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Writing and Research Training Program:

A UCLA Campus Partnership to Support BIPOC, LGBTQIA, and Disabled Student Researchers

Akua Agyen, Jason Araújo, Matthew Weirick Johnson, Simon Lee, Ashley Newby, Renee Romero, and Laurel Westrup

Introduction

In summer 2020, the authors collaborated on the fifth iteration of the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship (MMUF) Summer Writing and Research Training Program (WRTP). The program is intended to support writing and research skills development for BIPOC, LGBTQIA, and disabled student researchers interested in pursuing careers in academia. Our chapter details the history of the program, elaborates on the extensive campus partnerships involved in its success, and provides reflections and best practices around program coordination, culturally responsive pedagogy, student experience outside the classroom, and remote instruction to help others establish similar programs at their institutions. In particular, we explore the necessary structures to create a sustainable and flexible program that has continued successfully for several years while also accounting for changing student needs, changes in personnel, historical events like protests and the pandemic, and a shift from offering the program in-person to online.

Background

The MMUF Program (mmuf.org) is a nationwide initiative designed to increase diversity in the professoriate. MMUF funds promising humanities, arts, and social sciences students who are underrepresented in the academy as they complete their undergraduate degrees, pursue graduate degrees, and begin their careers in academia. In the summer of 2016, after securing funding through a Mellon grant, UCLA's Undergraduate Research Center for the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences (URC-HASS) launched the MMUF Summer Writing and Research Training Program (WRTP).[1] Beginning that summer, and each summer since, the UCLA WRTP has brought together a cohort of twenty MMUF undergraduate students from around the United States and sometimes Puerto Rico for an intensive six-week research and writing experience at UCLA. Students are rising juniors or rising seniors at different stages of their thesis projects and have different requirements for those projects depending on their home institution and department. From its inception, the UCLA WRTP has featured an instructional team composed of librarians, Writing Programs faculty, and graduate student mentors.

Librarians have been central to the program from the beginning, in part because the inaugural version of the program was based on a class, Honors 101i, developed by two UCLA librarians, Doug Worsham and Margarita Nafpaktitis. The Honors 101i course, Research Today: Sources, Tools, and Strategies, introduced UCLA Mellon Mays fellows and other students intending to pursue an undergraduate honors thesis project to research methods and encouraged students to chart their progress through an interactive research notebook that Doug designed. For the first year of the WRTP, Doug and Margarita collaborated with a Writing Programs faculty member, Laurel Westrup, to revise Honors 101i (under an existing course number, English Composition 100W: Interdisciplinary Academic Writing) to fit the intensive six-week format of the WRTP and integrate additional research-writing connections. The summer course, now called English Composition (EC) 180: Research Writing Workshop, centers students' individual goals by asking them first to determine an outcome for the course (which might be a literature review, chapter of the thesis, or article for an undergraduate research journal, among other possibilities) and to create a contract that maps out the steps they will take to achieve their final goal. All students participate in a public "research slam" at the end of the program where they present three-minute synopses of their projects. In the first year of the WRTP, EC 180 was taught by the two librarians and the faculty member, while the graduate mentors led separate class sessions focused on preparing for graduate school (researching programs, writing personal statements, funding, and mental health). From the program's inception, library staff have played a key role in shaping and re-envisioning the program to better meet students' needs.

As a program whose stated objective is the institutional support of BIPOC, LGBTQIA, and disabled students' professional achievement, the program's de-

velopment and trajectory have been and continue to be shaped by questions of and confrontations with white supremacy, anti-Blackness, ableism, accessibility, class, and gender. Most recently, the instructional team contended with how best to meet student needs in the social and political climate of the Trump years, as students have been acutely attuned to and impacted by heightened racism and the global pandemic. On March 13, 2020, Breonna Taylor was killed by Louisville police as she slept.[2] On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was killed by police officer Derek Chauvin as seventeen-year-old Darnella Frazier filmed.[3] On April 3, 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic surged, we received official word of the inevitable: the program would have to move to a remote format. On May 27, 2020, Tony McDade was killed by Tallahassee police, which marked the twelfth violent death of a transgender person in the US.[4]

