Curriculum-Based Peer Tutoring Programs: A Survey

Margot Soven

"... in colleges or universities today, peer tutors as a group, acting collaboratively, are potentially among the most powerful agents for educational change, because peer tutors learn the most important tool for effecting change, the art of translation—the art of conversation at the boundaries between communities."

Kenneth Bruffee

To celebrate the tenth anniversary of its Writing Fellows Program, the first curriculum-based peer tutoring program to achieve national recognition, Brown University held a national peer tutoring conference in April 1993. In his keynote address, "Lost in Translation: Peer Tutors, Faculty Members, and the Art of Boundary Conversation," Kenneth Bruffee focused on the relationship between peer tutors and faculty. Although Bruffee did not intend to compare curriculum-based peer tutoring programs to writing center-based peer tutoring programs, in fact, by emphasizing the role that peer tutors play in their conversations with faculty, not just with students, Bruffee was doing just that. The potential of curriculum-based peer tutoring programs to create contexts for conversation between faculty and peer tutors, in addition to providing tutoring services to students, may help to explain increasing interest in them.

The interactive quality characteristic of curriculum-based peer tutoring programs (often called Writing Fellows or Writing Associates programs, hereafter abbreviated as WF programs) makes them one of the most promising activities in Writing Across the Curriculum. Proponents of these programs believe that because peer tutors are assigned to individual classes, they enter into conversations with students and faculty in which multiple voices negotiate the crossings between the rhetoric of the discipline, the students' "dialect," and the language of the peer tutoring community. If one of the basic tenets of Writing Across the Curriculum is to put rhetoric back in its rightful place at the center of the curriculum, then WF programs may have a major role to play. Communication becomes inseparable from content when peer tutors are in the mainstream of the curriculum, rather than on its periphery, as they are often perceived to be when housed in a writing center.

The purpose of this essay is twofold: to describe the varieties of WF programs and to provide some help for those who want to start one. To provide up-to-date information on these programs, I administered a survey, the results of which form the basis of this report. In addition, I offer several observations based on my experience as a director of a six-year-old Writing Fellows Program.

Philosophically, many WF programs, such as the one at La Salle University, are the first descendants of the Brown University Writing Fellows Program. Because Tori Haring Smith, the founder of the Brown Program, so effectively articulated the principles on which it is based and developed a structure to carry them out, Brown became the model for other similar programs, although this was not the first program to assign undergraduate writing tutors to courses (e.g., The Illinois State and San Diego State University programs preceded Brown's). Most programs based on the Brown model agree that all students can benefit from draft review by peer tutors and that peer tutors should avoid comments on the accuracy of content in an essay. Admittedly, the line between content and expression is often hard to draw, but WF's try to comment on students' work as a reader would, noting areas of confusion and weakness in organization, coherence or style, and then suggesting ways to improve expression. Students who receive assistance may accept or reject the WF's suggestions, usually without penalty from the instructor.

Structurally, the programs surveyed exhibit a certain amount of variation, although there is surprising uniformity in administrative practices. Brown, with 80 tutors, is probably the most diverse in terms of the services it provides. Most of the programs responding are considerably smaller than Brown's (except for Swarthmore with 88 tutors), regardless of the size of the institution that sponsors the program. Several realities, such as budgetary constraints, seem to explain the relatively small size of most programs.

The Survey

The survey was mailed to ninety-five schools that had either requested information from Brown University or had participated in workshops on WF programs held at the Conference on College Composition and Communication meetings in 1988 and 1990. If there are other such programs, not on these lists, then they did not receive the survey. The reports received reveal similarities in all WF programs and some significant differences as well.

Of the twenty-six surveys returned, eighteen indicate that their institutions have some version of curriculum-based tutoring, although in
some cases (e.g., Lawrence University) peer tutors are assigned to both the Writing Center and to individual courses. Two-thirds of the institutions that responded are four-year liberal arts colleges; the others are large state universities (see Appendix for a complete list of the programs).

The survey asked questions in four areas: development and administration of the program, selection and training of peer tutors, faculty participation, and operation of the program (see Appendix for a sample survey). To verify the accuracy of the information, this article was sent to all of the institutions described. Ambiguities were resolved during phone conversations.

