

New education initiative provides one-on-one assistance to University students seeking improved writing skills

By Nancy Neff

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Tucked away in Parlin 102 on the UT Austin campus is a valuable new resource for students who want one-on-one help with their writing — whether it's finding a topic for a paper, organizing ideas or clearing up problems with grammar and punctuation.

Government junior Travis Shook found it. He came in recently to the Undergraduate Writing Center and got help on his English paper from graduate student Elizabeth Dell. She, along with other consultants, has been trained to help students develop strategies to improve their writing.

The new center is part of the Division of Rhetoric and Composition, a dramatic new initiative in the teaching of writing — with

an emphasis on writing and communicating through network computer. The division, which was established earlier in the year to provide an undergraduate writing program at the University, held an open house last week to show off its facilities.

"Seeing that students graduate from the University with a high level of writing skills is our ultimate goal," said Dr. Lester Faigley, professor of English and director of the division. "Writing is the core of education and is important in all disciplines. College-trained people, without exception, will have to write on the job, and much of it is complex."

The division is responsible for all lower and upper division writing courses (except creative writing) formerly taught by the English Department. Establishment of the

division was one of the proposals recommended by the Special Committee on the Undergraduate Experience, which was charged with undertaking a comprehensive and thorough examination of undergraduate education at UT Austin.

Courses offered include Rhetoric and Composition (E 306), a required course for all UT undergraduates; Rhetoric and Composition for Non-Native Speakers of English, designed to help non-native speakers acquire the analytical and writing skills they need for success at the University; The Writing Process; Thinking and Writing; Advanced Expository Writing; and Rhetoric and Composition for High School English Teachers.

"We offer a range of carefully developed undergraduate writing classes from

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New writing program helps students prepare for life after college

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general courses in argumentation and analysis at the freshmen level to seminars in writing and rhetoric for upper-division students," Faigley said. "The division already enjoys national leadership in the teaching of writing using networked computers, and we will continue to develop innovative approaches for integrating computers into writing instruction."

The Undergraduate Writing Center opened this fall and in the first four weeks of operation more than 200 students brainstormed with writing consultants. Students may use the resources, free of charge, by dropping in or phoning ahead for an appointment.

Sara Kimbell, the writing center's director, believes a key to the success of the

center is the approach consultants take toward undergraduates. "It's important that we view students as competent adults who are seeking assistance with difficult tasks," she said. "The help we provide is intended to foster independence."

Consultants are graduate and undergraduate students who have been trained to give students specialized writing instruction. The center currently is open only to those students who are taking Division of Rhetoric and Composition Courses. By fall of 1994, however, it will be open to all undergraduates.

In the future, the writing center also will provide electronic conferencing through which students who are unable to visit the center can transmit a draft essay or other writing project and receive comments from a writing consultant. Plans also are under-

way to create on-line handbooks of grammar and usage and "Most Frequently Asked Questions," which students can assess 24 hours a day. A writer's advice phone, which the university community and the Austin community at large can call for advice on matters of style, mechanics, usage and manuscript form, also will be established.

Also included in the division's domain are the Computer Writing and Research Labs headed by John Slatin, associate professor. The CWRL facilities include two networked computer classrooms and the new Multimedia Learning Facility. Work in the labs concentrates on developing courseware, incorporating recent technical advances into course curricula and training and supporting instructors who teach in the computer classrooms.

Next summer, first-year writing

students at UT will begin using a textbook written specifically for them. *The Student Guide to First-Year Writing* is a catalog of student writing that not only showcases quality student work, but also stimulates in-class and out-of-class discussions about the ways writers approach assignments. "The guide also will serve as a valuable reference tool for students, providing helpful information about effective peer critiquing and ways to avoid plagiarism, while addressing practical concerns such as course registration and placement," Faigley said.

The division also is in the process of producing a Substantial Writing Course Manual to help faculty across campus successfully work writing into their classes, said Faigley. "The manual offers helpful advice and specific examples — from across the disciplines," he said.