The 2020 MMUF WRTP cohort entered our virtual classrooms during a global pandemic that disproportionately affected our students because they are Black, Brown, people of color, disabled, and queer. This cohort convened remotely during a period of immense state-sanctioned violence. The students also gathered during what the Movement 4 Black Lives calls Freedom Summer 2020.[5] In the weeks before our first-class sessions, people across the US took to the streets. Cities were afire with demands for change. The texture of teaching in summer 2020 was consequently heavy and uncertain, leaden, and laden. The WRTP's move from residential to remote posed a range of challenges, from access to research materials and learning technologies to teaching team coordination and student connection, but also opportunities to truly meet students where they were. Teaching remotely challenged our team to consider questions of pedagogy in terms of intimacy, connection, and care.

Partnerships

The UCLA WRTP has continued as a partnership between URC-HASS, Library, and Writing Programs, connecting writing and research instructional experts across campus. In addition to staff and instructors from each of these units, URC-HASS employs graduate student mentors for the teaching team, providing instruction, mentoring, and additional disciplinary context. Though the summer WRTP has seen a variety of staff and personnel shifts since 2016, the program structure, including involvement by the units described above, has remained consistent.

In summer 2020, the authors collaborated on WRTP as the teaching team, representing the various partners involved with the program: two lecturers from Writing Programs, two graduate mentors employed by URC-HASS, and three librarians representing the Library. Our teaching team was further supported by staff members from URC-HASS and the co-directors of the Mellon Mays program at UCLA.

In addition to the programming offered by the teaching team for weekly classes and meetings with the graduate research mentors, URC-HASS staff provided opportunities for learning and social interaction. Specifically, the teaching team collaborated with URC-HASS staff to invite guest facilitators for workshops throughout the six-week program, generally for three workshops each Wednesday. These workshops provided additional opportunities to partner with campus groups and highlight the wealth of resources available to students in the program at UCLA. We worked with other members of the Library, including our ethnic studies center librarians, Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS), Academic Advancement Programs (AAP), Graduate Division, the Center for the Advancement of Teaching (CAT), and additional graduate students from across the campus. We were also joined by several faculty members and a colleague from UC Press to provide more opportunities for students to meet and learn from people throughout academia to support the MMUF goal of preparing students for careers in academia. Indeed, one of the advantages of the remote format of the 2020 program was our ability to bring scholars from around the country to our students via Zoom.

Assessment

Programmatic assessment has played an important role in shaping MMUF WRTP. We have conducted these assessments in several formats, including informal sessions, interactive in-class group activities and workshops, writing sessions, presentations, and mandatory one-on-one check-ins with instructors, graduate mentors, and librarians. Additionally, URC-HASS administered formative and summative assessments and official surveys. All in all, data gathered from these various assessments allow us to measure student engagement, learning, and progression, which inform the direction of the program. Each iteration of the MMUF WRTP has also generated important lessons on how best to assess programming with program participants.

In the first year of the program, students were asked to complete an "exit ticket" after each day of class. However, students were not very consistent about completing these open-ended responses as they felt such frequent feedback was unnecessary. The team subsequently moved toward a model of pre-program, midterm, and post-program assessments.

Non-anonymous pre-program surveys are sent to students each year, where they are asked to describe the subject of their research and their goals for the program. Over time, the program organizers and developers have fine-tuned these pre-program surveys to foster student engagement in and ownership of the program. In its most current form, students are asked to rank their interest in previously taught topics and are also given space to suggest other topics for the teaching team to address. This approach evolved out of feedback from students in earlier stages of the program who felt instruction was too broad for their in-

dividual projects and that not all instruction felt relevant for every student. For instance, a full class exercise on outlining strategies might not be relevant to a student who is still working on gathering and annotating sources and is not yet ready to start organizing material in this manner. The "menu of options" approach to the pre-class survey not only helps the instructional team determine which instructional topics will be most useful to students but also encourages students to reflect on their strengths, weaknesses, and goals.

Midterm and summative surveys informed the instructional team of themes and changes to consider for future programs. Due to the survey data's significance, our team has experimented with different mechanisms for surveying students about program efficacy in an effort to capture relevant and comprehensive feedback. For instance, in 2019 we tried using Padlet for a midterm evaluation of the class: students commented anonymously but were able to see all the comments. We found that while some students gave productive feedback, the social aspect of the activity generated some digressive commentary. We learned that tools like Padlet and Mentimeter work best when clear parameters for engagement are set in advance, and the team consequently moved toward using a Google form that each student completed individually and anonymously for the end-of-course evaluation that year and for subsequent midterm evaluations.

