

Eight steps for developing a first-year English composition award

A look at a successful program at East Carolina University

by Ali D. Abdulla and Janice Steed Lewis

During the 2000–2001 academic year, librarians at East Carolina University's (ECU) Joyner Library developed and implemented a research competition for students in first-year English composition classes. The award competition is a relatively inexpensive way to promote library instruction and research skills and to reward students for excellence. Lessons we learned during the process of establishing the award may be useful to other libraries considering similar projects.

Recognizing both the newly established higher education vision that provides for lifelong learning opportunities and trains students to become independent learners and the critical role information technology will play in the lives of our students and faculty, academic librarians have undertaken tremendous innovations to raise the profile of information literacy and bring together content learning and information literacy development.

The first-year composition award reflects our librarians' efforts in working closely with teaching faculty and moving library support toward a broader role in fostering student learning. It represents a partnership between teaching faculty and librarians at ECU that is helping build a university-wide awareness of information literacy as a key to student learning and to the university's lifelong learning agenda.

Because the first-year English composition course provides the basic concepts and skills of

information literacy to undergraduate students, we looked to these classes as one of the most appropriate venues for developing a collaborative partnership with teaching faculty. Creating an award program focused on this segment of our user group strengthens the library's natural link to the writing curriculum of the university.

Promoting research and writing

The First-Year Writing Program at ECU consists of two three-credit-hour classes that are general education requirements for all baccalaureate degree programs. English 1100 focuses on principles of expository writing, while English 1200 provides instruction in critical reading, library research, and research writing, including analytical and argumentative writing. The typical class size is 25 students. Classes are taught by a combination of tenured and tenure-track faculty, adjunct faculty, and teaching assistants who are graduate students in the Master's of Arts in English program. The majority of English 1200 instructors schedule one or two library instruction sessions for their classes.

Traditionally, the coordinator of instructional services has enjoyed a close relationship with the director of the First-Year Writing Program. She is invited to meet with new English teaching assistants at the start of each semester to explain the learning objectives for basic instruction sessions and to discuss the instruction options available to the instructors and their students.

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With the relationship between the library and the First-Year Writing Program in mind, the head of the reference department developed the idea of a research competition. He believed that the competition would promote research and writing skills and showcase the library's role in teaching the research process. He hoped that the program would provide helpful insights into the types of subjects being researched by our first-year students and the teaching methods of the course, which would lead to a higher level of collaboration with teaching faculty in the English department.

Within one academic year, we established, named, funded, and promoted the program, held the first competition, and awarded cash prizes to three students who wrote the top papers. The award winners were recognized at a reception attended by top university administrators, students, faculty, library staff, and members of the Friends of the Library. The effort reflects a successful collaboration among all these groups.

Eight steps to success

The following steps outline the process the ECU library followed in setting up the competition and some lessons we learned along the way.

1. Obtain the support of library administration. Our first step was to meet with the library director to obtain his support for the program. Since we planned to award cash prizes to the winners of the competition (\$100 for first place, \$75 for second, and \$50 for third), we needed a funding source. The director enthusiastically endorsed the competition and offered to ask the Friends of the Library to sponsor the program, i.e., pay for a reception honoring the winners and for the cash awards. The director also suggested that we name the award in honor of a respected long-time professor in the English Department, a gentleman who also serves as the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. Doing so gave us credibility within the university community, helped us attract an audience for the award reception, and recognized a worthy member of the faculty. The Friends of the Library's sponsorship also improved our credibility and stability.

2. Actively involve the English Department. The director of the First-Year



Standing (left to right): W. Keats Sparrow (dean of the College of Arts and Sciences), Carroll Varner (director of Academic Library Services), English 1100 instructors Mary Carroll-Hackett and Jennifer Hughes. Seated: Contest participant Ginger Raynor, first-place winner Meagan Attanasi, and second-place winner Rebecca Lynn Goodmuth.

Writing Program was a natural liaison within the English Department. He enthusiastically supported the competition and its potential for fostering closer instructional ties between Joyner Library and the English Department. The director presented the proposal for the competition to the department's composition committee and obtained its support. He readily agreed to be one of the judges and recommended that the associate director of the program also be a judge. An instruction librarian at Joyner Library agreed to be the third judge.

