

Teacher, Writer, Researcher

CONNECTICUT WRITING PROJECT-STORRS, SPRING 2019, VOL 11, NO. 2

The Director's Corner

CWP-Storrs Expands its Commitments to Student Writing and Teacher Education

Twelve years ago, there were 950 submissions to *Connecticut Student Writers*, and about 450 K-12 students, teachers, and their family members came to Jorgensen Center for the Performing Arts for Student Recognition Night.

This year—the magazine's 31st year—there were 1,795 submissions, and we packed about 1,500 people into Jorgensen. It's incredibly exciting to see such interest from the students and teachers.

Next year's keynote speaker will be Veera Hiranandani, whose book *The Night Diary* was just named a Newbery Honor book and won, among other awards, UConn's Malka Penn Award for Human Rights in Children's Literature.

This year was also our second year sponsoring the Library of Congress' Letters About Literature program. We actually had fewer submissions this year than last year (950 as opposed to 1,300), but I suspect that has a lot to do with the changes in COPA, which impacted the number of submissions from 4th through 6th graders.

Our culminating event at the State Capitol, however, was better than last year—better attended with about 80 folks, including a half dozen or more legislators from the nine student finalists' districts. And we had the three students who proceeded to nationals read their pieces.

Next year, in addition to hosting a Region-at-Large judging site for the Scholastic Writing Awards, we will become an affiliate partner of Scholastic, which means we will be hosting our own state-wide competition for 7th through 12th grade students, covering all counties but Fairfield and Litchfield (which are already covered by New York-based Writopia). We hope for a thousand submissions—but more to come on that later.

What's inside...

- A Lasting Bond: Partnerships Between E.O. Smith and UConn Writing Students Inspire Confidence in Young Writers
- Equity and Access: How Windham High School's Outdoor Club is Helping Students
- A New Perspective on the Teaching of Writing: Jason Courtmanche and Amanda Navarra Present at the Rhode Island Writing Project Spring Conference
- In Pursuit of Education: Two teachers discuss their experience with UConn's Graduate Program in English
- A Taste of College: UConn's Pre-College Summer Program Acclimating High School Students to a College Environment
- A Talk on *The Night Diary* by Veera Hiranandani
- Forging Ahead in Teacher Ed
- Aetna Awards Celebrate Student Writing
- UConn First Year Writing's 2019 Conference on the Teaching of Writing
- Kaylee Thurlow on The UConn Writing Center and The Outreach Partnership Program
- 2019 Letters About Literature Finalists Celebrated at State Capitol
- A Look Inside Neag's Equity and Social Justice Committee

With my new appointment as affiliate faculty in the School of Education, the Writing Project has also forayed deeper into Teacher Education.

Our new supervisor of Secondary English Education, Danielle Filipiak, is an NWP Teacher-Consultant, and together we have collaborated to review applications to various graduate programs, such as the one-year Teacher Certification Program for College Graduates, the 6th Year Program in Reading, and of course the Integrated Bachelor's/Master's Program.

We're also both on Neag's Equity and Social Justice Committee, which is committed to projects such as recruiting and supporting a more diverse population of pre-service teachers and to helping fellow teacher educators to provide culturally representative and relevant curricula in our courses.

* * *

Federal funding may be scarce under the current administration, but this merely necessitates flexible and opportunistic responses to provide support for improved teaching of writing in our schools.

Providing real audiences and purposes to our students is one way to approach this commitment. Working with pre-service teachers and with teachers returning for advanced degrees is another.

Look deeper into the pages of the newsletter to learn more about K-12 student writers, teacher education, the ESJ Committee, and Veera Hiranandani—among other things.

Enjoy the last weeks of the semester, and have a great summer.

We will, as we host our 38th Summer Institute!

A Lasting Bond: Partnerships Between E.O. Smith High School and UConn Writing Students Inspire Confidence in Young Writers

Valerie Jarret, CWP Intern

UConn provides many opportunities for students to get involved in tutoring and helping K-12 students in the area. One of these ways is through the courses that students are offered at UConn. For many years, UConn's Advanced Composition (ENGL3003W) class has partnered with E.O. Smith High School to create positive collaborations between high school and college students in their writing. Chris Iverson, a PhD student at UConn, was an instructor for a section of the Advanced Composition class in the Winter/Spring 2019 semester. He describes the partnership between high school and college students as a way to "expose students...to the realities of teaching that really can't be captured in a textbook." As the instructor of the college course, he works with Makenzie Aitchison (SI 19), an instructor of 10th Grade English students at E.O. Smith to foster strong communication between the students involved.

The program, which has been a huge success in previous years, works by partnering one college student with one high school student. From there, the two students communicate through email, as "virtual pen pals" in order to develop a relationship. The college student is able to encourage the high school student that they are paired with to continue their writing studies and help them with their essays and overall writing endeavors.

Aitchison, the high school English teacher involved in the partnership, has a unique perspective on the project works for her students and helps them achieve their writing goals. She says that the partnership helps her high school students "become more confident" in their writing. She likes that the students can gain this confidence and also have positive contact with their college partners, as she believes it allows them to look into their future and see the opportunities that college provides.

Aitchison's perspective on the partnership also comes from her previous experience with the partnership as a student. She explains that around ten years ago she was a high school student at E.O. Smith and was involved in this partnership. She recalls that it "led [her] to feel more confident in [her] writing." Inspired by this experience and then returning to E.O. Smith as a teacher, she felt that it was important to continue the collaboration, picking it up from a retiring E.O. Smith teacher. She guides the partnerships and gives her high school students "advice on how to seek feedback for writing and what questions to ask." She works primarily with the B-level English classes at E.O. Smith and believes that the partnership works best with these students because they are not "all on college trajectories" and "they don't all feel confident in their writing skills." For these reasons, she explains that "[the B-level students] are the ones who need that extra help."

On the college end of the partnership, many students are gaining teaching experience in a comfortable atmosphere where they are able to have one-on-one contact with a high school student. Chris Iverson explains that many students who take his course and participate in the partnership are interested in being educators in the future. He describes how he prearranged the class so that while the college students are reading the material on rhetorical theory that he has provided, they are also "thinking about their own learning and how it's worked for them in a way that acknowledges that the learning narrative is not just one narrative." The reading materials in the class are targeted to get students to think about different ways to respond to the inquiries of the E.O. Smith students. Iverson thinks that these connections are important for his students, and also help the students reflect on their experiences for their literacy narratives that they produce at the end of his course. He says that many of his students are going to go "into these classrooms as teachers" and so this type of work can be "very helpful" to them. He explains that while students are "not physically leaving campus or even the classroom, [they]'re working digitally and virtually with students."

"The realities of teaching... can't be captured in a textbook."

While the partnership is successful overall, it still has some flaws that are being worked on by the facilitators. Iverson explains that the biggest challenge is the lack of response from the high school students. It is evident that the high school students work at a slower pace than the college students, and in turn many of the college students do not get the response rate that they would like. Iverson and Ms. Aitchison remain in contact to make sure there are no major issues in the periods of break where there is not much communication. Iverson explains that his students were confused about how to go about a lack of response

“As teachers, we want to give our students a lot of help, but sometimes students grow more through trying to struggle through finding an answer.”

from their partners. After consulting with the supervisor of the partnership, Jason Courtmanche, Iverson came back to the class with the phrase “Welcome to teaching.” He explained to his students that, in teaching, things may not go exactly the way they are planned but teachers must be adaptable to different situations.

Aitchison explains that, “As a teacher, we want to give our students a lot of help, but sometimes students grow more through trying to struggle through finding an answer” and that the UConn students find their own way of helping the 10th graders without giving them the answers is important. Overall, the collaboration, even as it develops, has been a success.

When asked about memorable moments in the program, Aitchison fondly recalls a student who reached out to their college mentor, without her prompting in class, to ask about a novel they had been reading and request help with ideas for their

upcoming Socratic Seminar. Aitchison explains that this was a student who “has trouble speaking” in class discussions. She describes how the student was able to “conduct a conversation in the seminar about what her mentor had discussed with her.” Aitchison says that the mentor was able to discuss ideas with this student in a way that made the high schooler think about the novel in a different way. She explains that this is just one example of the confidence that students gain when they talk to someone they trust to help them, as well as someone who is not an authority figure.

