

PLACE-WRITING:
A “WRITING PATHWAY” FOR CAMPUS AND COMMUNITY

A Proposal for a Faculty Development Award

In Response to a Call for Proposals for New Writing Intensive Courses

By the MU Campus Writing Program

Submitted February 2, 2016 by

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Amount requested: \$6,235.50

Abstract

This project will create a “writing pathway” using the principles of “writing to learn” to bring incoming freshmen together with upper-division undergraduates, graduate students, and local community leaders and stakeholders in a learning community focused on “place writing.” The pathway envisioned here consists of creating three courses that function as nodes in a learning community focused on place-writing: (1) “Exploring Place and Landscape” Freshman Interest Group (FIG); (2) “Place-Writing,” a 3000-level undergraduate Geography course; and (3) graduate Geography seminar in creative nonfiction on place. Additionally, the pathway will involve graduate student teaching assistants and synergistic activities with like-minded organizations on campus and in the community.



Soren Larsen, Associate Professor

Please see attached letter

Michael Urban, Chair, Geography

Michael J. O’Brien, Dean

III. Goals, Objectives, Purpose(s) of Project:

Purpose

This project will create a “writing pathway” using the principles of “writing to learn” to bring incoming freshmen together with upper-division undergraduates, graduate students, and local community leaders and stakeholders in a learning community focused on “place writing.” Place-writing is a way of understanding and communicating our relationships with place—our senses of place—through the writing process. Contemporary research in Geography has indicated that developing a sense of place can simultaneously motivate productive responses to the crises of the Anthropocene epoch, e.g., climate change, overconsumption, pollution, species extinction. Indigenous scholars have added the insight that place itself is a conscious being whose capacities for speaking, teaching, and creating offer essential moral and spiritual compass in this vertiginous epoch. As it is conceived for this Writing Intensive project, place-writing is a method of “writing to learn” about the places we care for, and can learn from, in the Anthropocene.

Project Goals

The pathway envisioned here consists of creating three courses: (1) “Exploring Place and Landscape” Freshman Interest Group (FIG); (2) “Place-Writing,” a 3000-level undergraduate Writing Intensive Geography course; and (3) a graduate Geography seminar in creative nonfiction on place.

These courses do not represent the pathway per se. Rather, these courses function as nodes in an enduring learning community focused on place-writing that students, faculty, and community members can rely on to create their own writing pathways on projects incubated in these courses.

Exploring Place and Landscape FIG: In addition to the stipulated residential life goals (reslife.missouri.edu/about), this FIG will use Mizzou and Columbia landscapes to teach incoming freshmen the techniques for “reading” the landscape through the use of archival documents, close observation, and interviews with key stakeholders in the community. The curriculum will use writing to develop critical thinking skills through first-hand experience with the landscape while simultaneously introducing incoming freshmen to their new “home away from home.” Examples of prospective field projects include the hidden landscapes of race in Columbia; the historical geography of commercial architecture in The District; and discovering the Flat Branch watershed. I am currently in the beginning phase of developing this FIG with Anna Valiavska, Ted Tarkow, and Frankie Minor. Maximum enrollment: 20 students.

“Place-Writing” course. This Writing Intensive (WI) Geography course is scheduled for delivery as a Topics course in fall semester 2016. Based on this pilot delivery and consultation with the Campus Writing Program, I will develop a new WI course at the 3000-level (to be cross-listed with Anthropology, English, and Sociology) to service the Geography major and undergraduate students in cognate majors who are interested in place-writing practice. The course will combine guided readings from master place-writers (e.g., John McPhee, Terry Tempest Williams, Joan Didion, Ivan Doig) with a semester-long creative writing project that integrates multiple rounds of peer feedback and revision to develop students’ abilities to reason critically; solve complex

problems; and communicate with clear, effective language in discipline-specific ways. Students in this course will develop writing-mentorship relationships with students in the “Exploring Place and Landscape” FIG. Maximum enrollment: 35 students.

Graduate seminar: The graduate-level seminar on place-writing will be offered once every two years for Masters students in Geography and cognate disciplines who are interested in place-writing for their thesis or dissertation research or creative work. I offered this seminar in fall semester 2013, but for the pathway it will be modified to integrate pedagogical instruction for helping others “write to learn” about place. As part of their seminar requirements, graduate students will contribute to the in-class peer workshops undergraduate “Place-Writing” course (offered concomitantly). Maximum enrollment: 12 students.

Graduate teaching assistant: Each fall, a graduate student in Geography will serve as a dedicated Teaching Assistant for the WI course.

Synergistic activities: The vision proposed here is to use the 3000-level Writing Intensive course as the “anchor” for the learning community focused on place writing. The undergraduate students in this class will “write to learn” about local places in Boone County and the State of Missouri in a series of writing activities scaffolded into a final creative writing project. The students in the Freshman Interest Group (FIG) will participate in shorter writing activities that involve interviews and interactions with community leaders and stakeholders through mentorship relationships with the upper-division undergraduate students. These mentor relationships are also intended to facilitate peer-to-peer academic development, using the writing process to help more experienced students communicate what they have learned about academic success (and things to avoid!) to entering Freshmen. In the other direction, students from the undergraduate course will establish mentorship relationships with the graduate seminar students, who will have writing mentorship as part of their seminar requirements. Community leaders and stakeholders will be engaged through the writing process in the FIG, undergraduate course, and graduate seminar.

