

Who are our students?

A digest of facts and figures concerning UW-Madison freshmen
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Introduction

As teachers, we probably too often focus our discussions of course design and evaluation on *impersonal* matters, on questions of curriculum, methodology, theory, topics, and texts. Perhaps this comes from the ingrained belief that teaching is essentially knowledge transfer, that learning is at bottom cognitive development, and that everything else is just background noise. But that is a narrow view of a rich and complicated set of phenomena. Teaching and learning are always and everywhere intensely *personal*, highly *interpersonal* activities, inextricably situated in particular human lives, concrete social relations, and specific historical and geographic contexts. At the heart of any educational project are real people interacting with one another and the world and changing in the process. The classroom is always therefore an emotionally and ethically charged environment.

These *personal* dimensions of schooling are especially prominent in a course like English 100, in which nearly everyone involved occupies a liminal position in the academy: the students because they are new to college, often just a few months out of high school; the instructors (mostly graduate teaching assistants), because they are neither full-fledged faculty members nor “just” students anymore. And they are all very different from one another, the students representing every imaginable academic profile on campus, and the instructors coming from every corner of the English Department and beyond, some with little experience in or even professional commitment to writing instruction. And the course is socially and practically *intense*: a class of 19 or fewer students – often further subdivided into peer writing groups and instructor-student conferences – actively engaged with one another and course materials, reading, writing, and talking their way through four and a half months’ close investigation of complex problems and issues. In such a course, there is no textbook for the students to hide behind, no lecture hall to be anonymous in, no objective body of knowledge to deflect the focus from their experiences, ideas, opinions, and “ways with words.” It’s hard to imagine an educational situation, at least on this campus, more personally and interpersonally *fraught*.

How can English 100 instructors prepare for these aspects of the course? Experience helps, but that’s precisely what new teachers lack. Honest and frank acknowledgement of the complexity of teaching freshman composition, as well as support from a community of fellow teachers, are also helpful. But instructors benefit as well from simply knowing more about the situations they will find themselves in and the students who will be sitting in front of them on the first day of class. My hope is that this document, a digest of facts and figures about UW-Madison freshmen at the beginning of the 21st Century, can be a kind of starting point in that effort. We also of course need to be talking about *ourselves* and what it means to grow as teachers in a program like this; Mary Lou Odom’s recent dissertation demonstrates dramatically how English 100 TAs each negotiate the program in light of their own background

experiences and educational goals. This paper, however, is about the student part of the equation.

What follows is partial and imperfect. I see this as a working document, both in the sense that I hope to keep improving it, but also in the sense that I hope to update it every year according to trends in our students themselves. I'm also working on a companion document that will connect the social conditions described here to recent research on writing, language, and learning. My goal below is therefore not to be comprehensive about our students or to tease out all the implications of that knowledge.

But even given those limitations, I think the facts collected here show persuasively 1) how different our students are from one another and how important it is that we respect and acknowledge those differences; 2) how different from the wider American population UW-Madison students are becoming and how much our institution may be perpetuating societal inequities in its admissions practices; and 3) how different our students are from *us* in so many ways. There are also of course obvious and important *similarities* among our students, between our students and the society at large, and between them and us – we need to learn to see both the diversity and the commonality in the young men and women sitting in front of us.

Who are our students?

Who are our students? In an important sense, it's impossible to answer that question. Any abstract characterization of UW-Madison freshmen, of the type one could provide in a paper like this, would be unfair to the individual uniqueness and diversity of our students. In 2003-04, there were 41,507 students at this university, the 8th largest total enrollment in the country. About 69% of them, or 28,583 students, were undergraduates; and 5,445 of those were freshmen. These students have come here to study all kinds of things, from the fine arts to mechanical engineering, nursing to Russian. And they have come from nearly all 50 states and many foreign countries and represent a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds, educational histories, and personal experiences and goals.

Each one of our students is a full, complete, and unique human being. They have mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, boyfriends and girlfriends, hopes and fears. They are unpredictable and irreducible. They are prejudged by us at great risk to their integrity as human beings and our success as teachers. One of the first things you'll learn as a teacher of writing is that you can ask all of your students to read the exact same text and think about the exact same issue and respond to the exact same assignment, and yet you will receive from them nineteen completely different papers. That's one reason teaching writing is so difficult and time-consuming and sometimes even heart-rending; and it's also why it can be so rewarding. Probably more important than learning any theory, technique, or methodology is getting to know your students as human beings, treating them as individuals, and learning to like them as writers and thinkers.

