

2005

## Strengthening partnerships between sites and universities: Tips from site directors

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### Repository Citation

Bowen, Betsy; Brinkley, Ellen; Peterson, Meg; and Vanderweghe, Rick, "Strengthening partnerships between sites and universities: Tips from site directors" (2005). *English Faculty Publications*. 16. <https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/english-facultypubs/16>

### Published Citation

Bowen, Betsy, Brinkley, Ellen, Peterson, Meg, & Vanderweghe, Rick (2005). "Strengthening partnerships between sites and universities: Tips from site directors." *The Voice*, 10 (2): 6-8. Direct link to article: <http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2203>

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# Strengthening Partnerships Between Sites and Universities: Tips from Site Directors

By: [Betsey Bowen](#), [Ellen Brinkley](#), [Meg Petersen](#), [Rick VanDeWeghe](#)

Publication: [The Voice, Vol. 10, No. 2](#)

Date: 2005

**Summary:** NWP sites need their sponsoring universities to value the work they do. In this article, four writing project leaders present successful strategies for strengthening the relationship between sites and their universities.

Those of us involved in the National Writing Project know the value of our work. At our summer institutes, we see teachers draw on research, experience, and the wisdom of other teachers to understand students' development in literacy. In the classrooms of writing project colleagues, we see how students benefit when their teachers participate in ongoing and effective professional development. We have watched our sites mature because of work done by initiatives such as Project Outreach and the Technology Liaison Project. In short, we know that the work we do matters—to teachers, students, and the community at large. But that is not enough. If our sites are to flourish—and if we are to accomplish what we are capable of—we need our sponsoring universities to understand and value our work too.

The NWP model calls for a collaboration between sites and their sponsoring universities, with the site receiving some financial support from its university. Indeed, NWP guidelines require universities to provide "direct and in-kind financial support, i.e., a percentage of release time for the director, administrative costs, and facilities." In addition, the NWP expects the site and its university to pay the costs of writing project programs offered at the university, while school districts pay some of the cost of programs offered in schools.

Beyond this required support, universities can and do support local writing projects in other ways. Recently Ellen Brinkley of the Third Coast Writing Project conducted an informal survey of twenty people who had participated in a session for writing project directors at the 2003 annual meeting. Paul LeMahieu, NWP's director of research, analyzed the survey responses, which revealed significant differences in the kinds of university support that sites and site directors received. At some sites, universities grant directors generous release time (up to 50 percent of their workload) for writing project work; at other sites, release time is minimal or not available. Universities can also provide other kinds of support, such as funding for administrative or technical assistance. Some universities value writing project work enough to consider it a significant factor in a director's application for tenure, promotion, or salary decisions; others regard it simply as community service.

University support is crucial, because sites operate best when directors can get the time and administrative assistance they need to devote to writing project work. This is especially true for

directors on the tenure track; without university support, the work these directors do for the writing project would come at the expense of personal advancement and tenure. To further support these directors, perhaps the NWP might someday issue formal letters of appointment describing the academic value of writing project work, develop a peer-reviewed section in NWP journals, or provide access to prominent scholars for tenure review. These steps might significantly increase the recognition that directors receive from their universities for writing project work.

In the meantime, site directors can take action to strengthen the relationship between their site and its sponsoring university. This article presents strategies from four writing project leaders who actively work on that relationship. Their sites are both new and well established and cover rural, urban, and suburban settings. We hope you'll find something among these tips to help strengthen your partnership with your university.

### **Denver Writing Project**

The Denver Writing Project is located in the English Department of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Colorado at Denver, an urban campus. Our site serves the greater metro area as well as communities in the Front Range and mountain regions. Our university funding comes generously from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and the Office of the Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs.

The writing project has good relations with the university, shares in most of its values, and complements its dedication to urban education and partnerships with the community. Indeed, a number of the values underlying the university's missions directly reflect the basic assumptions of the National Writing Project:

- collaboration among faculty, students, staff, and the community in the learning process
- creativity, innovation, and flexibility
- service to the public good
- personal growth and professional success
- cultural diversity and enrichment.

When we implement writing project programs or conceive of new initiatives, we do so with university goals and values in mind. We believe we enhance our partnership with the university in the following ways:

- We offer our summer institute and most of our continuity programs on the campus, and we invite university officials to visit these sessions. Through these visits, administrators get a firsthand look at the workings of the project, and this helps them understand better what we do and how their support is also a form of partnership.
- We make sure to cite the college and the university in all correspondence and publicity. Each year, for example, summer institute fellows design commemorative T-shirts with the college initials (CLAS) and the university name printed on them. This may seem a small thing, but it visibly indicates for the public our connection with our sponsoring institution.

