

# Writing Assignments in the Community Service-Learning Program at the University of Alberta

## *A Research Report*

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Writing Across the Curriculum

<http://www.humanities.ualberta.ca/WAC>

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## ***Abstract***

This study examined writing assignments given to undergraduate students enrolled in Community Service-Learning program course in 2009-2010 at the University of Alberta. Assignments were drawn from syllabi and handouts for the courses. We received syllabi from 27 of the 32 courses (84% response rate), and we identified 163 total assignments from the 24 course syllabi that made up our study sample. Key findings included the following: students write in every course and write a lot in every course, with a minimum of 4 assignments and a maximum of 10 assignments per term; almost 60% of assignments require students to do some kind of research, usually ethnographic in nature; students in this program write in a wide range of genres—almost as many genres as there are courses. Recommendations include encouraging instructors to specify non-academic audiences for some writing assignments and encouraging instructors to communicate the evaluation criteria for assignments.

## **Introduction**

The Writing Across the Curriculum program was one of three initiatives funded by the office of the Provost in response to the Writing Task Force's final report in 2008. A second initiative created writing studies courses at the University of Alberta; the third initiative was the development of a free tutorial service to help student writers: the Centre for Writers in Assiniboia Hall, now in its third full year of operation, served over 2500 students in more than 4500 appointments in 2009-2010. These efforts offer three distinct ways of supporting the development of student writers: through semester-long writing studies courses, a traditional intervention; through one-to-one appointments with an experienced and trained tutor for any student in any program for help on any piece of writing at the Centre for Writers; and through the Writing Across the Curriculum's lectures on writing assignments to over 3500 students in content-area courses from Animal Science to Recreation and Leisure Studies in 2009-2010.

The Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program offers more than support for faculty members as they introduce and get students started on major writing assignments in content-area courses. WAC offers workshops for instructors throughout the year to help them write clear assignments, develop or clarify evaluation criteria, and improve their own writing. But the most important activity of the WAC program is the research program. Studies like this one of the writing practices within faculties and programs give us thorough, reliable, and complete data describing the writing that students do in their programs at the University of Alberta. This study complements an earlier study done of the writing that Faculty of Nursing students are required to do; both of these studies follow a method developed in two earlier studies at the University of Western Ontario and Huron University College (affiliated with the University of Western Ontario).

The Community Service-Learning Program integrates relevant community-based projects into academic courses in diverse disciplines at the U of A. Students' tangible contributions (e.g. front-line service, communications and outreach, social research, or exhibits and events) amplify their understanding of both course material and community. When CSL is integrated into a course, students typically spend about 20 hours over the semester with a community organization; course assignments and activities help students learn from and through those experiences. The Community Service-Learning (CSL) program showed early interest in this study because of the importance of writing in their courses. Students write in every CSL course, and because of the interactions with community partners students often research and produce documents for audiences outside the University.

## **Methods**

Course abstracts were obtained from the Community Service-Learning (CSL) program administrative offices as electronic files. We received a total of 27 course descriptions for the 32 undergraduate courses that were offered in 2009-2010 (84% response rate). Two course descriptions were removed because the fall and winter syllabi were identical (French 298 and Sociology 421) and one course description was removed because it was not within the analysis criteria (Swahili 212). Of our sample of 24 courses, all 24 courses had writing assignments (100%). Only writing assignments explicitly described/mentioned in syllabi are included here;

others are not captured, including writing assignments done for community partners as part of the student placement but not part of graded work for a course.

All 24 courses had at least one writing assignment, with the overall average being more than 6 assignments per course. This resulted in a data set of 163 writing assignments. Writing assignments in the sample that were missing data were coded as nd (no data).

### **Data coding**

Each course and coding sheet was reviewed twice for accuracy. In this review process several issues surfaced.

Regarding **genre labels** and **component type**, we discovered the instructor used synonymous or interchangeable labeling for assignments. For example, an assignment labeled ‘final project’ in one section of a syllabus was called ‘final paper’ in another section that explicitly detailed this assignment. Additionally, an assignment labeled ‘research paper’ at the head of the assignment details was called ‘essay’ within the details of the assignment. Therefore, we needed to re-read all the course syllabi and/or handouts for interchangeable assignment labels. The genre labels were coded with the exact label written by the instructor in the evaluation section of the syllabus. The component type was coded with the label used in the evaluation section of the syllabus. If there was no evaluation section in the syllabus, then the assignment was coded with the label at the head of the assignment details.