This collaboration has helped both high school and college students grow in their writing abilities. It has proven to raise students’ confidence in their own writing as well as guiding others. From Ms. Aitchison’s success story as a student, to the many students working together now, this partnership provides opportunity for success for all students involved. Because of this, it continues to grow with the students and teachers, and will stay in place for many years to come.

Equity and Access: How Windham High School’s Outdoor Club is Helping Students

Devin Ruot, CWP Intern

Windham High School has implemented a new club for students to participate in. Started by English teacher Stephanie White (SI 19) and math teacher Harold Lampert, the Outdoor Club allows students to join enjoy outdoor recreational activities. White’s educational journey began through Teach for America, an organization that places recent graduate students in high needs low-income communities. The program placed her in Willimantic, Connecticut and she began teaching English at Windham High School. While doing her Teach for America work, White attended the Connecticut Writing Project’s Summer Institute which helps teachers become better prepared for the classroom. Due in part to



Outdoor Club students on a lift at Mount Southington Ski Area. ©Brad Horrigan

her experience in the Summer Institute, White was promoted to the Windham High School English Department Chair last summer.

When not busy teaching and preparing for the classroom, White has always been an avid participant in outdoor activities. She enjoys hiking, has been a part of the equine community, and even commented that she will probably go for a run after the interview I conducted with her. With these activities as such a large part of her own life, she wanted to provide the same kind of opportunities to her students. White's inspiration for the Outdoor Club came when she took a nature writing course that showed her the different ways that teachers bring nature into their classrooms. At the same time, Lampport had previously established similar clubs when he worked at school systems in Colorado and Tennessee. He wanted to bring the same type of club to Windham High School and the two were brought together by a colleague. Together, the two created the club and began planning trips for their students.

White explained that she created this club to "make sure students have access to the culture of power." The Outdoor Club provides students opportunities to enter a world that has been largely hidden to many of them. Windham High School is one hundred percent free or reduced lunch, nine out of ten students live below the poverty line, and seventy-seven percent of the student body is Latino. These statistics point to a larger problem that people who live in poverty do not have the same resources to enjoy outdoor activities as those students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition, people of color often feel that they are not welcomed in an environment that is overwhelmingly occupied and participated in by white individuals. Windham High School's outdoor club aims to break through these barriers by creating affordable trips for students.

For their first outing, White and Lampport thought that it would be monumental for these students to hike the highest peak in Connecticut. Hiking to the top of Bear Mountain in Salisbury would represent students breaking through those societal barriers that had previously held them back. White explained that this trip was attended by a range of kids in terms of their physical ability, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and monolingual/bilingual ability. On the second trip, the Outdoor Club set out to hike Case Mountain in Manchester, Connecticut. Another cold day made the hike a battle, but the school's staff rallied to bring in warm gear. After trudging

through the cold, the students traveled to Stone Age Rock Gym to climb intimidating rock walls. They had additional teaching staff on this trip that all got certified to belay the students. They were able to belay four children at once to make this experience fun for everyone. From here, the club ventured to other outdoor activities in the New England tundra. With all the snow, they decided to go on a ski-trip. Even more than the hiking, this ski-trip really showed these students that they are welcomed in these circles. Most would think that skiing and snowboarding are activities for white wealthy individuals. However, this club brought in low-income students of different races to enjoy something that has



Windham High School Outdoor Club members

historically been out of their reach.

The biggest challenge the Outdoor Club faces is trying to give the students the best experience without requiring high costs to participate. Being that many students live below the poverty line, the club needed to hit a certain price point so that any student would be able to attend. For the first trip, students only had to pay ten dollars. That money was then put towards the rock-climbing gym for the next trip. The hardest trip to make affordable was the ski-trip. If you are an avid skier, you know the extreme costs that it brings. Lampport and White, however, were able to get a really good deal for the students. The trip ended up costing forty-three dollars per student, and the students only had to pay twenty dollars out of pocket. The school contributes funding as well in the form of providing the cost of transportation (buses). Although funding becomes a minor roadblock for this club, the facilitators and students find ways around it. Much of the school

staff, for example, has come to donate their old equipment for students to use. Thus, this club creates an environment where everyone aims to help out and create amazing experiences for these students.

Although the funding may be a bit tricky, the Windham High School Outdoor Club provides an overwhelming number of benefits to the students. The Outdoor Club welcomes students into an environment that is foreign and out of reach to them. Having a club that provides low cost recreational activities partially removes class barriers and creates an environment where everyone is welcomed. In addition, it welcomes people of color into a space that is for the majority white.

Outdoor sports and recreation are no longer just for the wealthy, but for people of all backgrounds. White told me that after going skiing, one Outdoor Club member asked if she would be able to take her parents skiing, too, highlighting just how impactful this club is. White remarked that this club is an “equal opportunity” club. She emphasized “equity and access,” two words that summarize the very essence of what this club provides for students.

A New Perspective on the Teaching of Writing: Jason Courtmanche and Amanda Navarra Present at the Rhode Island Writing Project Spring Conference

Valerie Jarret, CWP Intern



On March 9, 2019, Amanda Navarra, an instructional coach at Mansfield High School, and Jason Courtmanche, Director of the Connecticut Writing Project, presented at the Rhode Island Writing Project's Spring Conference. Their panel highlighted methods in teaching that have worked for them in the past, as well as talking about how to engage students in their writing. Specifically, Navarra presented on writing and art in the classroom, while Courtmanche discussed writing for authentic audiences. Navarra began by discussing her experience with using the arts to teach students. She explains, “Often, students feel that school isn't something they do, but something that is done to them. Many times, students—particularly at the secondary level—express frustration at the feeling that they're drowning in “stuff.” Teachers

then also drown in having to grade that stuff and plan more stuff...and so often all that stuff fails to produce the desired results.” Because of this, Navarra wanted to plan her presentation and workshop in order to stress the fact that teachers can make assignments simple and easy. She says that she has worked “alongside some of the best and most dedicated teachers in the business,” and she knows that “the last thing teachers need is more to do.” Because of this, her plan was to create a way to show teachers that this manner of teaching through and with art, while being important for students, would not result in “piles of grading” for them.

Her opinion on teaching the arts in writing is unique. She claims, “‘Art’ in this context is not just painting and coloring—it's performance, sound, language, innovation, construction, re-envisioning/re-framing, and more. I often define ‘art’ as getting someone else to see something the way you see it (or the way you want them to see it). There is a level of personal voice and ownership [in art] that is often missing when we stop at asking students to determine author's intent.” Navarra is very adamant about using these teaching techniques in her own classes and she described the success she has seen in students with varying levels of writing ability. She spoke of projects that students

“There is a level of personal voice and ownership [in art] that is often missing when we stop at asking students to determine author's intent.”

had to present creatively, some making a full children's book, others initiating a tea party with characters from their text, and one student even put book characters in a court trial in class. Navarra talks about these projects passionately: "I would say that these projects were the exception in this mixed-level class," she says, "but they weren't—they were the rule." She is enthusiastic about her students and the way that this type of instruction has inspired them. She believes that presenting this style of education to teachers in the field, and spreading the teaching of the arts in writing, can help all students begin to gain more confidence in their writing. At the crux of this presentation, she wanted to convey that this teaching style "promotes empowerment, engagement, and meaning-making in a way that more traditional classroom structures often do not."

The other presentation that they conducted at the conference, led by Jason Courtmanche, considered teaching students to write for authentic audiences. Courtmanche says that "Imitating genres that actually exist in the world and writing for audiences that likewise exist and in fact will read their writing both promotes real writing and motivates students." He is concerned with the make-believe that teachers engage their students in, and the papers that they will write that serve no real-world purpose. His presentation with Amanda Navarra highlighted the kinds of teaching that promote writing for the public. He practices this type of teaching with his own students. "Why else write if not for the purpose of writing to someone? Or about something of importance?" he asks. Courtmanche spoke about how students can find this process exciting and liberating. Most students feel as though this type of writing frees them from the monotony of the norm of academic writing. In a perfect illustration of the possibilities for students that stem from writing for authentic audiences in the college classroom, one of Courtmanche's students, Shayne DePalma, recently wrote an [Op-Ed](#) for the course that was published in the UConn newspaper, *The Daily Campus*. Soon after, DePalma's piece was picked up by the [CT Jewish Ledger](#), allowing DePalma's writing to reach a wider audience beyond the classroom.