Having said all that, you needn't go to your classroom on the first day of the semester as if the 19 students assigned to your section represent some random cross-section of the human population. Compared to society at large and to other institutions of higher learning both in this state and elsewhere (especially elsewhere!), our undergraduate classrooms have a certain demographic feel to them that you can

prepare for. Let's talk, then, about the *general* characteristics of UW-Madison freshmen as revealed by the university's own data.

First, our students are young. UW-Madison undergraduate students are, in general, traditional college-aged students, the vast majority of them between 17 and 22 years old. In fact, the average age of our undergraduates is actually declining, against the national trend of students attending post-secondary institutions at increasingly older ages. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, enrollment of students over 25 years old in U.S. colleges and universities *rose* 34 percent between 1980 to 1990, while the number of those under 25 rose only 3 percent. In other words, American college students are getting older, while UW-Madison undergraduate students are getting younger. What this means is that most of the students in your class will be only 17 or 18 years old. Think about this for a moment. As Bernie Hoes has often reminded English 100 TAs in past orientations, the students facing you on the first day of class will be for all practical purposes high school students, and *you* will be for all practical purposes a high school teacher. This may not be the professional identity you imagined for yourself, but it's one that you may need to adopt in order to do well in this program.

The placement of the college composition course during the freshman year, and its consequent status as an introductory, transitional, or even gatekeeping experience between high school and the "real" work of college is a source of embarrassment for some graduate students and faculty in English Departments (though we should remember that it is also a historically contingent phenomenon: in mid-19th Century America, the college course in rhetoric occurred at the *end*, not the beginning, of a student's bachelor's education – see Brereton, 1995; Connors, 1997; and Halloran, 1982). As PhD students, many of you are so enmeshed right now in your own studies, your own intellectual development, and your own professional status, that it's easy for you to think of undergraduate teaching on the model of the graduate seminar and your students as mini versions of yourself. That is probably a mistake. Most of your students will be literally *teenagers*; many will be living on their own for the first time in their lives: they will be struggling with everything from their sexual identity to how to responsibly handle alcohol to making basic decisions about what to eat and when to go to bed, things that many of you long ago figured out.

They will also be very different from you as readers, writers, and thinkers: they will have had little experience with the kinds of texts that are now your bread and butter; their cultural references will often be worlds apart from yours; and most will be unused to spending time with people who identify themselves as public intellectuals. In addition, studies suggest that many of them have just begun exercising control over the discursive moves that turn out to be central in college writing. Some freshmen have never consciously used a semi-colon in their lives; they will use the word "however," if at all, in ways that will seem awkward to you; according to a French study from the early 1990s, use of the logical connector *donc* ("therefore") doesn't typically occur in student writing until late adolescence (Piéraud-Le Bonniec, Gilberte, & Valette, M., 1991); another study found that written discourse in which a clear position on a controversial issue is justified with good reasons, situated against alternative positions and reasons, and embedded in "elaborated argumentative text" wasn't reliably generated by subjects until around the age of 15 (Coirier, Andriessen, & Chanquoy, 1999). If this research has any validity, it means that many of your students will be inexperienced in and unfamiliar with the literate practices that are central to a course like English 100. Our students are intelligent and mature, they can serve in the military,

vote in elections, and have children of their own – they are adults, and you should treat them as such. What they are not is graduate students in English.

Second, UW-Madison freshmen are about evenly split between men and women, though the proportion of women on this campus, as at most colleges and universities in this country, is increasing every year and at all levels. Fifty-three percent of undergraduate students at UW-Madison are female (though only a quarter of faculty are women, despite growth every year for the past decade). The specific situation of female writers, especially in school, has been the focus of a good bit of research and scholarship by compositionists over the last three or four decades (see, e.g., Kirsch), and there are still good reasons to be sensitive to discrimination against women in our schools and society at large. But nationwide trends appear to be moving in favor of female students. The results of the 2002 *Nation's Report Card On Writing*, sponsored by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), suggest that a gender gap in writing ability is present and growing. At every level studied (4th, 8th, and 12th grades), girls outperformed boys in writing, a difference independent of any general gender differences in schooling. And the gap widens as students get older and has also increased over time. (By comparison, the race/ethnicity gap in writing performance, at least as measured by NAEP, appears to be narrowing.) Given the historical exclusion of women from education, girls' recent performance on such tests is good news. But the young men in your classroom may have gendered issues as well.