Students have generally completed both a post-class evaluation specifically for the English Composition 180 course (sometimes combined with an evaluation of the graduate mentor sessions) administered by the teaching team and a broader post-program survey administered by URC-HASS. Each year all program stakeholders have met following the submission of these surveys to discuss how the program went and to plan for the following year. URC-HASS, as the institutional home of the program, has been crucial in ensuring continuity in this process, even as personnel has changed from year to year.

As we have assessed the program from year to year, we have identified several challenges and areas for improvement that we describe in the themed sections below:

1. coordinating the various moving parts of the program and making the most out of student time while mitigating overload;
2. incorporating culturally responsive pedagogy throughout all aspects of the program in ways that are reflective of the students and their lived experience;
3. cultivating a sense of community and approaching student learning and the student experience holistically; and
4. creating a meaningful and memorable learning experience remotely.

Program Coordination

In the first iterations of the program, a lot of emphasis was focused on the delivery of a rigorous program filled with workshops, classes, and meetings held

throughout the week in an effort to make sure students were being adequately supported and getting the most out of the program. However, students indicated that this was overwhelming; over-programming left too little time for reflection on their projects, constrained time to build social bonds with the other students, and hindered student exploration of the rich history of Los Angeles on their own time. Students expressed their concerns with the packed schedule prior to the pandemic, which led to changes in the scheduling of the program even before moving to the remote environment, which demanded greater attention to over-programming.

Workshops were initially mandatory for all students to attend. However, these workshops proved to only be relevant to a subset of the students and their research needs, leading to unpredictable attendance, over- or under-preparedness on the workshop facilitator's part, and students who did attend feeling as though their time could have been spent better elsewhere. On occasion, workshops were not tailored to be culturally sensitive to the audience and their research needs.

Coordinating program elements between the Library, Writing Programs, and the URC-HASS was initially not as cemented. This resulted in similarities in workshop topics, too much reading for students, and only partial cohesion between class sessions and sessions with the graduate mentors. Feedback indicated that students appreciated a more unified approach across the class, the graduate mentor sessions, and the library.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in the Classroom

Student feedback asserted the importance of culturally responsive and culturally reflective programming. From food served to lecture topics to methodological approaches, students raised concerns that certain aspects of the program did not reflect or center their lived reality nor the social and political commitments and realities of their research interlocutors. In classroom discussions with graduate mentors, some students shared their discomfort with the historical, material, and affective geographies of UCLA's campus. A sense of non-belonging affronted some while reminding others of their experience at their home institutions. Student encounters with these tensions manifested in multiple ways that challenged our team to think and respond critically and carefully. Through evaluations, students invited program staff to reflect on commitments to anti-oppressive practice not only in course content but also in the program's administration.

Once a week, during in-person afternoon workshops with invited guests, students were provided with catered meals. Week to week, students expressed disappointment and frustration with the catered meals. Initially, the team did not know how to interpret student responses to the meals. Later, we learned that students felt the food and beverages served did not reflect the cultural diversity of the student body. We can think of this disconnect in the context of a student

body that did not necessarily feel welcomed. How and what participants were fed signaled administrative investments in students' social, economic, and political communities. How and what participants were fed signaled administrative interest in developing a sense of belonging amongst the student participants.

The MMUF student body is composed of scholars who have historically been marginalized in higher education and were often the object of study across disciplines. Certainly, the studied have long been reclaiming space in the academy as well as the role of researcher. Yet, the university is slow in its evolution. These historical shifts in access to knowledge production have generated important shifts in research priorities and modes of engagement. On a micro-level, these shifts, changes, and new engagement with research agendas that have long been marginalized and/or undervalued by dominant culture scholars and disciplines produce difficult and generative tensions in our workshops, classroom discussions, and individual meetings.

During a workshop presentation, students raised questions related to critical methodologies and ethical engagement with research participants, including the possibilities for research compensation. While these were important inquiries that would help to further their approach, we were unprepared to hold these questions. In response, we formed a panel discussion with graduate scholars of color who were thinking critically about methods and methodologies, research ethics, and community-engaged or invested work.