When asked what struggles he has encountered with this style of teaching, he said the problem almost never stemmed from the students, but from the teachers. "The biggest problem I encountered," he says, "was in a large discussion group of teachers at a conference where a vocal handful objected that anything short of traditional academic essays of objective literary analysis (no first-person pronouns, no personal anecdotes, lots of close reading, and no subject matter beyond the parameters of the covers of the book) was inferior and a disservice to students." He claims that this type of thinking within teachers is harmful because it does not prepare students for real-world writing situations and does not prepare them for real people to read their work.

He tries to overcome this toxic attitude that teachers may have by doing presentations—like the one he did at the RIWP Conference, showing published student works, as well as helping teachers get published themselves. "Once they experience the value and positive impact of seeing their own name on a byline," he claims, "it's not hard to convince them that their students will have the same response."

Both Jason Courtmanche and Amanda Navarra are working to spread these alternative teaching techniques with the goal of creating student writers that not only are more creative in their writing, but are also more passionate about it. These techniques aim to create writers who talk about real world issues to real people, and do not just write for a classroom purpose. They want to educate teachers to believe in this type of writing, and will practice this pedagogy themselves in order to benefit students. Their presentations at the Rhode Island Writing Project Spring Conference were a great platform to share their knowledge with other teachers and expand these important ideas to help students.

In Pursuit of Education: Two teachers discuss their experience with UConn's Graduate Program in English

Julia Mancini, CWP Intern

The University of Connecticut is home to a wide range of graduate and doctoral programs, but perhaps one of the most impressive is its Graduate Program in English. According to the National Research Council, UConn's program is among the highest ranked doctoral programs nationwide, and the top public doctoral program in the northeast.

“We value our sense of community because we believe that a convergence of expert, caring, and interesting scholars at every level, from undergraduates to emeriti faculty, will promote the holistic development of our graduate students,” states Victoria Ford Smith, director of graduate studies, on the Department of English website. “We stress professional development in scholarship, teaching, and career preparation.”

The Graduate Program in English has a certain appeal to in-service educators. Danielle Pieratti (SI 14), an English teacher at South Windsor High School and a Writing Programs Leader with the Connecticut Writing Project-Storrs, and Kim Kraner (SI 14), an English teacher at Avon High School, are two such teachers. Both are currently in pursuit of higher degrees from UConn’s program. Pieratti hopes to complete the MA/PhD program by 2024 and Kraner expects to finish her English Master’s degree in literature this spring.

“I always planned to earn a PhD, but because of the interdisciplinary nature of my interests, it took me a long time to choose a program. For a while I thought I might pursue a PhD in education, but several mentors recommended that an English degree, combined with my two masters (in education and creative writing) might make me more versatile,” Pieratti said. “I chose UConn because I had already formed relationships with people in the English department and at the Connecticut Writing Project, and because I’ve always felt immensely supported by the UConn community.”

“In the summer of 2014, I attended the Connecticut Writing Project’s Summer Institute, which is designed for teachers of writing and comprises two graduate courses in English. I had always wanted to get my master’s in English literature, but the Summer Institute gave me the start I needed,” Kraner said of her decision to continue her education at UConn.

Both teachers discussed the challenges that come with pursuing a degree while at the same time working and juggling familial responsibilities and teaching full-time. But UConn’s English graduate program, in cooperation with their school districts, offered support and flexibility for their schedules, allowing them to complete their degree on their own timelines.

“One thing that helps me balance work and coursework is the fact that, for the past three years, my district has allowed me to teach on a .8 FTE basis, which means I am slightly part-time. And UConn has supported me by allowing me to pursue my studies part-time, which many other universities wouldn’t,” Pieratti said. “In addition, enough courses are scheduled during afternoons and evenings that I’ve been able to fulfill my enrollment goals each semester. I’ve also found my professors and my fellow graduate students to be incredibly welcoming, supportive, and flexible. I’ve been surprised by how many other students don’t live locally, or who, like me, are juggling other commitments, such as childcare.”

Kraner further commented her decision to attend UConn: “I have an hour commute to UConn, so there were closer opportunities for me. But the people I had met...made me want to be a member of the UConn community. My professors have been brilliant, generous, inspiring, and supportive—people I feel fortunate to know—and I believe that the spirit of collegiality in the graduate school is fostered by their guidance and the examples they set as scholars,” Kraner said.

UConn’s English Master’s degree for teachers requires 30 credits, six of which are from the Summer Institute. According to Kraner, taking one course per semester and during one summer session, the degree will take about four years to complete. In addition to credit hours, Master’s degree candidates must submit a final piece of writing that has been revised under the supervision of a professor.



Pieratti signing her book *Fugitives* (2016) which won the Connecticut Book Award for Poetry in 2017



Kraner on Mt. Adams in the White Mountains

Both teachers cite time constraints and busy schedules as the most difficult aspect of the graduate program, but according to Pieratti and Kraner, the hard work has been well worth it. “The rewards of learning new schools of critical theory and dipping deeply into reading, writing, and academic discourse made my efforts more than worthwhile,” Kraner said. “My hope is that my continued graduate work will open more doors for me as an educator, and help me develop expertise and contribute research that more thoroughly explores those interdisciplinary connections,” Pieratti remarked.

When asked if they had any advice for teachers interested in pursuing higher education, or for those struggling to choose an institution to attend, both Pieratti and Kraner had a few words of wisdom to offer. “I think the best advice I can give other teachers looking to go to graduate school is to take some courses as a non-matriculated student so that you can develop relationships and discover whether a department is a right fit for you. I don’t think I ever would have ended up at UConn had it not been for the mentorship of Jason Courtmanche and Penelope Pelizzon, both of whom I took classes with prior to applying,” Pieratti said. “If taking a course isn’t possible, even attending conferences like the ECE conference or First Year Writing conference can be helpful, because it can give you a sense of the personalities and culture of a place.” Kraner adds, “I highly recommend UConn’s English graduate program to teachers interested in pursuing the degree. I have been able to take a wide variety of courses and pursue my interests as a student, teacher, and writer,” Kraner said.

Admission into the UConn English graduate program is highly competitive. For admission in the Fall, complete applications must reach the University of Connecticut by January 1. Applications should be submitted online through the Graduate School website and should include unofficial transcripts, personal statement, three letters of recommendation, GRE test scores, and writing sample. More information can be found on the [Graduate School website](#).

2019 Pre-College Summer Dates:

Session 1: July 7 – July 13

Session 2: July 14 – July 20

Session 3: July 21 – July 27

Session 4: July 28 – August 3

Check out our [course overview](#) and [2019 course schedule](#).

Join our [mailing list](#) for updates.

See our [pricing, fees, and discounts](#).

A Taste of College: UConn’s Pre-College Summer Program Acclimating High School Students to a College Environment

Valerie Jarret, CWP Intern

UConn has provided many opportunities for students who are looking to apply to the university and join the community. One of these opportunities is [UConn’s Pre-College Summer Program](#) (PCS) for high school juniors and seniors. Nella Quasnitschka and Melanie Banks are the director and associate director of UConn’s Pre-College Summer Program, respectively. They each put in an immense amount of work every year to provide the opportunity for students to come onto UConn’s Storrs campus in the summer and take classes taught by UConn faculty, as well as get a feel for college life. Quasnitschka describes the program as having two missions: “Exploring academic interest...and getting a taste of what it’s like to be on a college campus.” The program is creative and offers students many opportunities to explore college-level academics, take part in workshops about their interests, and understand what it is like to live on a college campus. Melanie Banks talks about the

social aspect of the program, commenting that students learn “what it’s like to live with someone you’ve never lived with before or someone who lives across the country from you.” She places much importance on the communal aspect of the program, while still stating that the academic aspect is extremely important.

The program is structured so that students take class in the morning and then participate in workshops of their choice after class. Quasnitschka explains that “Courses are offered by faculty on campus or professionals in the industry,” ensuring that students will be getting an exemplary education taught by qualified faculty. The program also collaborates with organizations that work to help students apply what they have learned in their classes to the real world. Quasnitschka talks about how, in the past, the program has collaborated with Mystic Aquarium where students can go and meet employees there and learn about

that area of study as a supplement to their class. This way, they can see how their classes relate to possible future career routes.

