



Telling Our Story:

How Writers@Work: An Alumni Writers-in Residence Series Came into Existence

Writers @ Work is an alumni writers-in-residence series featuring both well-established and emerging writers, editors, and publishers working in a range of professional sectors (e.g., corporate, nonprofit, governmental, educational, media-related). The series seeks to connect Fredonia’s alumni, students, faculty, and community members with a focus on the diverse ways writing and the humanities make a difference in the world.

Who We Are:

The Writers@Work series emerged from conversations about the transdisciplinary importance of professional writing, the desire to further enhance students’ career-readiness and awareness, and an avid interest to find new ways to engage our alumni. At its launch in November 2015, the series intentionally recruited collaborative partners from Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, and University Advancement. Representatives from two academic departments (English and History) joined the directors of two administrative offices (Alumni Affairs and Career Development). Over time, the series staff has expanded to include representatives from additional departments (Business, Communications, and Theatre and Dance) and campus offices (Admissions).

As of March 2018, the series is still growing. On campus, we are working to recruit representatives from the physical and social sciences and from pre-professional programs. We are also working to expand our funding sources beyond annual grants to ensure continuity for the series.

What We Are Proudest Of:

In just a few years, the series has already reached audiences of more than 1,200, roughly eighty percent of whom are current students. We have also reached thousands of prospective students and their families because our events are intentionally timed to open houses and college exploration days, making alumni writers available to share their stories with undecided students. The series has also won a 2017 SUNY Career Development Organization Award for Excellence in Employer/Faculty/Community Engagement. The series is equally proud to be selected to present “Transdisciplinary Collaborations: Innovative and Applied Career Development” at NASPA’s 100th Anniversary Conference in March 2018.

On our website, check out our highlights reel, which features some of the dozen writers we have featured to date. In it, you’ll see a snippet of Sean Kirst’s open house remarks, which went viral. The audience rose and gave Sean a standing ovation for sharing his personal journey from a childhood of extreme economic instability to finding his passion for writing—and his future wife—at SUNY Fredonia—to then achieving both popular and critical acclaim for his writing for *The Syracuse Post-Standard*. This is just one story we can tell out of more than a dozen.

What We Do:

The series organizes four residencies a year, two per semester, typically timed to coincide with campus recruitment initiatives. From alumni who are “four years out” and already achieving significant success to alumni who are forty years out and are mentoring current students through intensive paid internship experiences, alumni writers-in-residence donate their time to share their expertise, engage current students, and demonstrate to both current and prospective students what they can do with a degree from a Fredonia.

Residencies have ranged from a single day to nearly a week, with the typical residency averaging two to three days. We find students become more confident approaching alumni after multiple encounters, so we try to structure a mix of public and private (both class-specific and invitation-only) events over several days.

Overall, our residencies follow the same basic structure. At minimum, all alumni writers-in-residence participate in the following public or large-group events:

- one or more class visits, each of which is carefully curated with the faculty member and alumni writer;
- a public talk that (a) elaborates upon the significance and varieties of workplace writing the writer engages in day to day; and (b) conveys the value of the alumni writer’s experiences at Fredonia and what role these experiences in and beyond the classroom may have played in the writer’s professional success;
- a student-only writing workshop, engaging students in real-world writing needs and sharing specific tips and tricks learned on the job; also,
- in addition, each writer joins smaller groups of selected students (typically from two to six) over coffee or a meal in a campus dining hall to share more personalized advice and to give these students—who are about to embark on a similar career path—the opportunity to ask questions and to develop and to apply their networking skills.

While there are common features to our residencies, it’s important to note that each individual residency is developed in close collaboration with each alumni writer. We involve alumni as deeply as they wish (or not) in our planning and publicity, and we communicate with them via email and phone to develop topics and activities they are passionate about. For example, alumni writers have led workshops on writing for different audiences and for different mediums; on cultivating relationships in book publishing and developing a concept from pitch to published book; on using social media to promote social justice; and on networking to land that first job out of college.