Third, most of our students are from Wisconsin. In 2003, almost two-thirds (64%) of UW-Madison freshmen were Wisconsin residents (11% were from Minnesota, students taking advantage of the special tuition compact between the two states; and 25% were from neither Wisconsin nor Minnesota). The predominance of Wisconsinites at UW-Madison makes sense, of course: this is a state university and has a historically state-based service mission, one that is typical of the land-grant universities established in the 19th C. agricultural upper Midwest. We can be more geographically specific about our students, however, than just pinpointing which state they come from: as Deborah Brandt reports in a recent paper, "students who graduate from high schools in the degree-rich communities around Madison or from the upscale southern suburbs of Waukesha and Ozaukee counties are four to seven times more likely to gain access to the UW-Madison than students who graduate from high schools in Indian country or in center city Milwaukee or in the farming or manufacturing counties of central and northwestern Wisconsin—even when GPAs or test scores are the same." (Though this predominance of students from the southern metropolitan areas of the state is growing, it's not new: Merle Curti and Vernon Carstensen argued in their 1949 *History of the University of Wisconsin* that university enrollment patterns at the turn of the 19th Century were already putting the lie to any claim that UW-Madison was a farmers' and mechanics' school – there was a clear bias even then in favor of students from the professional and managerial classes of Madison, Milwaukee, and surrounding communities.)

Fourth, most of our students come from well-to-do families. Again, Deborah Brandt sums this up well: "while the average family income for Wisconsin residents is about \$44,000 a year, the average family income of UW-Madison students is close to \$76,000 a year." The culprit here is probably a combination of the increasing selectivity of the UW-Madison admissions process (itself partly a function of the huge size of recent college-age cohorts – though the university believes the state high school population peaked for the foreseeable future in 2003) and the steady rise in the cost of attending this school. For the 2003-04 academic year, tuition and fees for resident

undergraduates at UW-Madison totaled \$5,139 (the cost including books, room, board, etc. was estimated to be \$14,370). With the exception of the University of Iowa, this is still the cheapest tuition of public Big Ten universities. Unfortunately, the pressure to raise tuition of late has been unrelenting and successful; between 2002 and 2003, the tuition increase for resident undergraduates here was a whopping 16%. And although that year's hike was unusually large, tuition has typically gone up anywhere from 5 to 10% each year for the past decade, on average four times the rate of inflation, putting us at odds with the accepted affordability standard for college tuition increases of twice inflation. It should be noted that, although the median family income of students here is up, the number of students receiving financial aid and the average debt load they carry are also increasing (as they are nationally).

Meanwhile, for non-resident students, this place is now largely out-of-reach financially: at over \$19,000 per year for tuition and fees, we're the 3rd most expensive school among public Big 10 universities for non-resident undergraduates; tuition increases in this category have been *eight* times the rate of inflation in recent years and have led to a decrease in the number of out of state students applying and enrolling here, making the campus less diverse geographically (and in other ways as well).

Fifth, our students are overwhelmingly white. In 2003, 87%, or nearly 9 out of 10 UW-Madison undergraduates, were white; only 2.4% were African-American; 4.8%, Asian American; 0.53%, Native American; and 2.4%, Hispanic. This means that in a class of 19, you can expect *at most* two non-white students; and of those, only one will be from a targeted minority group (that is, African American, Native American, or Hispanic). And those of us who've taught small undergraduate classes here know that it's not unusual to not have a single member of a targeted minority group in class. Improvements in the racial and ethnic diversity of UW-Madison undergraduates, meanwhile, have been modest, despite Plan 2008 and various diversity initiatives (see <http://www.provost.wisc.edu/climate.html>). In 1994, for example, 1.9% of freshmen enrollees were African American, a number that rose to only 2.7% by 2003. Granted, Wisconsin is less racially and ethnically diverse than some states; but even by strict proportional standards, we're well below where we should be. There are, of course, obstacles to improving this situation – for example, the stark differences in academic preparation of black and white high school students in this state. In 2003, less than half of black Wisconsin public high school graduates took the ACT (for whites, the figure was 73%); only 4% scored over 22 on the test (for whites, it was 31%); and only 3% scored over 22 on the ACT *and* were in the top quartile of their class (for whites, it was 24%; for Asian Americans, 14%; Native Americans, 7%; and Hispanics, 6%).