Who These Programs Serve

The largest number of WF programs included in the survey make tutors available to courses in all departments (e.g., Brigham Young University, Brown University, Swarthmore College, La Salle University, Western Washington University, University of Michigan, Wesleyan University), although often with priorities. The Swarthmore program is linked in part to their Primary Distribution courses offered in all disciplines. Western Washington University favors courses designated as writing proficiency courses. La Salle gives priority to Freshman Year Experience courses in the core curriculum designed for at-risk students. Brown and Swarthmore encourage requests for tutors from foreign language departments, and at Brown, Rhetoric Fellows, who receive special training, assist courses involving oral presentations. Rhoda Flaxman, director of the Brown program, believes that Brown is still the only program that includes this kind of training.

Freshmen writing programs and developmental reading and writing programs comprise the next largest constituencies using WFs. At Lawrence University (Wisconsin), peer tutors are assigned to each section of Freshman Studies, a two-term "great works" course required of all freshmen and taught by faculty from all disciplines. Geoff Gajewski, director of the Writing Lab, says that because a writing course is not required at Lawrence, the feeling is that the freshmen studies course must prepare freshmen for the writing demands that they will face in other studies. Pomona College (Claremont, California) is developing a similar program. At Illinois State University, students who may be at risk in introductory composition are placed in tutorial sections of the course; at California State University, Northridge, one group of WFs is dedicated to the developmental reading and writing program. Assistance may be requested by instructors who teach other courses.

Seattle University assigns all WFs to an activity situated within a course. The fellows work with students who are completing a senior project developed by the School of Engineering. Each project team, consisting of four or five students, meets with the tutor to produce a proposal, progress reports, and a final report. The Seattle program illustrates a trend toward assigning peer tutors to specific projects and populations, which sometimes grows out of a more broadly based program, like the one at Brown. For example, at La Salle several WFs are assigned to the senior writing project in Biology. At some institutions, like Seattle, targeted curriculum-based peer tutoring develops from the Writing Center.

The Budget

Most programs are funded by the central administration or from a writing center budget. Rhoda Flaxman (Brown) comments that the independence and autonomy of these programs is enhanced when they are not funded by the English Department. At California State University, Northridge, the program is funded by state funds earmarked for developmental English and Mathematics programs. At Brigham Young, the General Education/Honors Department controls the budget. Some programs began with limited funding of a pilot project, a strategy that worked at La Salle. The budget gradually increased as the program grew from ten to twenty-five peer tutors over a three-year period. A more permanent commitment by the institution was sought after the pilot project was evaluated.

Tutors receive monetary compensation (in some cases in addition to course credit) in all of the programs that responded to the survey, except at Beaver College. Salaries vary. In programs where students receive an hourly wage, salaries range from $4.65 to $7.00. The number of hours per week they work varies from 6-10 hours, depending on the school. At schools where students are paid by the semester, the range is from $250 to $500. At La Salle, students receive $300 for approximately sixty hours of service per semester. At Arkansas College, students are paid from work-study funds.

All but one of the directors who responded to the survey as full-time faculty receive a one-course reduction to administer the program. Part-time instructors receive the equivalent compensation for one course. The director is typically responsible for all aspects of the program: recruiting students and faculty, selecting, training, and supervising tutors, and evaluating the program. At several schools, the program is coordinated by the writing or learning center director or staff (e.g., Seattle, Lawrence, Illinois State). The program at the University of Michigan is administered...
by a three-person rotating faculty committee that receives no additional compensation.

Most institutions seem confident about renewed funding, except for several state-related schools that are experiencing general budget cuts. Increasing recognition of the value of peer tutoring may at least partially explain the approval of curriculum-based peer tutoring budgets.