We also take the time to learn what else alumni writers would like to do while they are on campus. For example, if they identify individuals or new buildings they’d like to see, we work to arrange these experiences. Alumni writers have toured our Fredonia Technology Incubator; talked with the e-boards of student groups they once led, like the Black Student Union and *The Leader*; critiqued writing by members of student clubs and honors organizations, including Alpha Lambda Delta, Golden Key, History Club, Sigma Tau Delta, Social Studies Club, Tau Delta, and Writers’ Ring; and joined their former faculty and fellow alumni now working on staff for a fine-dining experience (complete with linen tablecloth and stem glassware) in one of our campus dining halls. We have also partnered with student-run media

organizations to feature our writers on radio programs like *High Noon Friday* and on TV programs. And we have partnered with administrative divisions and offices ranging from the Fredonia College Foundation, the Office of the President, and the Office of Veterans Affairs to the Fredonia Division of Engagement and Economic Development and the Professional Development Center to develop programs that draw upon alumni writers' expertise.

Who Alumni Writers Are:

The occupational and disciplinary diversity of alumni writers demonstrates the importance of communication to success in every professional sector and for every professional rank. By April 2018, the series will have hosted ten residencies featuring professionals in corporate, nonprofit, academic, and government jobs. These alumni write for the page, for broadcast and social media, and for public address (e.g., speeches). They are owners of small businesses; valued staff members of regional corporations and national private companies; directors of communications for regional public nonprofits and for government officials; freelance contributors to some of today's most popular online and social-media publications; and self-employed authors. Few of the alumni's job titles overtly identify them as writers, but all the following people rely every day on the quality of their writing to do their jobs and to achieve success for their organizations, their causes, and their careers. These alumni include

- a senior marketer for technology and innovation companies;
- a nonprofit public-relations specialist;
- a management-development program coordinator;
- an academic and NPR commentator using the page, Web, and social media to promote social justice;
- a social-media manager;
- a video producer;
- a playwright, filmmaker, and writing coach/consultant;
- a former communications director for a nonprofit institution and (current) public-history writer;
- several communications directors for public servants;
- award-winning print and broadcast journalists; and
- book-publishing professionals.

Future invitations include a science writer, a former U.S. ambassador, and a comedian and actor who also freelances as a motivational speaker.

How We Do It:

We run the series on the sweat and good will of numerous partners. Our collaborative group is composed of students, faculty, and staff, all of whom have an active voice in series development. Faculty and staff suggest alumni writers and do much of the legwork to coordinate events. Undergraduate interns, who receive academic credit, help us to produce the events themselves as well as to manage our social media. Video production interns also document the series and produce short, polished YouTube videos capturing the spirit of each residency for posterity and for promotional uses. Graduate assistants, who receive a stipend, execute much of the logistics, liaise to alumni, produce promotional materials, and draft grant applications. The students also introduce events and interview

alumni writers, gaining valuable oral-communication skills. The students' support not only benefits the series; it provides them with professional samples of writing for multiple media, audiences, and purposes, which they can use in their career searches.

The annual budget for the series is less than five figures, and it is composed of competitive grants from on-campus funds, as well as targeted funding and modest support from partners to cover specific one-time costs. Overall, our costs remain low because staff and alumni writers donate their time and their services, and series partners and other campus offices provide significant in-kind support (including free lodging on campus and free or low-cost printing of promotional materials). Alumni have also shown us that a little thanks goes a long way: we provide meals, lodging, reimbursement of transportation expenses, and a modest gift as a token of our appreciation. They provide the unmatched experience of wanting to give back and to give thanks for their own experiences as students. They are pioneering what we like to call reverse-community service, a trend that we hope will catch on!

For a step-by-step guide to how we produce the series and how you can produce your own Writers@Work series for your campus, please visit <https://home.fredonia.edu/writersatwork>.

Why We Do It:

The “why” is the essential question for us. This series has many “whys.”

The first “why” is to serve the needs of our students. One is the recognition that some students lack confidence in their skill sets and professional aptitudes. One team member discovered in her professional-writing course that a lack of confidence and experience was holding back her students even more than their professional aptitudes. For this reason, it makes sense to bring to campus not just any successful writer but successful alumni writers. These alumni have sat where our current students are now sitting. They can share their journeys and bring an ethos that a nonaffiliated writer cannot. And they can both inspire current students to believe in themselves and help these students to find their professional pathways. As one current student wrote about a November 2017 residency with alumna Wendy Corsi Staub, a *New York Times*–bestselling writer, and her HarperCollins editor, Lucia Macro, “I’m very grateful to have been provided such a hands-on, unique experience. These wonderful women, Wendy Corsi Staub and Lucia Macro, brought personal insight from their professions directly to me, a student who’s drawn to the field they’re doing successful things in. After the several workshops and lectures, I feel like I’m more aware of what to expect from publishing houses post-graduation. Thank You, Writers@Work, for bringing this beneficial experience to campus -- I’m looking forward to the next!”