Quasnitschka also explained that the program has seen great results. Many students who attend the PCS Program eventually apply to UConn and attend the university. She says, “Students are coming to campus and faculty that are teaching in the summer are actually getting their students in their classes [when they enroll at UConn].” The program is very successful in helping students pave their way to college.

The program also provides interactive workshops for students after classes end for the day. When asked what the workshops do for the students, both Banks and Quasnitschka were excited to explain that this is a rather new aspect of the program. They describe that the workshops allow students to explore interests outside of the classroom as well as prepare for college. The workshops are meant to either target student interests or help them in applying for college. Banks explains that the program “partners with departments on campus” and it’s “a great resource that we are able to offer to our students, especially for those that are really interested in coming to UConn...We have all these departments on campus that are for you to use if you need them. To name a few, we partner with the Center for Career Development, the Department of Pharmacy, and the Writing Center with Tom Deans. He offers a ‘How to Write a College Essay’ Workshop.” The workshops range from essay-writing and resumé-building to drumming, flashlight-making, and self-exploratory workshops that allow students to reflect upon themselves. It’s a unique experience for students who may be taking STEM classes in the morning but want to take an art workshop in the afternoon.

The program offers a wide range of options that are tailored to the students that attend. Quasnitschka explains that the program is defined by the students. The social programming and activities that the students are offered are completely determined by the group’s interest for the week. “It really depends on the group,” she says, and continues, “We have some activities that we constantly have such as last year we had rock climbing and then we also had a paint workshop. But then we also look to the group each week, because each week is different. They were into circuit training one-week last year...they were into soccer another week, and then they were into volleyball.” This type of program listens to the students and is personalized to their interests. The students want to be there, they are excited to learn, and they have so many opportunities to meet others in the same position as them, explore their interests, and become more comfortable with the idea of college.

Currently, Quasnitschka and Banks are preparing for the sixth summer of the Pre-College Summer Program. While the program is relatively new, it has grown immensely and evolved in many facets. But, while the program has grown, it is still small enough that it has a “personal touch” to it that Quasnitschka discusses. She says: “We started off as two weeks and then grew into four weeks, started off with about 50-60 students and last year we had 400 so it’s just really grown over the years.” She explains that “Having that 100-125 students a week is a nice number for us to have where students don’t feel like they’re just another student within 4,000 students on campus.” Banks and Quasnitschka are proud that the program is at a size where they can get to know the students, as well as attend to any issues that arise.

They also discuss the retention of students explaining that many students will stay multiple weeks. On moving the program forward in the future, Quasnitschka says that “One of the things I’d like to look at is how to really enhance that experience for the two, three, and four-week students so they are not exhausted by week three and four just going to class and workshops.” She wants to find a way to “supplement their experience and really make it better.” Quasnitschka and Banks are always looking for opportunities to enhance the program and give their students the best experience they can. They love the program and are really looking at what they can do to make it the best it can be each year.

The two have been traveling around the East Coast to spread knowledge about the program and are using the connections they have to create awareness about it in high schools. Banks talks about their connection with the [Early-College Experience](#) (ECE) program, where students take UConn classes for high school and future college credit. Banks explains that through the ECE program they have contact with “over 13,000 students that are in high school so we are...able to reach out to them with the available courses that we have and just share overall program information.”

Quasnitschka wants to improve the program by attracting more international students to attend, but also explains that it is hard to advertise as much overseas. When asked about how the program is made


“Students don’t feel like they’re just another student within 4,000 students on campus”

accessible to those with financial need, Quasnitschka explained that they have partnered with an organization in the past that helped bring in these students. However, they do not have that opportunity this year, but the program has been “able to connect with [Summer of a Lifetime](#) which is an organization out of Chicago and we are hoping to get a good 15 students from them this year. So that is a program that will help students get here that have some financial need...We are always looking to offer scholarships or collaborate with other organizations that are looking to provide opportunities to students and provide access to the program”. Both Quasnitschka and Banks are dedicated to providing opportunities to students without the financial means to attend. They want to take on as many deserving students as possible and expand the program to more students internationally as well as students with financial need.

As the director of the program, Quasnitschka has much experience in her own life with programs like this one that provide opportunities for students. Before working for the Pre-College Summer Program, she was the director for the “Educational Talent Search Program” which she describes as a “program that is federally funded that works with middle school and high school students who come from moderate incomes and are first generation to college, so neither parent has completed a four-year degree here in the U.S. What we did was help these students get ready for college: Fill out their applications, go on college trips, anything that is associated with getting ready for college.” She transitioned over to the Pre-College Summer program because of her experience and her love for working with students. She contends, “It is really hard to find a job where you get to work on a college campus, which I absolutely love, at a university that I graduated from.” She talks about her desire to incorporate the “high school aspect where you can work with those high school students and help them get onto campus and prepare for college.” PCS was “just a perfect mix for me and I thought it was a good fit.” She developed the PCS program and her genuine love for working with students has helped the program grow. She has, along with Banks, created a safe place for college students to learn what it’s like to be in college, and help them feel comfortable with that experience.

When asked why the program was special to them, both had much to say. Quasnitschka says that “It’s just great to see the students come on campus and grow and learn and...they come in as very shy and timid and while they’re here you... see them realize that college can be tough for them.” Banks loves that she is “in the process with them from start to end. It’s actually really nice to connect with them from the beginning.” She loves helping students who aren’t sure what they want to do yet and maybe even seeing those who are completely sure change their minds. The program offers the opportunity for students to learn their likes and dislikes early so they can decide if a certain path is for them or not. The program is important to both Quasnitschka and Banks, and they both think that their work shaping it is not even close to done. They are in preparation for another summer and they are hard at work trying to create the best possible experience for their incoming students.

“It’s just great to see the students come on campus and grow and learn”



WHAT IS UCONN EARLY COLLEGE EXPERIENCE?

UConn Early College Experience (ECE) is a concurrent enrollment program that allows motivated high school students to take UConn courses at their high schools for both high school and college credit. Every course taken through UConn ECE is equivalent to the same course at the University of Connecticut. Students benefit by taking college courses in a setting that is both familiar and conducive to learning. High school instructors who have been certified through the University of Connecticut serve as adjunct faculty members and teach UConn ECE courses. Established in 1955, UConn Early College Experience is the nation's longest running concurrent enrollment program and is accredited by The National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships (NACEP).

A Talk on *The Night Diary* by Veera Hiranandani

Jason Courtmanche, CWP Director

On April 9, I drove to Rockville High School in Vernon to attend a talk given by Veera Hiranandani, whose newest book *The Night Diary* had just been named a Newbery Honor Book. Ms. Hiranandani had been invited to give talks at Rockville High and UConn as the recipient of the Malka Penn Award for Human Rights in Children's Literature, given annually since 1995 by UConn's Dodd Center.

The library was filled with students and their English teachers, listening as Ms. Hiranandani spoke for about 45 minutes about the origins of her novel. She said the primary motivation was to write about the 1947 partition of India into India and Pakistan, which her father had lived through as a Hindu boy living in what was suddenly a new and hostile country.

When asked, only a handful of students raised their hands to indicate they had heard of the partition, which resulted in 1 to 2 million deaths and 14 million people displaced.

Ms. Hiranandani explained that her father had grown up in a peaceful, diverse community where people shared customs and rituals, and so, she asked rhetorically, "How did we turn against each other?"

The main character is a girl of 12 named Nisha. Nisha is about the age Ms. Hiranandani's father was at the time of the partition, but unlike him she is bi-religious. Her father is a Hindu doctor and her mother, who died in childbirth, was Muslim. This aspect is based upon Ms. Hiranandani, herself, whose Hindu father married a Jewish woman from Brooklyn.



Nisha's household also includes a twin brother who is dyslexic, her paternal grandmother, and a fictive uncle who is Muslim and has cooked for the family since the death of her mother.

Although there is some violence in the novel, it is tempered for the sake of younger readers, and the novel also includes episodes where people take risks to save members of other groups, which of course happened in real life.

Ms. Hiranandani said that she was not concerned about writing male characters but was concerned about how to represent Muslims as a non-Muslim. She had the manuscript read by individuals from ten different backgrounds to give feedback.