Starting a WF Program: Faculty Support

[Our program grew] out of discussion concerning a writing component for a new variety of courses to meet distribution requirements, and in response to a general college concern for the quality of student writing, I was asked to look into the Brown Writing Fellows Program. . . The major impetus for the program came from the Provost's office and the all-college committees charged with designing and proposing new or revised curricular ventures. (Tom Blackburn, Swarthmore College)

At the initiative of an English Composition Board Member, the Dean's office appointed a committee on peer tutoring . . . . (Susan Marie Harrington, University of Michigan)

The director of writing in the sixties initiated an Undergraduate Teaching Assistant Program for Writing Classes. (Janice Neulieb, Illinois State University)

These responses to the question, "How did your program get started?" reflect various points of origin. Regardless of how and why the program got started, however, directors of WF programs agree that they cannot exist without a reasonably strong faculty mandate. Barbara Sylvester (Western Washington University) says, "Our program works because the interdisciplinary committee overseeing the program works." Faculty from the disciplines feel a sense of ownership for the program at Washington State because they help to run it.

WF programs seem to function best when faculty work collaboratively with the peer tutors assigned to their classes, and most directors suggest that considerable time be set aside for this purpose. Faculty understanding and cooperation are essential. "An extraordinary amount of collaboration among faculty and student tutors makes this program work so well; a great deal of good will is involved," says Patricia Murray (California State, Northridge).

It is recommended that a group of faculty be involved at the program's inception. Ideally, they should be among those faculty who observe a need on campus for additional attention to writing. At La Salle, the program proposal was jointly authored by a committee of faculty in the School of Arts and Science and the Business School who believed that a WF program would strengthen our Writing-Across-the-Curriculum program. Recruiting our first group of sponsors was made easier by their support. An interdisciplinary committee appointed by the dean still serves in an advisory capacity to the director.

Selecting Peer Tutors

Kim Toomey did a really excellent job with my students. I am grateful to her. Thanks. (Preston Feden, Education, La Salle)

I spoke to you about keeping Karen for a whole year with my Honors Course. Please say this is O.K. (Joseph Volpe, Philosophy, La Salle)

Rob has told me he will probably work with someone in Communications next semester. I understand his reasons completely and encourage him to do so, but I am very jealous of this person! He is so conscientious to interact with, helpful to me, and gives thoughtful suggestions to the students. They respect his comments. He did a superb job! (Nancy Jones, Chemistry, La Salle)

Comments like these are not unique to La Salle's WF program. Program directors who responded to the survey report almost unanimous faculty satisfaction with the peer tutors' performance. The weak tutor seems more the exception than the rule. Admittedly, such agreement is surprising. One possible explanation is that peer tutoring programs are somewhat self-selective. As peer tutors at La Salle have assured me, the stipend is insufficient motivation to participate in a program that is time-consuming, somewhat risky ("Will my fellow students hate me after this?") and usually requires enrolling in a rigorous training course (see below), often outside the peer tutor's major field of study. An interest in writing, a concern for one's fellow students, and the intellectual challenge bring students to our doors.

Mere interest is not sufficient, however, to gain acceptance into most WF programs. Most institutions that responded to the survey require applicants to submit writing samples and perform well in an interview with
supervising faculty. In addition, Swarthmore asks students to evaluate a sample paper, and Brown requires applicants "to teach us something" and describe their own writing process. Recommendation by a faculty member is necessary at other schools (Pomona, California State at Northridge). Seattle involves extensive role playing as part of the selection process. Illinois State requires a B+ average and a strong performance in writing courses, although students need not be English majors. Students at Wesleyan must submit a transcript. At some small colleges (e.g., Beaver), the process is more informal because faculty are familiar with students' work from courses they teach.

WF programs seem divided on the subject of class status as a criterion, although at most schools students must be sophomores to begin tutoring. At La Salle, students can apply as sophomores but cannot enter the program until they are juniors. In our experience, juniors and seniors seem to have less difficulty with interpersonal issues, and our applicant pool is sufficiently large to enable us to limit the program to juniors and seniors.

Although most schools report that the majority of tutors are English majors (University of Michigan and others), students from all departments are urged to apply. Science majors apply in surprisingly large numbers (e.g., Lawrence University, University of Southwestern Louisiana). La Salle makes a special effort to recruit business majors, who have been among our best tutors but who often have less confidence in their writing ability than other students.

Program directors agree that a selection procedure must be practical to be effective. The logistics of collecting writing samples, reviewing them, and arranging interviews are formidable. A process that becomes too complex may discourage potential applicants and frazzle the director. At La Salle, some supportive and willing colleagues help select the tutors by reading application submissions. Their assistance reduces questions about objectivity and gives the director needed support during a process that often takes several weeks.