Regarding **completion time**, assignments such as presentations did not have an explicit due date. Instructors provided a window in which to complete the assignment. For example, in-class presentations were due within a three-week period (weeks 10, 11, and 12) and the students arranged a specific due date with the instructor. The original coding sheet did not allow for this variance. To preserve data integrity, we followed a consistent pattern used with assignment length. If the syllabus specified the word length as ‘5-7 pages’ then we coded the average length, in this case, 6 pages. We followed the same coding method for completion time. If the due date varied between 10 and 12 weeks, then we coded the average due date, 11 weeks. If no average could be calculated, then we coded the last due date possible.

In addition to these issues, there were three other features of the community service-learning component of the course that we needed to establish consistent methods for coding.

Eight courses required the community service-learning component for every student in the course: CSL 100, French 298, Political Science 299, Angl ais 328, CSL 300, Drama 407, Human Ecology 492, and Native Studies 404. The other 16 courses made the CSL component an optional choice. In these course syllabi, the CSL component was presented in one of three ways:

1. an assignment only for CSL students;
2. an assignment for both CSL and non-CSL students
  - a. these were distinguished by the type of research activity for the assignment:
    - i. CSL option included primary resources
    - ii. non-CSL option included secondary resources; and

3. an assignment for either/or CSL options
  - a. these were presented as “CSL track” or “non-CSL track” assignments.

One of the distinguishing features of many CSL assignments is the research component. In every case, the research activity included an ethnographic and/or auto-ethnographic experience (the term ethnographic was used by the instructor of the course). The CSL students are required to volunteer with a pre-arranged local community organization, such as a youth center, environmental group, or care-giving facility, and record their participant observations in context, either through a field report, journal, or project summary.

The mark value for CSL and non-CSL assignments were equal except for two courses. In English 199, the CSL component had a 5% lower mark value than the non-CSL component for two assignments—the “analysis essay” and “research essay.” The CSL students also had two additional assignments that the non-CSL students did not have—a “CSL journal” and “CSL paperwork and meetings.” In Sociology 327, the CSL component had a 20% higher mark value than the non-CSL component for the “reflective paper.” The non-CSL students were required to write a “term paper” that the CSL students were not required to write.

When we finished cross-checking the data, we created a spreadsheet in Microsoft Excel<sup>®</sup> to input the data from the coding sheets. We checked each line item against the coding sheet, and cross-checked the spreadsheet for consistency. This spreadsheet was then entered into SPSS<sup>®</sup>. The data presented in the graphs and tables in this report were generated from SPSS<sup>®</sup>.

## Results

Students in the Community Service-Learning (CSL) program write frequently in their courses. Of the 24 courses in our sample, 100% required students to write an assignment, and two-thirds of these courses required students to write six or more assignments.

### How much writing is assigned to students?

Students in CSL courses write often: in first year courses students wrote almost one assignment per week, and in third and fourth year courses they wrote an average of one assignment every second week. By any measure, these courses engage students in consistent writing practice. They wrote the least amount of assignments in their second year, which may be attributed to the number and type of courses offered during the second year.

**Table 1: Number of writing assignments by year level**

Year	Number of Assignments	Number of Courses	Assignments/course
1	42	4	10
2	12	3	4
3	35	6	6
4	74	11	6.7
Total	163	24	6.7

**How many writing assignments ask students to integrate CSL?**

The number of writing assignments that ask students to integrate a community service-learning (CSL) component varies over the years usually in the 25-33% range for the courses requiring the component as part of the writing assignment and 67-75% making the component optional (See Table 2).

**Table 2. Number of courses that integrate CSL.**

Year	Required CSL Component (n=8)	Optional CSL Component (n=16)
1	25% (1 of 4 courses)	75% (3 of 4 courses)
2	67% (2 of 3 courses)	33% (1 of 3 courses)
3	33% (2 of 6 courses)	67% (4 of 6 courses)
4	27% (3 of 11 courses)	73% (8 of 11 courses)

Of the 163 writing assignments, 145 integrated CSL or included the possibility of doing so, and 18 were exclusively non-CSL assignments. Of students doing CSL, there were 145 assignments. Some of these were optional; some were required. Overall, the writing assignments are structured in one of three ways: they are not linked to CSL (coded non-CSL), they are assigned to all students but have different track for CSL and non-CSL students in classes where CSL is optional (coded CSL/non-CSL), or they explicitly require the integration of CSL (coded CSL).