3. Develop workable guidelines. We used the Web to find several similar programs at other academic libraries and reviewed their rules. The director of the First-Year Writing Program suggested that the guidelines be flexible enough to include the variety of approaches to research writing being taught (for example, multidisciplinary and multi-genre approaches). We felt, too, that the guidelines needed to be general, since the papers were originally written for a class assignment and would have to meet any requirements imposed by the instructor, such as number or type of sources used or length.

The draft guidelines stated that the papers had to include a research component and that they would be judged on the quality of the research as well as the quality of the writing. We also required that the paper have received a grade of "A" in an English 1200 class. The associate director of the First-Year Writing

Program suggested that we eliminate this requirement, to remove any possible unfairness caused by inconsistencies in grading practices by instructors. We removed this requirement, and the number and quality of papers submitted for the competition proved that students would not be motivated to submit mediocre papers.

4. Promote the competition. We promoted the award competition during English 1200 library instruction sessions. Handouts listing the award guidelines were available for pick up during these classes and in the reference area of the library. We posted signs in the library and outside of the English Department's classrooms. The guidelines were also posted on the Library Instruction and First-Year Writing Program Web sites. The First-Year Writing Program's director reminded instructors of the award at their weekly meetings. Only teaching assistants regularly attend these meetings, however, so faculty who taught English 1200 classes may not have been as aware of the award program. During the second year of the competition, we sent e-mail reminders near the end of the semester to all English 1200 faculty and teaching assistants, asking them to announce the competition to their students and encourage students to submit papers.

5. Develop a process for handling submitted papers. We decided that papers could be mailed or personally delivered to the First-Year Writing Program director (one of the judges) or to the coordinator of instructional services (who was not a judge). Without examining them, the director placed entries in an envelope and sent them to the coordinator. It was important to have someone handle the entries who was not a judge. Even though the guidelines specified that identifying information should only be on a cover page, many students' names were in headers on each page of the paper (probably a requirement from the instructor). The coordinator blacked out all identifying information, numbered the papers, made a key identifying numbers/names, made copies of the papers, and distributed them to each judge.

6. Judging. Judging went smoothly, with compromises being made where necessary. It probably is wise to have an odd number of judges in case a tiebreaker is needed. We also learned to allow sufficient time between judging and the awards ceremony to follow institutional procedures for having checks prepared for the winners. (A staff member had to advance the money for the awards at our first ceremony).

7. Recognize the winners with appropriate fanfare. We chose the day before classes began in the fall for the awards ceremony. We planned a simple reception with cake and punch. Invitations were created using Blue Mountain e-cards. A nice feature of these e-cards is the RSVP button. Even though many people selected the "Not Sure" response, we at least had some idea of how many people to expect. We invited all of the students who submitted entries, all teaching assistants and faculty in the English Department, the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, members of the Board of the Friends of the Library, members of the library's reference department, the library director, and the library's liaison with the Friends group. We contacted the winners via e-mail; if they did not reply within a few days, we telephoned them. We prepared special certificates for the first-, second- and third-place winners, as well as certificates of participation for all entrants. The library director served as the master of ceremonies at the reception and awarded the prizes and certificates.

8. Publicize the winners and the contest. We sent press releases and photographs to the student and faculty campus newspapers. Had it been later in the school year, we would have tried to have a reporter and photographer from the student newspaper attend the reception. We were pleasantly surprised that a reporter later interviewed the head of the reference department and one of the winners. We also posted fliers announcing the winners in the library and on the Library Instruction Web site.

Moving forward

This year, we will obtain the winners' written permission to post their papers on our Web site. Also, we'll ask the winners to read excerpts from their papers during the reception.

Establishing the award program required a substantial time commitment from library staff. With the groundwork in place, though, much less time has been required to coordinate the program during its second year. The benefits have been well worth the time spent. We increased the visibility of the Library Instruction and the First-Year Writing Programs, we developed closer working relationships between these groups, we positioned the library as an active player in the undergraduate research activities of the university, and we encouraged and rewarded excellence among our students. ■

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