Training and Supervising Tutors

Establishment of a mechanism for training tutors is integral to the process of developing a curriculum-based peer tutoring program. Most schools require tutors to enroll in a three-credit course that combines theory and practice. The course requirement emphasizes the seriousness of the program and also rewards students in training with course credit. Although peer tutors sometimes question the necessity of a course, as opposed to a brief workshop, to prepare them for peer tutoring, most directors seem convinced that a course is a good idea.

There is surprising agreement among program directors on what tutors need to know: how to write effective comments on student papers and conduct successful conferences, the specific demands of academic writing, and the reasons many students have difficulty meeting those requirements. On the theoretical side, courses emphasize the literature on process approaches to writing, collaborative learning, the development of writing ability on the college level, and the nature of academic writing in different disciplines. Some also include material on gender issues as they relate to writing, black dialect, theories of communication and textuality, and English as a second language. Most directors agree that a problem surfaces in these courses when teachers who are overly enthusiastic about theory allot insufficient time for practicing tutoring strategies, such as commenting on sample papers and role-playing conferences. (Note: Syllabi for sample courses can be requested from the schools marked by an asterisk in the Appendix.)

Once WFs complete the course and receive tutoring assignments, the method of supervising them varies by school. The University of Michigan has the most extensive training program, requiring WFs to enroll in a second course that meets one hour a week. At some schools (e.g., Illinois State University, California State at Northridge, Wesleyan), students attend weekly meetings during subsequent semesters. WFs at La Salle meet briefly with the coordinator when they receive a set of drafts. At Brown, head fellows help with monitoring new tutors, Fellows in most programs also meet periodically during the semester with their sponsoring instructors.

Program directors seem convinced that peer tutoring cannot be "taught" quickly. It takes time to synthesize theory and method, practice the recommended strategies, and receive feedback from classmates and the instructor. At some schools, (e.g., Brown and La Salle, where the course is taken simultaneously with a WF's first placement), the course also becomes a forum for discussing the first tutoring experiences. At those institutions where training is currently limited to a brief orientation or workshop, directors feel that more extensive training is necessary.

Evaluating the Program

Writing program evaluation is never easy, and WF program evaluation is no exception. The survey reveals that WF programs include extensive evaluation procedures, perhaps because accountability is crucial when peer tutors are involved. All programs that responded to the survey include an evaluation component, usually consisting of surveys completed
by tutees, faculty sponsors, and the fellows themselves. At La Salle, several fellows with lighter tutoring assignments help tabulate survey results each semester. (Sample survey forms can be requested from the schools listed in the Appendix.)

Evaluation serves several purposes. Most important, it provides immediate feedback to tutors and the coordinator, useful for improving the program and also for boosting the tutor's sometimes wavering confidence. ("Most of the kids in my class really felt I helped them! Wow.") Evidence from the schools surveyed indicates that all three constituencies—tutees, fellows, and faculty—seem incredibly pleased with existing programs. Some directors report a surge of strengthened administrative support once the first reports on the program are in. When budget time rolls around again, no argument may be more compelling than data gathered during the evaluation process. These comments represent the general positive reaction to WF programs:

Tremendous improvement in final products. (John Bean, Seattle University)

Increased attention to student needs and problems. (Patricia Murray, California State at Northridge)

Better writing. It definitely improved their papers. However, more importantly I think it had a long lasting positive effect. I believe these students are now more conscientious about what they write. Also, I think it is important for students to get used to constructive criticism. (Robert Vogel, Education Dept., La Salle University)

Improved performance of at risk writers. GPAs in these classes [tutorial sections of the freshman composition course] equal those in regular classes, though students placed in them have lower essay and ACT scores. (Janice Neulieb, Illinois State University)

Directors conclude that most students served by these programs believe their papers improve and, more importantly, report an increased understanding of the writing process. The fellows experience the satisfaction that comes from helping their peers and collaborating with instructors. They say that participation in the WF program enhances their own writing and interpersonal skills. By becoming translators of the conventions of academic writing, they become more aware of the traditions of thinking and expression in different disciplines that form their foundation. John Bean (Seattle University) reports that tutors who work with the engineering project experience increased job opportunities in technical writing.