Student Experience Outside the Classroom: Relationships, Wellness, and Social Aspects

During the program, students spend much of their time in small groups—as students from the same school, as graduate mentor groupmates, as section mates, as informal study groups, as roommates, and as friends. In some years, we noticed distancing between groups of students that presented obstacles to the sense of community we worked hard to cultivate. For example, divisions would fall along the lines of students from public versus private institutions, rising juniors versus rising seniors, students working in similar research areas or disciplines, and students from different class backgrounds. Recognizing these relational patterns helped us to rethink how to bring students together or foster community without ignoring the reality of these social differences or diminishing the protective factor and significance of such affiliations.

Remote Instruction

Adapting the program to a remote environment presented its own set of challenges. We encountered technology challenges on both the instructor and student sides, such as internet connectivity issues, managing screens, and acquiring

the necessary technology to participate. In addition, students, presenters, and the instructors were joining class sessions and activities from their own homes, presenting parts of our lives that we might not usually share and that impact the way we manage our image and performance of self. Working from home also meant balancing the requirements of the program with other aspects of home life, including childcare, caring for family members, and a lack of private space. The coalescence of these challenges suggested a need to implement new and revised methods for building community online in intentional and meaningful ways.

Reflection

As the program has continued, the team has had the opportunity to reflect and adapt it and our partnership to better serve students and to maintain a sustainable, flexible program that accommodates changes in personnel and delivery method. We elicited, actively listened, and implemented structural changes (to planning, curriculum, programming, partnerships, and staff) in response to the stated needs of BIPOC, LGBTQIA, and disabled students. We engaged in critical self-awareness and self-reflection about how whiteness, ableism, cisheterosexism, and classism were disrupting the work. Based on our assessment of the program detailed above, we identified four main areas for improvement:

1. coordinating across the different elements and partners of the program;
2. incorporating culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom more fully and intentionally;
3. approaching the student experience holistically and planning for aspects outside of the traditional classroom such as student relationships and wellness and the social experience of the program; and
4. accommodating remote instruction in a summer of pandemic and protest with technological difficulties and students joining us from their homes rather than UCLA's campus.

Program Coordination

The MMUF program has many moving parts and partners that make the program work. In order to provide students with more targeted support for their research projects, we instituted mandatory weekly one-on-one meetings between students and instructors. We also instated a contract approach to the program, where students set their own research and writing goals in consultation with the instructional team and worked closely with the team to achieve these goals. As a response to students wanting more personalized class sessions, we reorganized sessions around key concepts chosen by students. To increase dialogue between

students, we approached small group assignments differently and modified the curriculum so students could actively share and discuss their work with peers from different institutions and with different approaches and areas of study.

Coordination across the different partners of the program has also been an integral part of the success of the program and includes collaboration between the Library, Writing Programs, and the URC-HASS. While communication was always prioritized and welcomed between the groups, cohesion between the different elements of the program in terms of each piece informing and shaping the other increases each year. Program partners strive for dialogue at every stage of the program, from when students apply to the program to discussions and reflections after the program is completed.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in the Classroom

The team strongly felt that incorporating culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom needed to be done more intentionally and thoroughly. One of the first changes we made was to institutionalize an alternative tour of the school that highlighted the histories, legacies, and contemporary contributions made by BIPOC, LGBTQ, and disabled alumni. During the summer of 2020, we collaboratively contributed to and distributed a resource list to incoming Black students and Black alumni of the program. In addition, we encouraged workshop facilitators to develop more flexible and adaptable sessions and encouraged closer attention, awareness, and sensitivities associated with the individual research topics (if and when they are provided). In response to student calls for more politically engaged, feminist, and social justice-oriented programming, we actively searched for and secured workshop facilitators and panelists who were open to critical research studies. These changes helped students feel more seen and heard in the program and were changes made directly in response to student feedback about what felt missing in class sessions and activities.