The required CSL component makes up one-half to two-thirds (50-66%) of the writing assignments in years one through three, and drops to one-third (33%) in year four. In year four, the CSL component is optional in almost 60% of the writing assignments. (See Tables 3, 4, and 5 and Figure 1)

**Table 3. Number of writing assignments that integrate CSL.**

Year	CSL	CSL/non-CSL	non-CSL	Total by year
1	21	13	8	42
2	8	4	0	12
3	22	9	4	35
4	24	44	6	74
<b>Total</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>163</b>
<i># total</i>	145		18	163
<i>% total</i>	89%		11%	100%

**Table 4. Percentage of writing assignments that integrate CSL.**

Year	CSL	CSL/non-CSL	non-CSL
1	50%	31%	19%
2	67%	33%	0%
3	63%	26%	11%
4	32%	60%	8%
Total (163)	75	70	18

Figure 1. Percentage of writing assignments that integrate CSL.

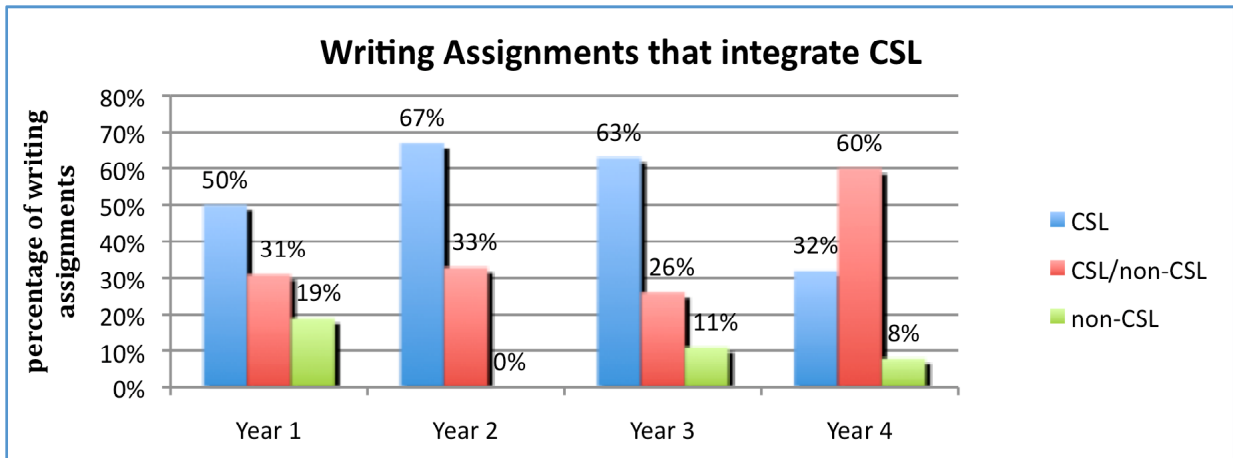


Table 5. Number of writing assignments that integrate CSL listed by course. Bold face indicates courses that require the CSL component.

Course	Writing Assignments	CSL Assignments	non-CSL Assignments
<b>ANG 328</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>CSL 100</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>CSL 300</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>DRAM 407</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>FREN 298</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>HECO 492</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>NS 404</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>POL 299</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>
ANTH 424	8	7	1
ANTH 485	9	9	0
AREC 173	8	8	0
ENGL 199	7	7	0
GER 317	8	7	1
HIST 470	4	3	1
MLCS 300	5	3	2
MLCS 472	8	7	1
MUS 303	4	4	0
PHIL 101	15	7	8
SCAN 499	8	6	2
SOC 327	2	1	1
SOC 421	6	6	0
SMO 488	5	5	0
WST 201	6	6	0
WST 431	9	8	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>163</b> <b>(100%)</b>	<b>145</b> <b>(89%)</b>	<b>18</b> <b>(11%)</b>

Fifty-nine percent (59%) of the CSL writing assignments required some kind of research activity (see Table 6 and 7). The type of research activity varied by course and most integrated qualitative research methods. The two most frequent types of research activities in CSL writing were ethnographic in nature: 60% were participant observation and 17% were journals or field notes from student placements. Additionally, 46% of the CSL writing assignments included primary sources such as interviews. Seven and one-half percent (7.5%) included secondary sources from library research, academic databases and media sources (e.g., newspapers, films). Five and one-half percent (5.5%) combined primary and secondary sources.