Many faculty who work with WFPs note changes in their assignments as a result of discussions with the peer tutor. Focus groups with WFPs involved in specific projects at La Salle have provided faculty with information about student attitudes toward assignments and their methods of accomplishing the assignment. As a result, we have modified several major department writing projects.

Problems and "Solutions"

The surveys indicate that the administrator of a curriculum-based peer tutoring program must be tolerant of the "less-than-perfect." Despite her best efforts to guide both faculty and tutors, she discovers that many components in these programs are difficult to control. For example, "getting students to commit the necessary time to work with tutors" (Geoff Gajewski, Lawrence University) is a persistent frustration. Both fellows and directors complain that some students submit carelessly written drafts. Late papers and missed conferences cause irritation. The "difficulty of inspiring writers to make the effort required by real revision rather than real but minor improvements" is noted by Tom Blackburn (Swarthmore).

"Logistics" was identified as a key problem by several directors. ("My draft is late; how can I find my Fellow? I lost my appointment time.") A more serious problem, tutor credibility, is sometimes cited as an obstacle to the program's effectiveness, especially in technical courses (Seattle) or in upper-division courses (La Salle).

According to the surveys, although never completely eradicable, students being students, these problems occur less frequently in classes where faculty voice strong support for the program and adhere conscientiously to the program guidelines. They must clearly indicate that the WF program is integral to the course, not a penalty for having unknowingly enrolled in a Writing Fellows' assisted course. Directors agree that when faculty underscore the importance of the writing process as a mode of learning and communicating about the course material and the value of having a non-expert read assignments, students seem more apt to adopt behaviors that help them benefit from the program. When procedures for submitting papers and signing up for conferences are clearly spelled out, students are less likely to be confused.

Other problems, such as poor assignments, faculty who want the fellow to become an editor, and faculty (often in the English Department) who are too critical of the fellow's performance, can also undermine the program. At La Salle, we have found that an informal conversation with the offending faculty member, to which the fellow may be invited, can set matters straight.
Occasionally, but very rarely, a WF may turn in a disappointing performance or simply decide midway through the semester that he wishes to leave the program. At La Salle, since all fellows are not given assignments each semester, we are usually able to substitute another peer tutor in his place. This possibility should be made clear to faculty when they agree to sponsor a fellow.

Recruiting faculty and peer tutors was cited as time consuming and at times frustrating (e.g., University of Michigan, Beaver College). Directors agree that there is no substitute for continuous publicity and personal meetings with both interested students and faculty. Also, appropriate placement of the peer tutors is a prerequisite for creating a positive campus-wide attitude towards the program.

The WF Program Director

Directing a curriculum-based peer tutoring program is like nothing else I have ever done, although as co-director of La Salle's composition program and coordinator of the Writing-Across-the-Curriculum program I have twelve years of experience as a WPA. Perhaps the intense involvement with the peer tutors makes the difference. My own diplomatic skills have been considerably honed by serving as the meeting point between the fellows, their faculty sponsors, the committee that oversees the program, and school administrators.

I endorse Tom Blackburn's (Swarthmore) and Patricia Murray's (California State, Northridge) recommended qualities for WF program directors, although at times it is difficult to live up to them:

I would urge that the leadership of the program be vested in someone who believes in and can articulate the goals of the program, who understands the particular institution and its internal politics, and who has or is given a position not easily marginalized. (Tom Blackburn)

Hire knowledgeable, hard-working, self-sacrificing enthusiastic people to run it [the program]. (Patricia Murray)

Final Observations

"All you need are a few willing students, someone to train them and administer the program, and most important, the cooperation of an administrator who will provide the funding." This statement by Tori Haring-Smith echoes the optimism and confidence in students and the concept of curriculum-based peer tutoring that inspired many of us to attempt our own versions of the Brown program. The results of this survey suggest that the process of developing such programs may be more demanding than Tori Haring-Smith's statement implies; however, this survey also indicates that institutions which have developed WF programs have not been disappointed. Additional research is needed for a more accurate assessment of the effects of WF programs, but for now, faculty and student reports suggest that these programs seem to strengthen writing instruction and enhance performance. By creating contexts for "conversation at the boundaries between communities," they also foster a sense of collegiality between students and faculty, often cited as a primary but elusive goal on many campuses. They bring people together to pursue common objectives: good writing, enhanced understanding of the writing process, and commitment to the power of peer collaboration.