The novel also includes a great deal of luscious writing about food (Ms. Hiranandani's second novel was about a boy who was a foodie) because of food's connection to memory and culture.

Ms. Hiranandani shared a number of historic photos, such as those of the two groups passing each other on trains across the desert, but also of her own family and of foods such as chapati, pakora, daal, and kaju katli, her favorite, which is a sort of cashew fudge.

After the talk, students asked questions, many about the process of writing. Ms. Hiranandani explained that her favorite childhood authors included Judy Blume and Beverly Cleary, and that her favorites as an adult include Jhumpa Lahiri and Paul Auster. She's currently working on a novel about her parents' marriage, which is also inspired by the fiftieth anniversary of the Loving vs. Virginia ruling in favor of interracial marriage.

Ms. Hiranandani spoke about the challenges of writing as a mother of two teenagers, and explained that fortunately they do go to school but that, nonetheless, if she wants to get any writing done, sometimes the laundry just has to wait.

She writes for about four hours daily in an attic office, and is content to complete 500 to 1,000 words each day. She gets her inspiration to write from students, her writing group, books, and deadlines.

Many students were interested in how to work through periods of frustration. Ms. Hiranandani explained that sometimes you have to just “throw down a piece of clay” and work with it. Mixing her metaphors, she said that writing is also like working out. “You just make yourself do it even if you know it’s bad.” She added that you have to acknowledge that your writing won’t be perfect, and in fact have to give yourself “permission to write badly” sometimes.

Ms. Hiranandani also addressed the myth of the successful writer, explaining that it’s not the case that you get so good that you don’t need to revise any more. In fact, the reverse is true. “The more experienced writer you become, the more revision you do.” You just get more comfortable with it. “Then it starts to flow.”

We’re fortunate that Veera Hiranandani has agreed to be the keynote speaker at the Connecticut Student Writers Recognition Night in 2020.



Forging Ahead in Teacher Ed

Julia Mancini, CWP Intern

[Leadership in Diversity](#) (LID), a mentoring program started in 2014 by two UConn’s Neag School of Education students, works to maintain and encourage confidence and success in students of color and minority students as they pursue careers in education. The group works tirelessly to provide the necessary tools, networks and information for these students to be competitive, well-rounded future educators, according to their website.

One example of the LID’s efforts is their annual Leadership in Diversity Conference, held at the University of Connecticut-Storrs Campus. This year marked the fourth conference held by LID, entitled “Forging Ahead in Teacher Ed,” with the entire event sharing a common theme of improving empathy, diversity, representation, and equity in the classroom.

The conference was held on March 30, running from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and opened with a performance by the Epic Theater Ensemble and a welcome from LID organizers. The rest of the day included a number of sessions on a rotating schedule, so that each attendee could attend up to four sessions over the course of the conference. The event concluded with a keynote address from educator and speaker Michael Bonner.

Some of the highlights of the day were sessions like “Using Student Home languages for Academic and Socioemotional Success,” led by Michele Back, an assistant professor of world languages education in the Neag School of Education. Her presentation focused on how to implement strategies to encourage the use of home languages in the classroom, without the need for teacher knowledge of these languages. Back demonstrated how to plan activities in areas like translanguaging and multilingual ecology to be used in the classroom environment. “Equity in Education” presented by Gloria F. Mengual, the diversity and inclusion coordinator for [CREC’s Open Choice](#) program. Mengual spoke on facilitating cultural storytelling



LID students attended the National Association for Multicultural Education Conference in 2017.

dialogue and building relationships and trust in a school community through the use of stories of students of color. According to Mengual, hearing other people's stories reduces the biases that impact our perspectives and educators have a unique opportunity to implement change.

In a session entitled "Supporting Student Activism Through Shared Leadership," teachers, administrators, and students from CREC Academy of Aerospace and Engineering involved in the Breaking B.R.E.A.D. group presented on the success of their student activist group. They discussed supporting youth voice in advocating for their needs as a central focus of their organization. They shared their organization's lessons, practices, an outline of support and their shared leadership in youth activism. The student group believes in "unity and diversity." The presenters spoke about working with LDF and the NAACP to orchestrate legislative change in education. Students stressed the importance of having a space like Breaking B.R.E.A.D. for their voices to be heard.

"Every connection can lead to another. Capitalize on every connection you make. Support the shared goals," one of the student presenters said about creating your own advocacy group in a school system.

Shauna Brown, an educator and social justice advocate, presented "Creating a Safe and Inclusive Space for Girls of Color in Diverse Schools" and spoke on "minding the intersections." She presented various research and statistics about the biases educators hold when it comes to diverse students in the classroom. For example, according to a study released in 2019, a quarter of schools with the highest concentration of students with color do not offer Algebra II, a course mandatory for college admissions. These disadvantages are systemic, but there is change that individual educators can work to affect in their own classroom spaces, with a primary focus on building relationships and understanding in the classroom. Part of this comes with including representative materials and curricula in lesson plans and offering diverse role models to students, specifically girls of color.

Michael Bonner, author of *Get Up or Give Up: How I Almost Gave Up On Teaching*, closed the conference with his keynote address. Bonner is well known for his students' viral music video, helping them learn classroom content. The video was recognized by public figures like Ellen Degeneres and Ashton Kutcher, and Bonner was put in the national spotlight for changing learning culture. Bonner used music as a tool to help counter the negative statistical data concerning children living in poverty. At UConn's LID Conference, he presented research and statistics about student performance when dealing with trauma. Bonner spoke to the needs of students with diverse backgrounds, strengths, needs and challenges and strategies to be used to create more empathic, equitable classrooms to meet those needs.

"You can't demand a withdrawal from someone you have never invested in," Bonner said of engaging your students. "Teachers affect eternity; no one can understand where their influence stops."

The fourth annual LID conference was ultimately a huge success in educating teachers on how to "forge ahead" and create safer, more respectful, inclusive and diverse spaces to meet the needs of all students.



Aetna Awards Celebrate Student Writers

Valerie Jarret, CWP Intern

On April 30, 2019, students presented posters at the Aetna Celebration of Student Writing. The work was presented from an array of student writers at the university. Many students in first-year writing courses were presenting posters on an essay/project they had completed of the course of the semester.

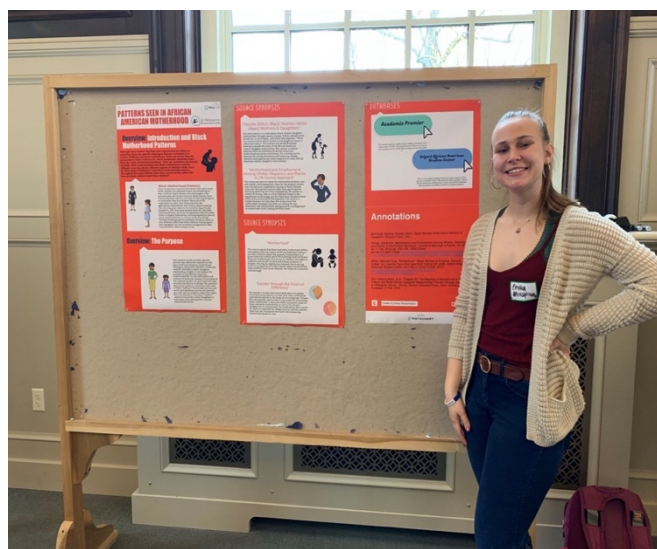
One first-year writing student, Suzannah De Almeida, created a poster on her creation of an angel/demon monster that she had created for her first-year writing course. Almeida, a STEM major, spoke about her excitement over the project and what her monster was supposed to represent.

She talked about the human interest in monsters and horror, and says how “every human being has a persona in a shadow”. She based her monster off of this interior and exterior division, and created a poster showing what it would look like, the qualities of it, and what it would do.

Another student, Emilia Herasimowicz, created a poster entitled “Patterns seen in African American motherhood” where she discusses the patterns of black motherhood. Her poster talks about how there is more encouragement for black mothers to be self-reliant in their careers, and discusses how this affects their motherhood styles.