**Table 6. Percentage of CSL assignments with research activity. n=145.**

Year	CSL Research Activity YES	CSL Research Activity NO	CSL Research Activity UNKNOWN
1	53%	21%	26%
2	75%	25%	0%
3	51%	38%	10%
4	63%	25%	12%
Total	Total YES = 59%	Total NO = 27%	Total UNKNOWN = 14%

**What kinds/genres of assignments do students write?**

There were 21 different kinds of writing assignments assigned in CSL. The names listed in Table 7 are the names the instructors used to describe the assignment. Papers, presentations, and reflective writing are the predominate genres. The diversity of genres with a low number of assignments may be attributed to the interdisciplinary nature of the community service-learning program which draws courses from across the disciplines.

Note that CSL as program seeks to limit the diversity of assignments by encouraging the nesting and linking of assignments.

**What were the least frequently assigned genres?**

Field projects emerge essentially in the third year and proposals in the fourth year. Genres such as work logs, lesson plans, and mind maps are the least frequent and attest to the diversity of the CSL program. Such assignments come from women’s studies, linguistics, and drama, respectively.

**What were the most frequently assigned genres?**

Papers are the most frequent assignment over the years, and double in frequency between year two and three and again from year three and four. Presentations and field reports are frequently assigned in year four but not before. Drafts are frequently assigned in year one but not after. It is also interesting to note that reflective writing assignments are most frequent in years one and four.

**Table 7.**

Types of Writing Assignments	
Paper	21.5%
Presentation	17.2%
Journal	10.4%
Essay	6.1%
Outline	4.9%
Draft	4.9%
Field Report	4.9%
Online Discussion (blog)	4.2%
Email	3.7%
Proposal	3.0%
Field Project	3.0%
A/V	3.0%
Bibliography	2.5%
Other	1.8%
Abstract	1.8%
Field Notes	1.3%
Handout	1.3%
Work Log	1.3%
Lesson Plan	1.3%
Review	1.3%
Mind Map	0.6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 8. Writing assignments by type and year in program. n=163**

Assignments	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Paper	3.7%	2.5%	4.9%	10.4%
Presentation	1.8%	0.6%	4.2%	10.4%
Journal	1.8%	2.5%	3.0%	3.0%
Essay	3.0%	0	0.6%	2.5%
Outline	2.5%	0	0.6%	1.8%
Draft	3.7%	0	1.3%	0
Field Report	1.3%	0	1.3%	2.5%
Online Discussion (blog)	1.8%	0	0.6%	1.8%
Email	0.6%	0.6%	1.3%	1.3%
Proposal	0.6%	0.6%	0	1.8%
Field Project	0	0	1.3%	1.8%
A/V	0	0	1.8%	1.3%
Bibliography	1.8%	0	0	0.6%
Other	0	0	0	1.8%
Abstract	0.6%	0	0	1.3%
Field Notes	1.3%	0	0	0
Handout	0.6%	0	0	0.6%
Work Log	0	0.6%	0	0.6%
Lesson Plan	0	0	0.6%	0.6%
Review	0	0	0	1.8%
Mind Map	0.6%	0	0	0

**Nested or linked assignments**

One way to keep students on track with their assignments is to link them: a draft and a paper, for example, would be assigned as two separate assignments but on the same topic. Table 9 shows that about two-thirds of all writing assignments were linked in this way (68%). Starting in the first year, this tactic is prevalent and remains fairly consistent through year three ( $\pm 5\%$ ) with a notable increase of 10% from year three to four.

**Table 9. Percentage of nested assignments. n=163**

Nested	Total	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Yes	68%	67%	58%	63%	73%
No	32%	33%	42%	37%	27%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

### Length of writing assignments

As we expected, writing assignments get longer as students progress from first year to fourth year (see Tables 10 and 11). In the first year, the largest group of assignments is in the 500-1000 word category (2-4 pages). In the fourth year, the largest group of assignments is in the 1200-1500 word category (5-10 pages). Students are rarely asked to write 10-page or longer essays. Only 10% of all assignments fall into that category and only 5% of longer assignments (more than 20 pages) occur in the fourth year.

