rather than one final version. Finally, as reflected in the composition of the team, this initiative served to further integrate the sociology and gerontology components of our faculty, and to increase involvement of sociology faculty with the MGS curriculum.

Future Impact. The impact of the grant is ongoing and continues to influence courses in the sociology and gerontology curricula, particularly the MGS curriculum. Our efforts are helping to develop better-prepared, better-rounded MGS graduates, and will enhance students' abilities to communicate gerontological knowledge in their future roles as academicians and/or practitioners in our rapidly-aging society.