Student Experience Outside the Classroom: Relationships, Wellness, and Social Aspects

The social elements of the program are integral to helping students feel they belong and cultivating a community of learning and growth. Based on assessment, we rethought the historical approach of over-programming by consolidating meetings/classes (including graduate mentors in the lesson planning process) and providing space for community-building among students to form naturally rather than only through structured meetings/events. We maintained workshops as optional, encouraging non-attendees to use this time to work on their research projects in class or at home. Students were coming from institutions outside of Los Angeles and appreciated the opportunity to have more time to

learn about the city. In order to help facilitate learning about LA, we collaboratively compiled "What to do in LA" resource lists and organized trips to cultural events and sites throughout LA.

Remote Instruction

In order to respond to the unique challenges of the remote environment, we approached the program flexibly to respond to student needs in real time. As instructors, we called attention to the challenges we were facing and tried to communicate that we were all in the situation together. We incorporated student input when it came to defining class participation and engagement. We presented parts of our lives that we would not typically share, discussing our Zoom background and work set-up. All these actions took place at the start of the program to situate and humanize each one of us.

To foster a sense of community, we created a digital space (via Google Sites) for students and the teaching team to introduce themselves, their research, and any other personal information (e.g., fun facts, pets, etc.). The hub also served as a repository for course materials, class/workshop schedules, student-librarian pairings, recordings and transcripts, and other resources. With all aspects of the program situated in a remote environment, providing a single convenient location to access resources and connect with one another was important.

Recommendations and Best Practices

Based on our experiences, we offer the following recommendations for remote/ online learning contexts and more general recommendations that address program structure, coordination across campus units and personnel, and meeting student needs (academically and beyond the classroom).

Remote and Online Learning Recommendations

- Provide students with an opportunity to set the guidelines for their own learning community and what "counts" as participation/engagement. (This is important in person, too, but it seems particularly important in the remote context, where community can be more difficult to achieve.)
- Encourage students to be present while also giving them opportunities to engage in multiple ways (i.e., students who cannot leave cameras on in synchronous class/workshop sessions because of bandwidth issues can contribute to the chat and/or through emoji reactions; students who cannot make it to a workshop because of work or family commit-

ments can watch a recording and review materials later).
- Provide small group and full group opportunities for engagement.
- Provide opportunities for verbal and non-verbal feedback, presentation, and community building.
- Make sure all necessary resources are easy to locate online.
- Communicate frequently and clearly with students to ensure that they are getting the support they need and not putting unreasonable expectations on themselves.
- Be flexible!

General Recommendations
- Proactively gauge the needs of the cohort early on and midway into the program.
- Hold intentional space for students to reflect, complain, talk through ideas, etc.
- Be flexible and collaborate to adjust the program to meet emergent needs.
- Shift some pressure off the organizers by allowing students to lead and drive some of the programming.
- Do not overpack the schedule: students need time to work independently and make progress on their research projects, and rest and breaks are important too.
- Incorporate social aspects of the program: introductions, time to bond, hang out, etc. are important for students' overall satisfaction with the program and can help build the learning community.
- Institute weekly meetings and other communication among stakeholders to avoid unintentional repetition and make sure everyone involved knows what is going on and can attend effectively to student needs.
- Be thoughtful in choosing key personnel (instructors, library staff, other campus partners) as well as guests: ask whether or not they will be responsive to students' interests and sensitivities.

Conclusion

As MMUF 2021 gets underway, many students are coming out of more than a year of remote learning. The increased global unrest and uncertainty of the past eighteen months, coupled with increasing Zoom fatigue, have made flexibility on the part of the instructional team more important than ever. Our students are engaging with research that is not only critical but also oftentimes deeply personal. It is necessary, now more than ever, to hold space within the program for students to reflect on the program the ways they choose and for us to of-

fer more independent time outside of programming for research and writing. While many of the programmatic changes made in shifting rapidly from online to remote instruction have continued into this year's program, others have had to further shift to meet the needs of students. In response to student assessment and feedback from MMUF 2020, the library workshops this summer considered the positionality of the students as researchers in addition to integral research skills. Additionally, several of the workshops that students expressed interest in for the program have been integrated directly into the EC 180 course itself. Through this consolidation, we have been able to not only reduce the amount of time students are spending in formal programming and provide them with more time for independent writing and research but also to extend the time of the individual weekly workshop to allow for more student interaction with presenters. As we move forward toward a new normal in academic spaces, active listening and engagement across instructional team collaborations and student responsiveness are key.

Notes

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