**Table 10. Length of writing assignments; n=103.**

Assignment word length	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Total
Under 500	35%	6%	18%	41%	100%
500-1000	50%	7.5%	20%	22.5%	100%
1200-2500	10%	4%	31%	55%	100%
3000-5000	21%	7%	29%	43%	100%
Over 5000	0	0	0	100%	100%

**Table 11. Length of writing assignments. n=103.**

Assignment word length	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Total
Under 500	6	1	3	7	17
500-1000	20	3	8	9	40
1200-2500	3	1	9	16	29
3000-5000	3	1	4	6	14
Over 5000	0	0	0	3	3
Total	32	6	24	41	103

### Audience for writing assignments

Writing assignments in CSL courses are almost exclusively (90% of the time) for academic audiences: their instructors or their fellow students (Table 12). This study showed that the other 10% (15 assignments) were written for the CSL partner organization that the student volunteers with as part of a class assignment. In addition, writing assignments done by students for the organization but not for class (see discussion section) were not part of the data included in the results.

**Table 12. Audience for writing assignments .**

Audience	Total	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
In Class	91%	88%	100%	89%	92%
Outside Class	9%	12%	0	11%	8%

Total	100%				
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### Feedback on writing assignments

With the exception of year two, students get feedback on their assignments roughly 40% of the time.

**Table 13. Feedback on writing assignments.**

Feedback	TOTAL	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Yes	67	15	9	17	26
No	95	27	3	18	47
Unknown	0	0	0	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>163</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>74</b>
<i>Percentage</i>					
Yes	41%	36%	75%	49%	35%
<i>Percentage</i>					
No	59%	64%	25%	51%	64%

### Scoring guides and samples for writing assignments (rubrics)

Rarely do students write assignments with a scoring guide or an example of the assignment (Table 14 and Figure 15).

**Table 14. Scoring guides for writing assignments.**

Rubric	Total	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Yes	22	2	4	9	7
No	141	40	8	26	67
<b>Total</b>	<b>163</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>74</b>
<i>Percentage</i>					
Yes	13%	5%	33%	26%	9.5%
<i>Percentage</i>					
No	87%	95%	67%	74%	90.5%

### Resources suggested for writing assignments

Resources are always suggested for every writing assignment (100%) (Table 15). The types of resources varied by course and writing genre and ranged from format to content resources.

Examples include the following:

- CSL 100 – methodology textbooks, library resources and field work descriptions
- AREC 173 – department reading room materials (videos, book chapters, media clippings), database links
- CSL 300 – E-Reserve materials, course pack/course readings for online discussion assignment, library resources and web page links

- ANTH 424 – software programs needed for the assignment (provided in department labs), library resources and web page links
- ANTH 485 – resources put in the library reserve desk
- DRAM 407 – resources suggested were screenplays and attending theatrical performances

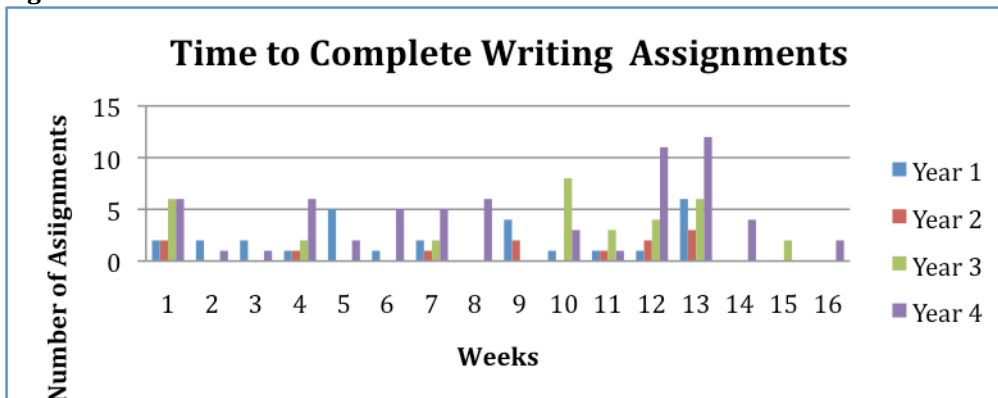
**Table 15. Resources suggested for writing assignments.**

