Council of Graduate Schools Future Faculty Assessment Grants (through 2014)

Through the Council of Graduate Schools, the Graduate School and Center for Teaching Excellence at Cornell have secured funding to support the professional development of graduate student instructors of first-year writing, particularly in the humanities and qualitative social sciences. These Future Faculty Assessment Grants are designed to promote research on pedagogical methods, as well as to foster both inquiry into and active assessment of student learning outcomes. Up to ten (10) FFA grants of $250 per individual will be awarded to instructors who propose projects in keeping with the mission of the CGS grant: to build skills of future faculty members in assessment of student learning. Since such goals can be most effectively pursued collaboratively, we also welcome pairs of students interested in collaboratively exploring similar topics in their individual writing seminars.

FFA grant projects are similar to Peer Collaboration or TA Mentorship programs in the Knight Institute, but distinct from these in crucial respects. Each proposal should address a plan, modest in scope, with two parts: 1) to explore a specific pedagogical strategy, and 2) to assess directly one or more specific student learning outcomes. (Some suggestions about sample activities will be outlined below; the staffs of the Knight Institute and of the Center for Teaching Excellence are also available for further consultation.)

Outcomes-based assessment will shape the future of higher education, so all Ph. D. candidates can benefit from preparing themselves for that future. Moreover, there are many advantages to exploring assessment within the structure of the First-Year Writing Seminar program: first, a robust tradition of collaborative pedagogy already exists there. Second, First-Year Writing Seminars are explicitly focused on discipline-specific learning outcomes. However, because these courses do not fulfill requirements for majors, the remarkable and innovative work done by graduate student instructors in First-Year Writing Seminars does not always make itself felt in the departmental curriculum above the introductory level. One ancillary goal of this grant initiative, therefore, is to raise the profile of the innovative teaching approaches used in designing First-Year Writing Seminars within the home department by presenting systematic evidence about student learning outcomes at a campus-wide Classroom Research and Teaching Symposium in May.

To these ends, the Fellowships will operate under certain formalities:

- **Each individual or pair will recruit at least one faculty member** to participate in planning and executing the proposed activity. This faculty member could be, but need not be, the course leader of one or more of the instructors; some grantees may instead wish to work with a dissertation committee member or chair. The level of participation can vary and need not be burdensome, but the faculty member should at least take part in the process of assessing student work.

- **Each instructor will participate in a series of six two-hour “Teaching as Research” support workshops** led by staff from the Center for Teaching Excellence, including seeking exemption or approval by the Institutional Review Board as appropriate to the study. A schedule of these practically focused workshops is available for review; these will occur on Friday afternoons beginning February 7, 2014 or soon thereafter. As part of this research, you
should plan to gather preliminary data about student learning at a mid-point in the
course through surveys or mid-semester evaluations, with help from the Center for Teaching Excellence.

- **Each individual or pair will present the results and implications of the research**
at one or more symposia convened by the Center for Teaching Excellence; ideally, the results would also be presented to the department(s) involved. For 2014, the Classroom Research and Teaching Symposium will take place on Friday, May 16.

Some discussion and illustrations of sample “learning outcomes” in various disciplines may be found in the Knight Institute pamphlet *The Indispensable Reference for Teachers of First-Year Writing Seminars*. An excellent overview of outcomes-based assessment is provided by Barbara Walvoord’s *Assessment Clear and Simple* (Jossey-Bass, 2010). In simple but general terms, assessment involves articulating a specific learning outcome; identifying an instrument to measure it (i.e., student writing); creating a “rubric” to describe performances that meet, exceed, or fall short of an acceptable standard; and then gathering and evaluating a body of student work (i.e., a sample batch of student papers). Instructors might wish to investigate such student writing competencies as the following, which by no means represent a comprehensive list:

- The ability to articulate a “close reading” of a passage or text
- The ability to summarize and/or paraphrase accurately and effectively
- The ability to incorporate source material properly
- The ability to imitate a specific genre or craft a specific section of a genre
- The ability to analyze, critique or construct arguments
- The ability to incorporate and respond adequately to competing points of view
- The ability to synthesize multiple texts or perspectives, as in a “literature review”
- The ability to tailor sentence patterns or diction appropriately to an audience or occasion
- The ability to create effective and illuminating titles

Pedagogical strategies worthy of experimentation and research could include—but the possibilities are almost limitless—role-playing exercises, classroom debates, alternative strategies for peer review/editing or instructor response, style exercises, library instruction, applications of technology, etc.

As noted above, the Center for Teaching Excellence and the Knight Institute staffs are available for further consultation and bibliographical suggestions. Examples of past classroom research on assessing student writing are available in the Center for Teaching Excellence’s office in 420 CCC Building or upon request.

Depending on the nature of the proposal and the teaching assignments of the instructors involved, projects might be implemented during the Spring 2014 semester and then written up for a working paper series during the ensuing Fall, or might continue across semesters. Either timeframe would have the goal of presenting research results in May.

**Proposals of approximately 300-600 words should be submitted to the Center for Teaching Excellence at cornellcete@cornell.edu by Friday, February 7.**