(Unfortunately, the situation for minority students does not substantially improve once they get here, despite the fact they are in general as successful in high school as our majority students. The freshman-to-sophomore retention rate for all students here is around 90%, but for targeted minorities, it's only 80%. The six-year graduation rate for UW-Madison students, meanwhile, is 78%; but for targeted minorities, it's only 55%. What that means is that only half of the targeted minority students who enroll here actually finish. So, remember that single African-American, Native American, or Hispanic student in your English 100 classroom? Chances are nearly 50/50 that he or she will not graduate from this university, at some point falling through its cracks.)

A recent study conducted by the university projects that by 2018 this university will of necessity be more diverse than it is now, and this for the simple reason that the proportion of white high school students in this state is falling and is likely to continue

to fall every year over the next decade and a half, from 88% now to 78% in 2018. And while the white proportion of the student population falls, and the black, Asian, and Native American percentages remain relatively constant, the Hispanic population is set to rise dramatically. Currently just 3% of the state's graduating high school student population, Hispanics are projected to account for 11% by 2018. In this, the state will be following national trends: according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the Hispanic and Asian American populations are the fastest growing in the country (at respectively 13 and 12% percent annual growth vs. 3% for the whole population).

So, who will be sitting across from you on the first day of English 100? *In general*, they will be affluent white teenagers from metropolitan Wisconsin. They will also be, in general, well prepared to succeed here. In fact, the 2003 freshmen class was the most selective in the university's history. Over the last decade, there has been a huge increase in the number of undergraduate applications here (more than 20,000 for last year's class of about 5,500); and consequently, recent freshmen classes have been extraordinarily talented by the university's own admissions criteria: last year's class had an average high school GPA of 3.66; over half graduated in the top 10% of their high school class and 93% in the top quartile; and they had an average ACT score of 27.5, up from 26.1 a decade ago, and an average SAT score of 1260, up from 1203 in 1994. In other words, these are *good* students.

In some things, then, like gender, your freshmen will be more and more like the society at large; in other things, like age, class, and race, they will increasingly constitute a separate and exclusive sub-group of our society, as this university becomes more competitive, more selective, more expensive, and thus less accessible to students from non-traditional backgrounds.

What kind of writers are they?

What kinds of writers are these students? What kinds of experiences with writing have they had? How prepared are they for the kinds of writing that you'll be asking them to do in English 100? How prepared are *you* for the kinds of writing that *they* already do or will do in college and on the job *beyond* English 100? These are difficult, perhaps impossible, questions to answer, and it's beyond the scope of this paper to even try. But I think we can, as a start, advance a couple of broad claims about writing based on research and theory from the past three or four decades. First, "writing" is a single word used to refer, often clumsily, to an extraordinarily diverse range of practices, habits, activities, processes, objects, and ideologies, each inextricably situated in a particular time, place, community, purpose, and even way of being. Second, there is probably no such thing as a single, general, universal process or activity of "writing" and thus no such thing as a *general writing skill* that can be learned by late adolescents in 15 weeks in a formal academic setting – or by anyone in any setting for that matter. That's not to say that there aren't certain kinds of literate practices, processes, and objects that are especially prominent in our society and exert special power over us – but they possess their status not because they are more naturally "writing" than other practices and objects but simply because they are historically aligned with power and prestige. Students who take quickly to the kinds of literacies valued in the early 21st Century North American research university are not *ipso facto* smarter than other students, are not even better "writers" from some god's eye point of view, are certainly not necessarily better persons. They may simply have had more experience doing that kind of thing in their lives. And those who seem to struggle with

the literate moves you want them to make may be not only highly intelligent persons with rich insights and talents but also accomplished and fluent language users in other genres and situations. Their difficulties with academic writing may come from nothing more, as Mina Shaughnessy taught us thirty years ago, than lack of experience in that particular way of being.