Year	Resources Suggested	
	Yes	Total
Year 1	42	42
Year 2	12	12
Year 3	35	35
Year 4	74	74
Total	163	163

**Time to complete writing assignments**

Figure 2 shows that the time to complete writing assignments increases with year level. In the first year, 60% of the writing assignments are due in less than four weeks; in the third year, 60% are due at or before the mid-term (less than six weeks); and in the fourth year almost 50% are due at the end of the semester (12 to 13 weeks). This trend shows that students get more time to complete their assignments as they advance from year 1 to 4.

**Figure 2.**



## Discussion and Recommendations

### Key findings

Key findings of this study of writing assignments in the Community Service-Learning program include:

- Students write in every course
- Students write a lot in every course, with a minimum of 4 assignments and a maximum of 10 assignments per term
- Almost 90% of assignments require or allow students to select a community service version
- Almost 60% of assignments require students to do some kind of research, usually ethnographic in nature
- Students in this program write in a wide range of genres—almost as many genres as there are courses
- The most frequently assigned genres are papers and essays (27.6%), presentations (17.2%), and journal entries (10.4%)
- Over two-thirds of all assignments are linked to another assignment in the course
- Assignment length generally gets longer from first year to fourth year, but very few assignments in the entire program are over 2500 words long
- Students write course writing assignments almost exclusively focus on academic audiences
- Students get in-process feedback on their writing 25% of the time
- Students rarely get scoring guides (rubrics) or sample assignments before turning their written work in for evaluation
- Students always get suggestions for resources they might use to complete the assignment
- Upper-year students are given more time to complete their assignments than first-year students

Students write often and in a wide variety of genres in this program, including a large number of oral presentations. In this sense it echoes the traditional liberal arts curriculum of 100 years or so ago, before the University of Alberta existed but upon which the Faculty of Arts was founded. Students in the CSL program read and write extensively, conduct research habitually, and connect their work to the community in which they live.

A key feature of CSL that does not occur in other academic contexts is the community work of the students. In many cases this community work consists of writing documents of one kind or another. Some examples of this kind of writing the following projects include:

#### *Change for Children Association (CFCA)*

A Visual Anthropology student developed a two-minute, digital storytelling project that celebrated CFCA's work over the past thirty years to function as tool for their website and to engage the public in a process of awareness. The student reviewed materials already captured, conducted interviews with CFCA members and partners, and developed a digital storytelling clip capturing CFCA's "personality". The digital story was played to a wide audience at their 30th Anniversary

Celebration at the Winspear Centre (I believe at the Winspear Centre).

*Great Edmonton Foundation (GEF)*

Students in a variety of classes (for example the Sociology Qualitative Methods in Women's Studies) interviewed a number of seniors in various lodges in order to contribute to GEF's project designed to document the residents' life histories. Having the students both conduct the interviews and write the stories meant that these projects could be completed much more quickly than originally anticipated.

*Alberta Council of Women's Shelters (ACWS)*

In order to prepare for the first world conference for women's shelters (September 2008), ACWS needed baseline data of shelter programs and best practices worldwide. Students from Women's Studies classes provided this baseline information by researching shelter and shelter organizations around the world – the information was compiled into a database that not only listed the shelters around the world and some of their best practices but also provided contact information so that women from around the world could be invited to attend this important event.

While this writing is not done in an academic class, it occurs because the student takes a CSL class. It is important to recognize that this writing is done for non-academic audiences, in "authentic" contexts, and for specific purposes. These kinds of writing opportunities broaden the students' rhetorical competency and range in very important ways. They also contribute to building a bridge between their studies at university and their futures after they graduate. That sense of a destination beyond their academic work often serves to motivate students to engage their academic work even more seriously.

**Recommendations**

1. Consider exploiting the opportunities to have students write for an audience outside of academia within the courses themselves
2. Encourage instructors to communicate the criteria they will use to evaluate the assignments
3. Ensure that students are aware that the Centre for Writers can supply in-process feedback on student assignments
4. Encourage students to create portfolios of the work they do for community organizations, both for their own use in employment applications but also as a record of the contributions of the CSL program to the community outside the University.