Susana De Almeida presenting her poster and project



Emily Herasimowicz's project on African American motherhood

Herasimowicz, a business major, spoke about how she really enjoyed the project for her first-year writing course, and thought that the research and presentation was helpful and related to her major. The information was presented through both the research she had done and the observations she had made from it. Overall, the presentations and posters at the Aetna Awards Celebration showed a wide range of student interests and different perspectives in writing. Events like these show the involvement of the UConn community.

It was surprising and enlightening to see the wide array of majors who had a passion for their writing projects, even if they did not directly relate to the student's major. The Aetna Awards creates a community for writing students to share their work, comment on each other's projects, and feel proud of what they have accomplished.

UConn First Year Writing's 2019 Conference on the Teaching of Writing

Devin Ruot, CWP Intern



The University of Connecticut First-Year Writing program held its annual [Conference on the Teaching of Writing](#) at the University of Connecticut-Hartford Campus on Friday, April 5, 2019. The title of the conference this year was “Active and Accessible: Engaging Writing Pedagogy in the 21st century.” Examples of ideas presented on at the conference were writing through community, re-envisioning the research paper through collage, and incorporating technological literacy into the First-Year Writing classroom. The conference was split into two presentation sessions in the morning, followed by lunch and a keynote talk by [Dr. Shannon Walters](#) of Temple University. The afternoon program included a multimodal poster session and an interactive workshop, “Writing with Community Partners,” hosted by the [Trinity College Office of Community Learning](#).

When I arrived at the conference, the second panel session was just beginning. The room was full of eager educators waiting to hear from colleagues about their experiences with First-Year Writing. The title of the panel that I attended was “Engaging with the Active and Accessible University” and focused on the university’s role in the student experience of writing and composition. Ranging from different universities, the three speakers presented on their various topics. Becky Caouette of Rhode Island College presented first on the ethical problems with corequisite courses. At many higher-ed institutions, before students can take courses that count towards their graduating credits, they must take prerequisite or corequisite courses. Caouette argues that the names of these courses carry stigmas and can segregate students by their skill level. Students in these courses may feel like they are inadequate writers which can influence their future career choices and creativity. She proposed a solution to this issue: Eliminate the titles of “prerequisite” or “corequisite” because they perpetuate annotations attached to these categories. For educators designing courses, they should move away from this traditional script. Instead, prerequisite and corequisite should not be in their vocabulary when describing First-Year Writing courses. Caouette wants to create an environment where students do not feel ashamed to take these classes. Removing these labels is one solution to a troubling problem with First-Year Writing at universities across the country.

The second presenter on the panel was Rachael Barlow from Wesleyan University. She presented her findings from a case study that she conducted to measure college freshmen’s confidence in their writing ability, monitor them over the course of the first year, and then reassess their writing confidence at the end of the course. Barlow aimed to see how students benefited from FYW courses and if they used campus resources available to them. Barlow found that the results of her study were not consistent across the board and that student writing confidence is highly variable. For example, some students felt that they improved their writing; other students felt like their writing skills decreased. Further, these feelings of confidence were not shown to be impacted by the amount of resources they used. Students ranged from using every resource available to them on campus to using none at all. Interestingly, Barlow found examples of students using many resources but still reporting a decrease in their overall confidence at the end of the first year. Other examples revealed students who did not use any resources and had an increase in confidence over the year. Barlow’s other results were scattered between these two extremes. Since Barlow’s study is still in

progress, she stressed that her findings are only preliminary and that she is hopeful about the conclusions she draws from the remainder of the study.

Brigetta Abel gave the final presentation on this panel. The school where Abel teaches, Macalester College, has implemented a “flipped classroom” structure for the majority of courses offered at the school. In this setting, students watch a lecture for homework and do assignments in the classroom. A pedagogical method like this allows teachers to create an environment where students arrive to class better acquainted with the material and they are more prepared to ask questions on information they were confused by in the lecture. In addition, Abel argued, flipped classrooms allow students who are hesitant to seek additional help to rewatch and relearn from the video lectures. Macalester College, though, adopted this idea of the flipped classroom and recently pushed that idea further. Any faculty member is allowed to create one-minute long videos aimed at helping students. These videos cover a range of topics, but specifically benefit First-Year writers. Abel played two examples of these videos in which professors give tips to students on how to improve their writing. The topics were about creating a strong thesis and creating concise sentences. She argued that these videos greatly help students. For example, if students are writing an essay late at night and they cannot contact a professor for help, these videos can provide a significant amount of assistance. Abel is a strong advocate for a flipped classroom model as it has shown to have benefits for FYW students.

After the conference session ended, all the attendees moved to the Center for Contemporary Culture across the street at the Hartford Public Library. Lunch was served for everyone to enjoy while the keynote speaker, Dr. Shannon Walters from Temple University gave a talk titled “Access Paradigms of Shared Experience: Toward a Pedagogy of Doing.” Her talk examined pedagogy through the lens of disability theory, pushed innovative ideas for accessibility, and critiques Universal Design for Learning. She began by breaking down the words in her title. The words access and accessibility have figurative and literal meanings that have been studied by disability theorists. Access in the literal sense means the ability for opportunities, being able to enter or exit buildings, or use certain technologies. Figuratively, access implies a person’s participation in political, cultural, and social realms. Although there have been advancements in the United States, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, access has not been entirely solved for people with disabilities. Walters continued with her dissection of the word paradigm. The prefix “para” means besides, adjacent, assisting, or distinct from. In the medical field, “para” points out a disordered function; Walters relates this definition to the Greek origin of alteration or modification.

These definitions may seem abstract or unimportant, but according to Walters they represent how the community of those with disabilities is represented in society. From these very words, ideas around being separate from society emerge to create ideas of people who are “different” or “abnormal.” Normalcy relates to the word paradigm because that word means pattern or model. Many of the patterns or models used in society measure being normal. Walters uses the example of a “good man speaking well” to show that this model of normalcy cannot be applied to disabled individuals who are deaf or mute. As definitions of “normalcy” rose in the period of 1840 to 1860 so did grammatical and mechanical correctness. Based on these created paradigms, ideas of “normalcy” were imposed on reading and writing. Drawing on this history, Walters poses the question, “Is it possible, though, to reconsider this paradigmatic approach to style so rooted in normalization?” Her question allowed the audience to critically think about how teachers view reading and writing.

Walters concluded her talk by expanding on ideas around “shared expertise.” Through the lens of disability studies, non-expertise can be seen as a deficiency or a lack in a student’s ability. For English



A presenter shares a digital image with the audience at CTW.

courses, students never become experts in reading or writing. These are disciplines that students learn over their academic and non-academic careers. For classrooms where students may feel like non-experts because of a disability, Walters offers a solution called “strategic expertise alliances.” These alliances provide a space for students to learn without the presence of their limitations. In the classroom, teachers and students are constantly sharing expertise by learning from each other. Even with this shared expertise, teachers still struggle with student accommodation. For example, accommodations for students with ADHD may not be helpful for a student on the Autism spectrum. The impulse to accommodate everyone with one sweeping “accommodation” prompts Walters’ critique of Universal Design for Learning.

Building off of her critique of Universal Design for Learning, Walters then asked the audience to participate in the discussion. She had us consider our areas of expertise and how we use that knowledge in the classroom. Specifically, she wanted us to consider the changes of technology and how that has influenced our expertise. The group discussion led to many educators explaining how technology has aided them in the classroom. Through the exchange of ideas, this discussion provided real insight into how technology affects teachers in the classroom and the changing landscape of accommodations for students with disabilities.

After the keynote speech, the conference broke up into two different sections. Some attendees participated in the Writing with Community Partners workshop, while myself and others went to the poster session. At the poster session, members of UConn’s FYW office as well as those from other universities presented their courses and what they are doing for the program. I walked around the room and stumbled upon a poster describing an innovative course called the “Rhetorics of Hip-Hop.” One of the co-creators of the course, Aaron Proudfoot, explained that the course covers different themes present in Hip-Hop music and culture throughout the semester. One example of these themes is his section on death and mortality. His class examines these themes in Hip-Hop music and compares them to other works of literature. Having a course that examines contemporary music that many students are interested in enables the course assignments to be inviting to students. The material is familiar and the students have more desire to write about topics that they know well compared to other FYW courses that may ask them to engage with material in which they have no interest. Proudfoot’s students write essays using themes in the music and how they are present in society as well as the music itself. For examples, many of his students’ essays examined police brutality, gender issues, mental health, and other important societal issues. The “Rhetorics of Hip-Hop” course creates an engaging writing environment that makes the subject matter relatable to students.