Unfortunately, *we* often have a fairly narrow view of writing and of writers – many of us have been in English Departments our whole academic lives and have been fluent readers and writers of certain kinds of culturally-sanctioned texts since we were young. We have deeply felt attachments to “standard edited American English,” to “essayist literacy,” to a particular (and often romantic) ideology concerning “the writing life,” to pen and paper as a technology for thinking and communicating, to print as a way of being in the world. But none of this constitutes the whole of “writing,” not even the whole of academic writing; and in fact, seen from a wide enough point of view, “our” literacy is a fairly unusual and uncommon one. It is not a kind of life that all of our students, even the ones described above as academically and culturally well prepared for college life, will necessarily recognize and value. And yet this should not be taken to mean that they are illiterate or unsophisticated.

In fact, we know that a lot of writing by young people takes place *outside* of school – writing that serves very important purposes for the individuals who engage in it and writing that they are demonstrably *good* at. Since at least 1971, when Janet Emig published her groundbreaking study of the composing processes of 12th graders, compositionists have learned (though not always remembered) that many students who do not write well at school, and do not like writing at school, in fact write frequently and well in their non-academic lives and find writing in such situations fulfilling, important, and even enjoyable. Although, according to a recent National Endowment for the Arts study, “literary” reading appears to be losing popularity in this country, self-initiated creative *writing* is actually up, and it is less tied to race, class, and age than reading. In other words, writing is an increasingly prevalent and vital activity in the lives of ordinary Americans, one that is surprisingly accessible, even democratic – and *not* necessarily tied to academic situations or purposes even if it can probably never shake off the residues of school completely.

Similar conclusions could be reached about our students’ writing and the “new” media. Our students write, and write effectively, in ways and via technologies that are not typically considered part of school discourse: internet surfing, instant and text messaging, email, blogs, chat rooms, listserves, online shopping, buying, selling, gaming, betting, dating, etc. Writing in the early 21st Century involves not only new kinds of writers, texts, and genres, but also new types of literate situations, new modes of organizing and disseminating information, and new ways of constituting and maintaining human relationships. Alice Robison, a composition and rhetoric PhD student in our department, is currently engaged in a study that looks at the reciprocal influence of students’ online gaming and their school writing; one recent survey she cites documents how prevalent video, computer, and online gaming is now in the everyday lives of American college students, 65% of whom consider themselves regular players. In fact, the researchers who conducted the survey reported that the students they interviewed often had online games open on their computer screens alongside their school work, which was more often than not a written paper. In sum, there is more to writing and writers, texts and tactics, discursive processes and practices than is contained within our traditional, school-based image of literacy.

Having said that, we still need to know something about our students' experiences with academic discourse. As the research collected above shows, most of the freshmen who enroll at UW-Madison are in fact well prepared for the kind of intellectual work they will do here, including the written work. They did well in their high school classes, many of which must have demanded substantial writing of some kind; they scored high on the verbal portions of the ACT and SAT; and they wrote successful essays for their admissions applications. And, if our students are in fact predominantly affluent, white, and suburban, as claimed above, research suggests that they are probably good school writers, too: the 2002 Nation's Report Card on Writing shows that in general whites and Asian Americans perform better on writing tests than blacks and Hispanics, that non-poor students do better than poor ones, that students whose parents attended more years of school do better than those whose parents attended less, and that students from suburban schools do better than those from either rural or urban schools. And many of our students will have benefited from the good writing instruction provided in their public schools. My daughters, who attend Madison public schools, were both taught early on to use a district-wide six-trait rubric for responding to and evaluating writing; both have frequently "published" their writing in school; my high school aged daughter has a writing center in her school; both are experienced peer reviewers and accustomed to using invention and revision techniques in writing their school essays. They are often asked by their teachers to plan their writing, to write multiple drafts, to talk about their writing, to save their work in folders or portfolios – all pedagogical techniques associated with effective writing performance. Your students who graduated from Wisconsin high schools with strong traditions of responsible writing instruction will be in good shape for English 100.