What starts in person, we’ve found, also often continues. Seeing students continue to reach out to alumni writers—and seeing our alumni writers continue to respond—long after a residency is over motivates us to work even harder and to always do better for the next event. This “why” is all about what happens during and after: the ongoing mentoring, networking, and guidance, which keep us going, too.

The second “why” is to better engage our alumni. We recognize that alumni bring tremendous talent, experience, and a genuine desire to serve and to give back, and this series represents an opportunity to formalize and to sustain these relationships. In the short term, the series aims to recognize and honor

alumni for their achievements and for their meaningful contributions to our campus. In the long term, the series hopes to harness its potential to leverage these connections into applied-learning experiences and career pathways for students.

The third “why” is to serve and advance the needs of our institution. It’s important to note that this innovative series also is a conscious response to campus-wide calls for strategic enrollment initiatives. When the series was founded, our university president had recently called upon faculty and staff to do a better job of telling the story of what it means to be a Fredonian. Our series strives to tell alumni’s stories and to do so in ways that advance our institutional mission and that support recruitment and retention initiatives. In engaging alumni, who are a valuable resource in word-of-mouth campaigns for enrollments, we strengthen the possibility of applications not only from legacy candidates but also from alumni’s personal and professional networks. And by showcasing alumni’s success in open-house forums, the series makes a pragmatic and persuasive appeal to parents of prospective students: alumni writers are tangible evidence of both the power—and the value—of a Fredonia degree.

The series also strives to be a differentiator for our campus. Where many campuses feature creative writing residencies, our campus is among the few to recognize and engage professional writers and professional writing across disciplines and careers. This engagement is one important way our campus helps prepare students for careers, by addressing the skills gap between current college graduates and current demands from employers.

The fourth “why” is to enhance our own engagement. Importantly, our series also fosters a sense of shared mission among staff members. Too often, academic institutions can be described as silos, without strong communication or collaboration between divisions. One of the key lessons we have learned since the launch of the series is how much each side of the house contributes and how greatly our mutual efforts together support the success of students and the vibrancy of our campus as a culture of learning.

What We Have Learned and Plan to Do Better:

As a series, we have learned three key lessons:

- 1) Relationships among all constituents are key.
- 2) Multimedia documentation is essential.
- 3) Assessment can strengthen our achievements.

Lesson #1: There’s nothing more time consuming—or important—than maintaining relationships, with our partners, our alumni writers, our internal campus offices, our campus community, and our region. Getting the word out and managing outreach to different constituencies is essential to ensuring that a great event has an equally great audience. And keeping relationships going long after a residency is perhaps even more essential to developing the pathways we’d like to see for students.

Lesson #2: Simply put, video and Dropbox links expire, and computer files can become corrupted. Losing valuable data compromises our ability to tell alumni’s stories. We need to become better stewards of our video footage, our photographs, and our publicity. Part of this story is ensuring better continuity with the student interns who manage this portion of the series. We are currently having our video production and social media interns develop job descriptions and instructions so that subsequent students in these roles will have a set of unified instructions to follow.

Lesson #3: While the series has been persuasive in demonstrating its success on our campus (i.e., anecdotally), we must do a better job of making our success measurable and thus reportable to both internal and outside organizations. While the series did, from the outset, identify goals, it has not yet attempted to assess these goals beyond gathering statistics about attendance. Moving forward, we can do a better job to measure the impact that events had upon audiences and to capture what audiences took away from each individual session. We can make better decisions about which events to continue and how to spend our funds if we have objective data assessing the outcomes of the series overall and of individual events and residencies. To this end, we will begin later this semester to revise the series' mission and its goals to reflect our considerable growth over the past three years. We will also design simple qualitative and quantitative assessment tools for each kind of event (talk, workshop, class visit, meal, coffee talk), and we will begin gathering this data next year from both alumni writers and audiences. Once we have a year of data, we will assess how well we are meeting our goals and what adjustments, and new directions, we may be ready to make.