These synergies will catalyze writing pathways oriented toward writing about place, and articulating the value of a sense of place in today’s rapidly globalizing world, with a focus on the City of Columbia and the State of Missouri. The writing projects incubated in these courses will also produce pathways that will connect place-oriented organizations across campus and in the community. Structural synergies with organizations such as the Missouri Writing Projects Network and the Museum of Art and Archaeology’s “Pride of Place” network will also be explored as part of the Award.

IV. List of strategies for carrying out project including a specific time line

Objectives

The work involved in building this place-writing pathway requires research and curriculum development, organizational planning, and community networking. Given my responsibilities during the regular academic year, the ideal time to complete this work is June 2016. The objectives to be completed during this time are:

- (1) Reading and research on “best practices” in field-based writing-intensive curricula and course mapping for curriculum integration (“pathways”).
- (2) Work with FIGs Coordinator to develop a pilot program for the “Exploring Place and Landscapes” fieldwork and writing projects under the “Culture & Religion” FIG; develop the new “Exploring Place and Landscapes” FIG curriculum.
- (3) Develop the “Place-Writing” course curriculum at the 3000-level in consultation with experts at the Campus Writing Program; write the new course proposal for the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee.
- (4) Develop the fieldwork and writing projects for the “Place-Writing” course; build the network of community leaders and stakeholders who will participate in the course.
- (5) Modify the graduate place-writing seminar to integrate seminar objectives and projects with the 3000-level WI course. Develop a timeline that synchronizes the two courses.
- (6) Develop synergies with the writing pathway, which may include writing retreats, write-to-learn fieldtrips, research and assessment projects; and publication or exhibition of student creative work.
- (7) Develop five-year goals for the place-writing learning community, including dissemination of creative works and pedagogical “best practices.”

Timeline

Spring 2016	Submit the WI application for the Topics version of “Place Writing”
June 2016	Complete the objectives as listed in Section IV above
Fall 2016	Offer the “Culture & Religions” FIG Offer the undergraduate “Place Writing” course as a Topics course. Recruit graduate student for place-writing courses AY2017-18
Fall 2017	Offer the Exploring Place & Landscape FIG, the Place-Writing course, and graduate seminar (GEOG 8710)

V. Budget

Summer salary: \$6,235.50

The project planning phase requires 3/4 of one month of my time, or 1/9 of my academic year salary of \$74,826 pro-rated at seventy-five per cent, to complete the objectives listed above in June 2016 [$\$74,826 / 9 = \$8,314 * 0.75 = \$6,235.50$]. Benefits are not included.

Project costs: Not requested for this Award.

Project costs will be determined during the Award period and covered by other sources.

Graduate Student Support: Not requested for this Award.

Graduate student support will be covered by CWP cost-share for the 20:1 ratio in the 3000-level course (35 students = 15 students above 20:1) in conjunction with the Department of Geography assistantship allocation.

VI. Project benefits

- CWP, the Department of Geography, and MU will benefit by having an innovative new writing pathway that includes a new FIG and Writing Intensive undergraduate course.
- Students will gain transferable skills in writing and reading the landscape, and will become part of a cohort that includes peers, mentors, and members of the community.

- Relationships between campus and community will be strengthened as students and community members develop their shared relationships to place through writing, building a network for future dialogues and projects.
- The writing pathway will provide a platform for synergistic place-writing activities on campus and in the community.
- I will gain valuable experience in writing-to-learn and writing across the curriculum, which can be shared with other members of the Campus Writing community.
- The writing pathway can be used to recruit high-quality graduate students to relevant graduate programs on campus.

VII. Manner of CWP involvement

I plan to work extensively with the CWP staff to meet the objectives for this project, especially during the Award period, to facilitate the development of the undergraduate course and the organization of the writing pathway. These consultations will result in an assessment structure for the delivery and modification of prototype courses in fall semester 2016 and the delivery of the new FIG and undergraduate course in fall semester 2017. CWP will be involved in disseminating the “best practices” gleaned from the implementation of this writing pathway.

I am particularly interested in working with the CWP to develop my skills in the scholarship of teaching with the aim of conducting research on the ways that place-writing may help students and community members think through their relationships with place as a means of addressing global problems of the Anthropocene—climate change, energy consumption, habitat degradation. The CWP has the research expertise in this area, while I have expertise in the role of place—and the agency of place—in the Anthropocene. By connecting these two areas of expertise, it seems possible to produce some extremely innovative research that articulates the importance of the writing process for place-based approaches to Anthropocene issues, the results of which will be of interest to our respective professional colleagues in the fields of education and geography as well as cognate disciplines across the social and physical sciences.