Others will not be so lucky. NAEP data show that many American students do very little extended writing in school; one survey of twelfth grade students found that the majority wrote long papers (3 or more pages) less than once a month in their English classes – that is, infrequently. And they did not write much in their other classes either: 75 percent said they never received writing assignments in their social studies or history classes. When asked how many reports or papers they had written during the last six weeks as part of any school assignment, half said two or less. And American high school students often have limited exposure to a variety of written genres. They know how to read short stories and textbooks, and they are accustomed to writing reports and summaries. But they are often completely inexperienced with sophisticated academic texts and tasks of the kind they will encounter the minute they set foot in a UW-Madison classroom. As Mike Rose put it several years ago, "many young people come to university able to summarize the events in a news story or write a personal response to a play. . . . But they have considerable trouble with what has come to be called critical literacy: framing an argument or taking someone else's argument apart [and] synthesizing different points of view." Note, for example, the three writing tasks that made up the NAEP writing test for American 12th graders in 2002: there was 1) narrative writing, which "involves the production of stories or personal essays"; 2) informative writing, which "communicates information to the reader to share knowledge or to convey messages, instructions, and ideas"; and 3) persuasive writing, which "seeks to influence the reader to take some action or bring about change." None of these really corresponds to the kinds of critical argumentative writing that is the bread and butter of a course like English 100 and that often has more to do with inquiry and analysis than persuasion (see also Geisler for a compelling argument about high our students' unfamiliarity with professional academic discourse).

In sum, many of your students will *not* be prepared for the discourse demands of your course. They will have written infrequently, in a narrow range of genres, for limited purposes, and for a single audience – their teachers. They will have suffered from an American pedagogical tradition that still, in some places and in some hands, focuses writing instruction primarily on correctness, grammar, and form. They will come from schools where the five paragraph theme continues to flourish. And the only alternative pedagogy some will have encountered will have been little better: a neo-romantic approach that focuses on writing about personal experiences and responding to literature.

The result of such pedagogies at the national level is that too many high school students in our country don't like to write and don't do it particularly well (see *Because Writing Matters*). If those students are among our freshmen and signed up for English 100, they will come into your class not only unpracticed in academic writing but insecure and apprehensive about it. And, according to research conducted by Mike Palmquist and Richard Young, the students most apprehensive about writing are also the ones most likely to believe that writing is a natural gift, one that some people are simply born with and others not, a belief that is sadly and inexplicably held by some writing teachers as well.

So, your students will represent great diversity in their experiences with writing. Some will have encountered sophisticated, responsible language arts pedagogies in their high school classes; others will not. And they will come from homes and communities with widely different kinds and levels of material and ideological support for literacy (see Brandt, *Literacy in American Lives*). All that is why we encourage you to be respectful of the different literate habits and dispositions your students will come with and why it's good for you to try to learn as much as you can about them. And that's why we're also asking that this year every English 100 TA collect an early, relatively short piece of writing from their students, something done on the first day or in the first week of the semester – partly to identify potential ESL students and others who may need special help or attention from you, partly to impress on your students that this is a course in writing and that they'll be doing a lot of it, partly to help you understand what your students are like as writers and how they differ from one another.

What will they study at UW-Madison?

What do our freshmen study when they get to UW-Madison? Well, the first thing to note is that your students will be taking other courses besides English 100; the average credit load here is 14 hours, or about 5 courses, per semester. The second thing to note is that they will probably not be following in your footsteps as English majors. Of 6,004 bachelor's degrees awarded at UW-Madison in 2003, only 277 were in English (4.6%). In other words, if your class of 19 is a perfect microcosm of the undergraduate population here, *one* student in your class will be an English major. Although English remains a popular major here (ranked fourth in the number of bachelor's degrees awarded behind psychology, political science, and communication arts, and just ahead of history), it is only one of nearly 140 undergraduate majors at the university. And, in terms of broad academic divisions, this remains an overwhelmingly science-focused institution and is becoming more so. Bachelor's degrees in arts and humanities make up an average of only 17% of total degrees awarded here; the social sciences, like

psychology and political science, account for 49%; the biological sciences, 19%; and the physical sciences, 15%.

Not surprisingly, the university in general is very much oriented towards research. Though we have the 8th largest enrollment of students, we confer the 2nd most doctorates and rank 2nd in research spending among public universities (\$600 million), spending which is increasingly funded from national rather than state sources: Wisconsin taxes now support only 20% of the university's budget, down from 30% just 10 years ago. The biggest source of funds, 27% of the total, is now the federal government, especially such research agencies as the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation. Student tuition pays for only 15% of the budget; gifts and grants pay for 19%.