- Annually we prepare lists of accomplishments by directors, fellows, and students of fellows, much like those that appear in the Awards and Accolades section of *The Voice*, and we send them to administrators. In this way, we underscore the project's commitment to the university's goal of personal growth and professional success.
- We have produced a promotional CD that contains information about our project, video testimonials, institute demonstrations, and open readings of fellows' writing. We use the CD for recruitment, but also to educate university administrators about the nature of the project and provide compelling images of teachers hard at work. For some administrators, this is as close as they will get to an institute visit, and it makes an impression on them as an example of collaboration among faculty, students, and the community.
- We gather and share statistics with the university on the impact of the writing project. We have data on the increased number of graduate students in English programs owing to the writing project's presence; the amount of grant money brought in by the writing project (more than all other department grants combined); the number of publications and presentations by writing project directors and fellows; and the number of students that writing project teachers directly affect. Figures such as these reflect, we believe, our and the university's commitment to diversity and enrichment; creativity, innovation, and flexibility; and professional success.

It is not difficult to see how the values of the university and the writing project align, nor is it difficult to find ways to make those connections a visible part of our work.

### **Connecticut Writing Project-Fairfield**

The Connecticut Writing Project-Fairfield has been located at Fairfield University since 2000, having moved there after fifteen years at a branch campus of the Connecticut state university system. Fairfield is a small, comprehensive school in the Jesuit Catholic tradition, and it seeks to develop the creative intellectual potential of its students while it fosters in them ethical and religious values and a sense of social responsibility. As a Jesuit institution, it is devoted to the development of faith and the promotion of justice. In keeping with that commitment, the university shares its resources and expertise with the wider community, an effort in which CWP-Fairfield plays a part.

We are located in Fairfield County, which includes both exceptionally affluent suburban towns and three of Connecticut's poorest cities. As a result, CWP-Fairfield draws teachers who serve widely diverse student populations in terms of economics, experience, and opportunity.

Even though the National Writing Project's mission fits well with the university's, schools like Fairfield seldom host NWP sites. In fact, CWP-Fairfield is one of the few NWP affiliates at a private institution and one of only four at Catholic schools. When we moved here, the NWP was unknown to anyone outside the university's Graduate School of Education and Allied Professions. As a result, we have had to educate university administrators and staff about who we are and what we do. We have learned to work effectively with university departments (academic and administrative) and to demonstrate the project's value to the university. We have accomplished this in a number of ways:

- We have developed a strong relationship with the university's grants offices, particularly the office for corporate and foundation grants. We notify grants officers about work that project participants are doing that might be attractive to funders, such as after-school family literacy workshops. The officers in turn notify us of potential funding sources and help us approach them. With the assistance of the grants office we were able to secure a three-year grant from a private foundation to provide scholarships for low-income students to attend our summer Young Writers Institute.
- We have learned to work effectively with the university's public relations office, which has worked to our mutual benefit. When we sponsor a conference or event, we notify the office in advance so that it can send someone to photograph or report on the event. Knowing that the PR office is always looking for stories that reflect well on the university, we keep them informed of the successes of our fellows. In turn, the PR office now calls on us when it needs an expert on writing in the schools. When the National Assessment of Educational Progress results on writing were released last summer, the PR office arranged for our associate director to be interviewed by various media. Such cooperation has brought good publicity to the university and the project alike.
- We offer participants in our weeklong advanced institute the option of living in university housing that would otherwise be vacant during the summer. Fellows who choose this option get a week of writing and private time—a rare luxury for most teachers—and the university gets a small payment for the use of the rooms.
- We developed a summer program for students entering grades six through eleven that advances the principles of the NWP and fills a special niche at the university. The Young Writers Institute nourishes and challenges students interested in writing, providing them with rich experiences that some do not get in their regular classrooms. At the same time it advances a university goal by giving pre-college students an introduction to the campus. Through generous support from a bequest, the Tauck Foundation, and our own fellows, we have been able to provide scholarships for low-income students, thus furthering the university's efforts to share its resources with the wider community.
- Finally, we recognized that we needed to reconsider the site's relationship with the university. When CWP came to Fairfield, strong state funding made it possible for us to match NWP funds with minimal support from the university. At that time, Fairfield was unfamiliar with the National Writing Project and uncertain of the site's value. Now, we can no longer count on state funding, but our value to the university is more evident. As a result, we have been able to propose a new partnership between the university and our site, one that will ensure greater support for the project and a closer integration between its work and the overall work of the university.

### **Plymouth Writing Project**

The Plymouth Writing Project is a new site founded in 2002 at Plymouth State University (then Plymouth State College), a residential liberal arts institution with 3,700 full-time undergraduate students and more than 3,000 graduate students.

Plymouth has a long tradition of teacher preparation and service to the community, and it also boasts a strong writing program. The university has an undergraduate writing major, as well as a strong teacher preparation program in English. The acclaimed Plymouth Writers Group

anthologies of teachers' writing have been published at the university since 1996. The English department launched a master's degree in the teaching of writing in 2000. And the university actively encourages faculty to pursue grant funding and provides a grants office with a financial officer who works directly with faculty in preparing budgets. Because of its traditions and programs, Plymouth was poised to support a writing project site.