The Connecticut Writing Project was started in 1982 in the English Department at the University of Connecticut. Its goal then was to improve the writing instruction of teachers at all levels of education and from all disciplines. Over 530 teachers have received Aetna Fellowships to attend CWP Summer Institutes and thousands more have benefitted from its professional development services in schools and its writing programs for students.

To help us continue to reach this goal you can [donate](#) at the UConn Foundation website. You can also support the Connecticut Writing project via the [National Writing Project](#). Thank you for your support!

Kaylee Thurlow (SI 18) on the UConn Writing Center and the Outreach Partnership Program

By Valerie Jarret and Julia Mancini, CWP Interns

There are many notable students at the University of Connecticut that go above and beyond in providing opportunities for students in elementary and high school. Kaylee Thurlow (SI 18) is a graduate student in UConn's [Neag School of Education Integrated Bachelor and Masters program](#). In addition to being a full time graduate student, Thurlow works at [UConn's Writing Center](#) and is the coordinator of the [Outreach Partnership Program](#) within it.

Thurlow explains that the goal of the Writing Center, and by extension the Outreach Program, is "to build better writers not just better papers." She speaks about how the UConn Writing Center is special because of its pure focus on writing and students helping other students: "When people come to our Writing Center, they are expecting to meet an English major. But anyone can be a good writing tutor that has the skills for it," Thurlow says of the uniqueness of the UConn Writing Center. She explains that there are political science majors as well as engineers and math majors that work at the center. She says this wide scope "broadens our understandings." According to Thurlow, all of the tutors train together and "fill in each other's gaps."

Tutors at the Writing Center help students not only with English papers but with writing from all disciplines, even lab reports, and they will look over any piece a student brings in at any stage of the writing process, making it a unique resource for all students.

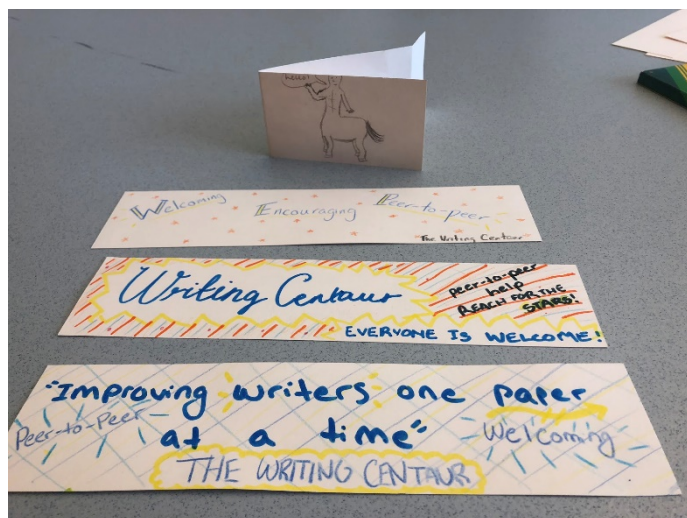
The UConn Writing Center has many other initiatives to create opportunities for students, one of them being the Outreach Program that Thurlow coordinates. She describes the outreach program as a way to reach out to schools in Connecticut and promote their own writing centers. Thurlow believes in the value of writing centers and is determined to help facilitate their growth in middle and high schools in Connecticut.

Thurlow and the Outreach Program gain the attention of schools around Connecticut and spread awareness of writing centers in many ways. Their main method of outreach is partnering with local schools to either create a writing center or enhance one that already exists. They also hold an annual conference at UConn to help schools understand the benefits of having a writing center, as well as encouraging field trips to the UConn Writing Center so students can see what it looks like.

Thurlow manages the partnership with one school that UConn's Writing Center selects to help in their endeavors to create or uphold a Writing Center. Thurlow is responsible for the success of this partnership, as well as preparing for the conference and hosting the field trips for schools to come to the UConn Writing Center.

The most recent Connecticut school the Writing Center partnered with is Ellington High School. Thurlow describes how she and the other Writing Center personnel go to Ellington once a week to train students to be tutors in their own writing center. She believes that the Writing Centers' goal of students tutoring students "continues to build student confidence in writing through working with peers".

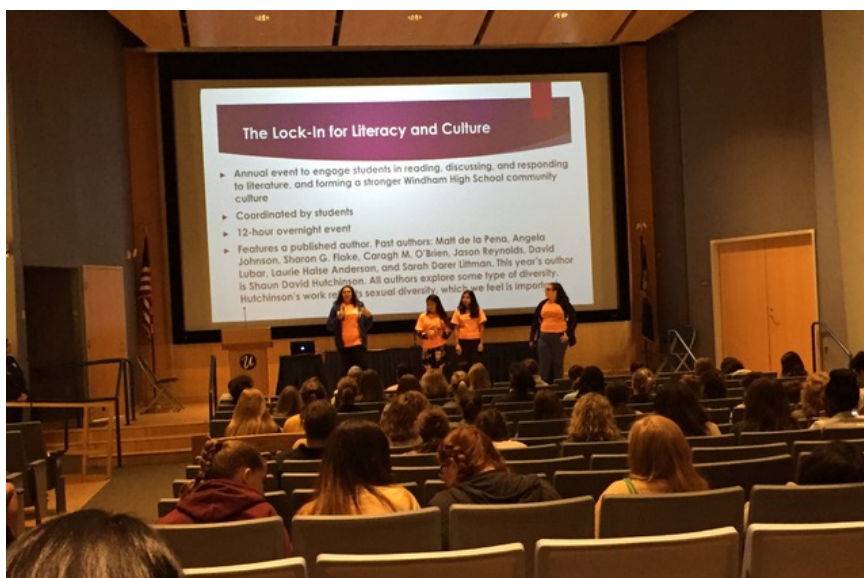
She also believes that there is a level of comfort that students get from being tutored by a peer rather than a teacher or someone in an authoritative position. But even though the



Student-made bookmarks from the Writing Center that Thurlow helped create

Writing Center is a student-centered program, Thurlow believes that teacher support is vital. She says that many teachers understand the importance of writing centers and are already doing peer review exercises with their students in classes. Taking this outside of class and allowing students to have a place to help each other with their writing is valuable.

Overall, Thurlow's work with the Writing Center and the Outreach Program is inspiring. She supports students helping other students improve and enhance their writing and hopes to create a Writing Center in her classroom or school when she becomes a teacher.



A presentation at the Outreach Program's annual conference that Thurlow planned and coordinated

2019 Letters about Literature State Semi-Finalists Celebrated at CT State Capitol

By Devin Ruot, CWP Intern and Mollie Kervick, Graduate Assistant

For the last two years, the University of Connecticut's Neag School of Education, UConn Department of English, and the Connecticut Writing Project have hosted the [Letters About Literature writing contest sponsored by the Library of Congress](#). The contest asks students in grade 4-12 to write letters to the author of their favorite book, poem, or speech and expressing how the text has impacted their life and what it means to them.

Letters About Literature is a national contest and this year, 946 students in the state of Connecticut submitted.

Contestants are organized into three different levels: Level 1 includes grades four through six,

Level 2 includes grades seven and eight, and grades nine through twelve make up Level 3. This year, the entries were judged by students in UConn's teacher-education program and Connecticut Writing Project teacher consultants. Of the 946 entries, 96 were chosen as State Semi-Finalists. Of these State Semi-Finalists, nine were judged to be State Finalists, with one student in each level as the top-winner in their



2019 Letters about Literature CT Finalists

level. These three students will go on to be judged alongside other State Finalists across the country at the national level and, if selected as national winners, will have the opportunity to travel to Washington, D.C. to read their pieces.

On April 26th, Neag School of Education, UConn English, and the Connecticut Writing Project hosted a Letters About Literature award ceremony at the Connecticut State Capitol Building. The event was attended by the nine State Finalists as well as their families and teachers. In addition, state representatives Senator Derek Slap, Representative Jillian Gilchrest, Senator Saud Anwar, Representative Tom Delnicki, Senator Mae Flexer and Representative Greg Haddad were present.