Appendix 1

This essay is based on survey information and materials gathered with grant support from La Salle University. Contact these schools for additional information about their programs.

Schools responding to the survey that have Writing Center Peer Tutoring Programs are not listed. I thank their WPAs for their responses. See Muriel Harris' chapter, "The Writing Center and Tutoring in WAC Programs" in Writing Across the Curriculum: A Guide to Developing Programs, eds. Susan McLeod and Margot Soven (Sage Publications, 1992) for a comprehensive discussion of these programs.

*John C. Bean, English, Seattle University, Broadway and Madison, Seattle, WA 98122, (206)296-5421.


*Jo Ann Bomze, English, Beaver College, Glenside, PA 19038, (215) 592-2105.

*Rhoda Flaxman, Rose Writing Fellows Program, Brown University, Box 1962, Providence, RI 02912, (401) 863-1404.
Appendix 2

A SURVEY: CURRICULUM-BASED PEER TUTORING PROGRAMS

Please return to: Margot Soven
La Salle University
Phila. Pa. 19141
(215) 951-1148/664-0491

This survey is designed to gather information about curriculum-based peer tutoring programs, often called Writing Fellows or Writing Associates Programs, in which peer tutors are assigned to individual classes to help students with their writing.

Name __________________________
School Address _____________________
Phone ____________________________

I. Development and Administration of the Program

1. How long has your program been in existence?

2. How did your program get started?

3. Who does your program serve? Is your program related to a writing across the curriculum program? Please explain.

4. Do tutors receive a stipend? If so, how much do they receive per semester?

5. How is your program funded? (external funding, English Dept., Central Administration, etc.)

6. How is your program administered? Who controls the budget? Who does the training? Does the coordinator receive compensation?
7. How do you evaluate your program?

II. Selection and Training of Peer Tutors

8. How many tutors are in the program? 

9. Are most peer tutors English majors? If not, please explain.

10. Which of the following are required for application to the program?
   __ a) attaining (frosh, soph, junior) status to apply?
   __ b) submission of writing samples
   __ c) an interview with faculty
   __ d) an interview with students
   __ e) nomination by a faculty member
   __ f) other

11. What kind of training do you provide for tutors? (a course, workshop, etc.)

12. Which topics are emphasized during training?

13. How are tutors supervised after the training program? (e.g., How often are they required to meet with the supervisor?)

III. Faculty Participation

14. ___ What percentage of the faculty participate in the program?

15. What are the requirements for participation?
   ___ specific kinds of assignments
   ___ meet periodically with the tutor
   ___ other?

IV. How Does the Program Work?

16. ___ How many hours does the peer tutor work during the semester?

17. ___ How many students does the peer tutor assist during a semester?

18. Does the program emphasize the value of written comments on the students' papers or conferencing (or both)?

19. What are the major benefits of the program?

20. What are the major problems associated with the program?

21. Is there a unique feature of your program that these questions have not brought out? If so, please describe.

22. What kinds of advice would you give faculty and administrators who are interested in developing curriculum-based peer tutoring programs?

23. In order for this survey to be complete, it would be useful to have the following information about your institution.
   a) ___ Number of students
   b) ___ Number of faculty

24. Please circle the description that best fits your institution:
   a) Community College
   b) Two-year College
   c) MA granting University
   d) PhD granting University
   e) Other (please describe)

25. Please circle whether your institution is:
   a) Public
   b) Private

26. Please indicate the writing requirement at your institution:
   ___ a) one semester of freshman composition
   ___ b) two semesters of freshman composition
   ___ c) an upper-division writing course
   ___ d) a writing emphasis course requirement
   ___ e) other. Please explain.

Thank you for your time.
Margot Soven
Curriculum-Based Peer Tutoring: Related References