Even with all of this support, the project needs to nurture good relations with the university in various ways. Writing project people are not naturally inclined to promote themselves. We have found that tending to our relationship with the university and the graduate division on an ongoing basis can be enormously valuable to the project.

- We have formed a good relationship with the university's public relations office. We inform the public relations office about all project activities and give them copies of the awards and accolades that we send to the NWP. In return, we've gotten good press coverage for our spring conference.
- Like the Denver Writing Project, we invite key administrators, including the head of the graduate programs, to attend our events and to address participants. This gives administrators the chance to make project participants aware of the full scope of graduate offerings at the university, and it lets us keep the administrators aware of our programs.
- We run a young writers conference and publish *High School Voices*, an anthology of high school students' writing. Through these initiatives, we distribute admissions materials to potential students and make contact with teachers who may influence students' choices for college applications.
- We integrate our professional school partnerships with our work in undergraduate teacher preparation, placing student teachers with writing project teacher-consultants. By doing so, we ensure that student teachers have strong mentors and teacher-consultants get to lead professional development activities.
- We bring more than 250 teachers to campus during the spring break period for an all-day conference on the teaching of writing, during the course of which we provide information about university programs.
- We complement the university's commitment to outreach through our work in surrounding school districts.

### **Third Coast Writing Project**

Now in our eleventh year, the Third Coast Writing Project (TCWP) at Western Michigan University is an English Department program within the College of Arts and Sciences.

WMU is a student-centered research university that serves almost 30,000 students at the Kalamazoo and satellite campuses.

Our site serves teachers in a nine-county area in southwest Michigan. Our largest city is Kalamazoo, with a population of about 80,000. Some of our teacher-consultants work with students in inner-city, high-poverty locations; others teach in affluent suburban and resort communities; and still others teach in small towns and rural areas. In some places, up to 30

percent of the students are children of migrant workers, but in many districts there are virtually no students from minority populations.

Currently there is no state funding in Michigan for NWP sites, but TCWP has been well supported by the university. From the time of our original site application, the university has provided funding for faculty salaries to support the summer institute, one-course release time for the director, a graduate assistant for summer sessions, free parking and computer lab access for summer fellows, and support from the English department administrative assistant and secretaries.

Our site has always been an integral part of the English department. Over the years both the writing project and the department have been strengthened by this reciprocal relationship. Our partnership strategies include the following:

- We coordinate our programs and the graduate programs of our English department. When our English Education faculty redesigned a master's program for teachers of English, we established a link that enables our teacher-consultants to use summer institute credits to fulfill a required advanced writing pedagogy course plus one elective course toward their master's degree. The credits also apply to selected programs within the College of Education.
- We have recruited new English Education faculty who are interested in working with our site. A former middle school teacher finished his Ph.D. at Purdue, was hired at our university, and co-directed our summer institute—all in one summer. Now he is a co-director for our site and directs our NWP New-Teacher Initiative program.
- We have strengthened the bond between the project and the university by inviting our teacher-consultants to teach writing methods courses for preservice teachers. They bring a deep understanding of the needs and interests of K–12 student writers to their part-time teaching in the English department. Similarly, we have invited English department faculty to be guest presenters in our summer institutes, teacher-as-writer workshops, and continuity events.
- We've discovered ways to support English department programs for everyone's benefit. A new Scholarly Speakers Series includes an event cosponsored by TCWP. Our participation expands the offerings that the series can provide on a very limited budget, and the series provides an excellent opportunity for teacher-consultants to meet visiting scholars and to socialize with faculty and community members.
- We try to take advantage of opportunities when they occur. In 2002 a cross-campus partnership developed when the director of the university's Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers to Use Technology program (PT3) attended an English education technology showcase. At the close of the event, TCWP presented digital stories that teacher-consultants had created during the previous summer's Digital Storytelling Institute (funded in part by an NWP minigrant). The PT3 director's enthusiastic response led to a unique digital institute the following summer. This remarkable event brought together faculty from the College of Arts and Sciences and the College of Education who work with preservice teachers, K–12 mentor teachers for undergraduate intern teachers, English Education doctoral students, and undergraduate students who had just completed

their teaching internships. Working in small groups, the participants took on the role of learners as together they created digital stories.

The work of our writing project sites and the work of our universities are mutually reinforcing. Each supports and extends the other. Reminding ourselves and our universities of the value of that partnership contributes greatly to the maintenance of that relationship.

**About the Author** Betsy A. Bowen is the director of the Connecticut Writing Project-Fairfield; Ellen Brinkley is the director of the Third Coast Writing Project; Meg Peterson is the director of the Plymouth Writing Project; and Rick Vandeweghe is the director of the Denver Writing Project.