Ironically, given the prominent research profile of this university, the proportion of students enrolled at the graduate level has been dropping for a decade, while the proportion at the undergraduate level continues to grow. That's one reason why the university has intensified its efforts lately to improve undergraduate education here: note, for example, the growing importance of such projects as Learning Communities (see, e.g., <http://www.housing.wisc.edu/bradley/>), Freshmen Interest Groups (FIGs) (<http://www.lssaa.wisc.edu/figs/>), the Academic Advancement Program (AAP) (<http://www.lssaa.wisc.edu/aap/>), the increasing location of first-year courses in the residence halls (<http://www.housing.wisc.edu/>), the Writing Center and its various programs (<http://www.wisc.edu/writing/>), and the Morgridge Center for Public Service (<http://www.morgridge.wisc.edu/index.html>). And that's also why the university participates in the National Survey of Student Engagement (<http://www.iub.edu/~nsse/>), which has pointed out the importance in undergraduate learning of such "best practices" as frequent student-faculty contact, close cooperation among students, active learning, prompt feedback, high expectations, and respect for diversity. These various movements have begun to affect English 100 already: of 47 sections of Freshman Composition this Fall, nearly half are dedicated in some fashion to one of the university's undergraduate learning initiatives: 11 are located in residence halls (two of those with new and innovative service learning components), six are connected to FIGs, and three are part of the AAP program.

Another prominent part of the university's undergraduate mission is of course the general education program, still less than a decade old. The program currently consists of about 22-30 credit hours of coursework, most of it taken during the student's first two years at UW-Madison, and is intended "to provide for breadth across the humanities and arts, social studies, biological sciences and physical sciences; competence in communication, critical thinking and analytical skills appropriate for a university-educated person; and investigation of the issues raised by living in a culturally diverse society" (<http://www.ls.wisc.edu/gened/>). The so-called "Communication A" requirement is part of this effort and is meant to ensure that all students here are prepared for "the writing and speaking they will encounter in their college courses, as well as the kind of critical writing that will serve them well beyond the university." Some students satisfy the "Comm A" requirement without actually taking a course: by receiving a high score on the English Placement Test, a 90 minute multiple-choice exam on English usage, sentence correction, and reading comprehension taken by all students during orientation (see http://wiscinfo.doit.wisc.edu/exams/english_placement_test.htm). Currently, 75% of entering freshmen, however, are required to take an actual "Comm A" course, the two biggest of which are Communication Arts 100, *Introduction to Speech Composition*, and

English 100, *Freshman Composition*. The latter is one of the largest courses on campus, enrolling about 900 students per semester, 1,800 per year, or about a third of all freshmen here.

Conclusion

So, those are some of the characteristics of the UW-Madison students that will be enrolled in your English 100 course this semester. Remember that I have focused here on indices of predominance: because 65% of our freshmen last year were from Wisconsin, we can say that our students are *predominantly* from that state. But note that 35% were *not* Wisconsinites – a sizable portion of your English 100 enrollment if that class is a microcosm of the school as a whole. And remember that, even among students with similar characteristics, there is tremendous diversity: of the 65% from Wisconsin, there will be huge “within group” variation; most will come from suburban or suburban-like communities, but many will come from rural and urban backgrounds. Finally, even among students who fit our profile exactly, there will be differences, both visible and invisible, and those differences will be complex and irreducible. We owe it to our students to honor those differences – in fact, there may be no course on campus where human uniqueness and personhood is more important.

Works Cited

Most of the statistics in this paper came from materials provided by the Academic Planning and Analysis group of the Provost’s Office, UW-Madison (<http://wiscinfo.doit.wisc.edu/obpa/>), and the Office of Budget Planning and Analysis in the office of the Vice Chancellor for Administration (<http://www.bpa.wisc.edu/>). For links to these and other relevant sites, see the Provost’s “Teaching and Learning Excellence” website (<http://www.provost.wisc.edu/tle/>). For national trends, see the websites of the National Center for Educational Statistics (<http://nces.ed.gov/>), the U.S. Census Bureau (<http://www.census.gov/index.html>), and the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which sponsors the Nation’s Report Cards (<http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>). See also:

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