The event opened with welcome remarks from Associate Professor in the Neag School of Education, Doug Kauffmann, and the director of the Connecticut Writing Project Jason Courtmanche. Bob Hasenfratz, head of the UConn English department, and Joseph Madaus, Associate Dean of Academic Affairs for Neag School of Education, followed the welcome remarks, both expressing the vital role of reading and writing in education, but also in life more generally, as reading and writing promote democratic engagement.

Each of the State Finalists was then called up to receive their prize and take a photo with Jason Courtmanche. Next, the three top State Finalists were asked read their letters. The first reading was given by Level 1 winner, Lauren Zhang of Middlesex Middle School. Her letter to Ruta Sepetys emphasized how her book, *Salt to the Sea*, pushed Lauren towards finding happiness even in dark moments. Sarah Chandler, Level 2 winner of King Philip Middle School, expressed how the characters in the novel *Clockwork Angel* by Cassandra Clare revealed many lessons about how the world works and sparked her desire to advocate for women's rights. The last reader, Geena Kim of Westminster School, wrote to Paul Kalanithi to explain how reading his book, *When Breath Becomes Air*, helped her find peace in mortality and death. All the letters were beautifully written and stressed the transformative power of reading.

When asked what she learned from participating in the Letters About Literature contest, Geena Kim explained, "I realized how important it is, not only to read a book, but [to] reflect on the message the author is trying to convey." She said she found herself, "really thinking about what the author was thinking when he wrote the book and what it meant to [me] personally. I think it is really important to understand both perspectives when it comes to reading." Grace Wright-Goodison told us about how she chose to write a letter to Rachel DeWoskin: "I really got immersed in this book, *Blind*, and I knew I wanted to write about it. I didn't know what I wanted to write before, but then I read it and I couldn't put it down. And writing about it helped me understand it more and being involved in the contest sort of helped me understand what a big deal writing is." At the event, the writers showcased their talents and passion for reading and writing, underscoring the importance of enrichment programs and awards that further inspire students to engage with literature. For a list of CT State Semi-Finalists and Finalists, go to the Neag School of Education website or click [here](#). You can see more photos of ceremony [here](#).



(Left to Right) Rep. Greg Haddad, Sen. Mae Flexer, Doug Kauffmann, Sarah Chandler

A look inside Neag's Equity and Social Justice Committee

By Julia Mancini, CWP Intern

The University of Connecticut's Neag School of Education ranks No. 17 among all of the nation's public graduate schools of education, and No. 30 among all graduate schools of education in the nation according to the *U.S. News* 2020 rankings report. But Neag works hard to maintain accolades such as these. Constant work is being done to better the field of education and the way that UConn is preparing its preservice teachers.

One committee that's making strides to change Neag for the better is a relatively new one. [The Equity and Social Justice Committee](#) (ESJC) works from within the School of Education to improve diversity, representation and the sense of community within Neag.

According to Dr. Joseph Cooper, one of the chairpeople of the committee, a published author and an assistant professor in sport management, the committee has a few central goals. "The mission of the Equity and Social Justice Committee is to promote and facilitate equity and social justice within and on behalf of the Neag School of Education," Cooper said.



Dr. Joseph Cooper, Associate Professor of Educational Leadership and Sports Management at UConn

"These efforts shall include but are not limited to: review and recommendations for policies ... for practices and cultural/institutional norms, programming and trainings, curricula, aesthetic presentations such as representation within Neag facilities ... assets of community partners ... and a public response team for the social justice related issues at the local, state, regional, national and international levels."

With so much hate and injustice in society, the Equity and Social Justice Committee (ESJC) works to combat that negativity on the UConn campus and educate others. "When we have incidents in our society, whether it be politically, or even on campus, that may range from racial discrimination to sexual discrimination, we like to make sure that Neag is very clear in taking a bold stance that we support inclusivity. We do not support bigotry. We do not support discrimination that leads to negative outcomes or harmful effects, particularly for groups that have been disadvantaged in society," Cooper said. "We look at disrupting norms that privilege certain groups over others, and usually that's along racial,

gender and class lines. It means that we all have a part to play in promoting equity because at the end of the day, we're all human beings, right?"

Cooper says that underrepresentation is not an issue specific to Neag, but a campus-wide and societal issue. "We know that there have been hierarchies that have been socially constructed, which means they can be socially deconstructed. Just because we've done things a certain way for however long doesn't mean that it's the best way or the most equitable way." He continued, "Because we recognize that the School of Education does not operate in a vacuum, that we are a part of a subsystem of larger systems...we have to recognize that some of the broader inequalities, stereotypes and implicit biases that contribute to disparate outcomes can also manifest itself within our practices, if we're not conscious and cognizant and courageous enough to change them."

Cooper referenced other groups on campus and within Neag as laying the groundwork for the ESJC, including [Leadership in Diversity](#) (LID), [Diverse Educators Making Outstanding Change](#) (DEMO), [Collective Uplift](#), Husky Sport and the cultural centers, among others. He cites collaboration within Neag, and groups supporting each other, as a key to their success within the School of Education.

"What we were trying to do was celebrate and highlight those works but also build upon them and say, 'Hey, if certain needs are there, then we need to have a concerted effort and a group to focus on them.'

A part of the challenge is, if you don't have a specific group of people who are dedicated to addressing those issues, it's really easy for things to fall through the cracks," Cooper said. "For one, it's all of our responsibilities... We'd like to see a constellation across the School of Education, so that every faculty, every staff, every student understands how to promote and engage equity and social justice. But this group can say we're going to be consistently focused on some of these issues."

Those issues include curricula and syllabi review, improving equitable hiring practices, expanding the scope of diverse literature available to the School of Education, organizing philanthropic 5Ks and co-hosting events to honor indigenous peoples. There are numerous subcommittees within the ESJC, including the Undocumented Peer Training Subcommittee, the Syllabi Review Subcommittee, the Neag Reads Subcommittee and the PTR [Promotion, Tenure, Reappointment] Equity Reform Subcommittee, just to name a few. Each subcommittee has their own goals and responsibilities within the larger group, and help in affecting change and advocacy.


A central focus of the ESJC is peer review of syllabi, and exploring how syllabi could foster more equitable content. While this review is totally voluntary, Cooper encourages it, explaining "that it's not that a lot of faculty don't care about social justice, sometimes they just don't understand how to do it." Most programs don't emphasize equity-minded content, but it's important to provide diverse perspectives in curricula in order to create a more holistic view and for educators to understand the value of that work, according to Cooper. "We'd like for everyone to have a spirit of continuous improvement when it comes to things around cultural knowledge, understanding and empathy and being aware of your own privileges, biases, even your own blind spots," Cooper said of the committee's plans to host cultural awareness and empathy trainings. "None of us is an expert on everything."

The ESJC is comprised of faculty, staff, graduate students and undergraduate students. Cooper and other members encourage everyone to attend a meeting and get involved. Monthly meeting times for the fall semester can be found in the Neag newsletter. "Even if you can't come to meetings, you can still be involved. You can lend your talents, your voice and your time to make sure that certain things are improving throughout the School of Education," Cooper said. "It's not one person. It's a collective group because everyone has different talents, insights and resources that lend themselves to enhancing equity and social justice within Neag," Cooper noted of the committee's shared leadership approach.

Looking to the future of the ESJC, Cooper hopes to see the subcommittees thrive and expand, syllabi become more reflective of diverse views, a more diverse faculty and staff, and equity for students across diverse backgrounds, particularly those that are underrepresented. "Ideally, instead of Equity and Social Justice being a committee within the School of Education, people will look at Neag as the leader in terms of schools of education that reflect, embody and promote equity and social justice. Every day we see people engage in humanistic acts. We need it to be happening systemically"

If you have any further questions about the ESJC, Dr. Cooper encourages you to reach out to him directly at joseph.cooper@uconn.edu. Other contacts for the ESJC include Milagros Castillo-Montoya, an assistant professor of higher education and student affairs, Mark Kohan, an assistant clinical professor, and Glenn Mitoma, an assistant professor and director in Neag.

"Look for the attainable goals. Start small and focus on one particular issue you're passionate about," Cooper says to those looking to create their own advocacy groups, or just looking to support diversity and inclusivity in general. "Look for the ways you can affect subtle change."



"It's not one person. It's a collective group because everyone has different talents, insights and resources that lend themselves to enhancing equity and social justice..."