

MILLSAP'S COLLEGE
WRITING CENTER



Write On, Millsaps

The College is ranked among the top ~~100~~^{17!} colleges~~#~~ in the nation for its revolutionary writing program

By Jo~~n~~ Webb

DR. PAULA Garrett’s parents live in Spartanburg, South Carolina—about a nine-hour drive from Millsaps—and until recently they have had little real understanding of what she does for the College. “My dad is a preacher, so both of my parents introduce me as working at ‘Millsaps Methodist College,’” said Garrett, director of the Millsaps Writing Program. “That’s the one thing that translates into their world. I do share stories with them about my teaching, but I’m pretty convinced these anecdotes only add to their lack of understanding about my job.”

So when *U.S. News & World Report’s 2006 America’s Best Colleges* ranked Millsaps alongside Amherst, Harvard, and Duke in a group of 17 colleges “that make writing a priority,” Garrett showed the list to her parents.

“See, this is what I do,” she told them. “This is the program I direct. I’m pretty sure that they have the press release about this and a copy of that *U.S. News* book on their coffee table!”

Now, in addition to Garrett’s parents, the world of academia and the national media are becoming aware of Garrett’s work and the reputation of the Writing Program at Millsaps. The *U.S. News* ranking caught Garrett by surprise at a meeting last year with Dr. Richard A. Smith, senior vice president and dean of the College. “He pulled out the report from *U.S. News* and showed me how we were listed,”

she said. “We both just sat there for a moment to soak it in—the fact that Millsaps is on that list with schools that we don’t ordinarily think we compete with. I left that meeting very jazzed.”

Finally, Garrett knew that Millsaps’ innovative Writing Program was being acknowledged on a national scale and that those who rank colleges have come to see that writing is one of the College’s most impressive and distinctive strengths. “A few days later, Richard sent an email to me and Kathi Griffin, assistant director of the Writing Program and coordinator of the Writing Center, congratulating us,” she said. “I was a little self-effacing in my response, telling him that I knew those rankings were a bit mysterious—and that I was not going to take them too seriously. He wrote back that I should take it seriously, that it is a real pat on the back.”

A pat on the back, indeed, for what has been an immense, exhaustive effort on the part of the College to actively put writing at the forefront of its academic agenda—through the overhaul seven years ago of the Writing Program and the Writing Center, which included the hiring of Garrett and Griffin. It also included adding to the responsibilities of Janice Jordan, who was asked to take on administrative assistance to the Writing Program in addition to her work with Liberal Studies and the Core Curriculum. Garrett worked hard to put together this team.

Moreover, through their presence and participation in the na-

The painting on the left, by Jackson artist Ellen Langford, depicts John Stone Hall, which houses the Millsaps Writing Center. Langford has studied fine arts at the San Francisco Art Institute, Studio Art Centers International in Florence, Italy, the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, D.C., and at the University of Mississippi. Having left Mississippi as a teen in 1985, Langford returned in 1998 and found new inspiration for her paintings. Langford is a neighbor and friend of Dr. Paula Garrett, director of the Writing Program, and Kathi Griffin, coordinator of the Writing Center, both of whom believed she could capture the soul of John Stone Hall on canvas.

John Stone Hall is named for Dr. John Stone, B.A. 1958, a poet, essayist, and cardiologist who has gained national recognition for studying the relationship between medicine and literature.



tional dialogue on literacy, Garrett and Griffin have garnered for Millsaps national clout and cachet. “It’s always hard to say how those rankings come down, but clearly enough people have to be aware of the Millsaps program and think highly of it for us to be in that ranking,” Smith said. “Paula and Kathi’s presence at conferences on writing, where they are talking about what we’re doing at Millsaps, is an important piece of the puzzle.”

“It’s been a community effort, but we were so pleased to get this recognition,” said Griffin, who speaks with authority, passion, and urgency not only to literacy issues on campus, but also across the state and the nation. “A lot of that recognition happens because Paula and I are engaged in national conventions on writing. Our support from a majority of the faculty has helped, too. Plus, our students have a good reputation out there.”

Although Smith might have been surprised by the ranking, he said Millsaps had been aiming high all along. “Part of my charge to Paula was to develop a writing program that not only would serve the needs of our faculty and students but would also go beyond that to become one of the best in the South,” he said. “We wanted to be able to make a strong claim that the program is both nationally competitive and regionally distinctive. And I think we’re there, based on research Paula has done, surveying what our program looks like compared to those at a lot of other schools. It’s a very fine program.”

The proof is in the performance of Millsaps alumni after graduation. Alumni and employers of alumni consistently cite Millsaps graduates as better writers than their peers from other institutions. “The writing program continues that long tradition of providing

faculty and students with the support necessary to become better writers,” Smith said.

WHEN SMITH CAME to Millsaps eight and a half years ago, there was already a functioning Writing Center, but it lacked a cohesive strategy, a strong foundation, and institutional support. “In 1998, I asked the faculty to do an assessment of the Core Curriculum, which at the time was five to six years old, and asked, ‘O.K., it’s been in place for awhile, how well is it working?’” Smith said. “The review came back with a number of recommendations, and the most significant of those was to do more with the Writing Center and the Writing Program.”

Out of that recommendation arose the decision to create a tenure-track writing director’s position. “We wanted to hire somebody who would have the Writing Program as a primary responsibility, as well as more traditional faculty responsibilities,” Smith said. “We also wanted to have a coordinator of the Writing Center who would oversee its day-to-day activities, as opposed to the general Writing Program, which focuses on both faculty and students.”

Enter Garrett and Griffin. Smith said Garrett’s work as program director primarily focuses on working with faculty, while Griffin’s role at the Writing Center is to work with students and student-tutors. The third position is that of Jordan, who provides administrative support to both Garrett and Griffin. “None of this would happen without Janice,” Garrett said. “It is her task to keep the immense writing portfolio process organized and efficient. Her contributions can’t be overestimated.”

As director of the Writing Program, Garrett serves as an adviser to the faculty on all writing issues relating to the curriculum. “This means that I am primarily thinking about how we are teaching writing, and serving as a resource for faculty members who need a sounding board for their use of writing in their classes,” Garrett said. “Each semester I send out an email to tell faculty members that I’m here and would be happy to read their assignments, brainstorm with them, etc. In addition, I serve as an ex-officio member of the Core Council and help determine the role of writing in Core courses.”

Department by department, Garrett has been stimulating conversations about writing in



Dr. Paula Garrett (center), director of the Writing Program, hosting a discussion with the history faculty on writing in the major.



the individual disciplines. “I have met with at least half of the departments on campus to talk about their goals for writing in their departments, about how their current curricular offerings help them meet these goals, about gaps in the curriculum, and about ways to assess these goals,” Garrett said. “Those conversations are incredible. It’s amazing to see what folks in various departments are doing. We have real teaching innovation, and I’m one of the few people on campus who can have such a firsthand look at it and hear faculty members talk so openly about teaching writing.”

“Paula has been successful because she has tried to meet the departments’ needs as opposed to trying to develop a general model that is imposed on everybody,” Smith said.

He added that Garrett has contacts with writing program directors around the nation for whom the Millsaps template is a model. “It’s about developing a network of people who know you, because they often are the ones that create word-of-mouth,” he said.

While the College had an organized outline for the Writing Program and a clearly articulated thesis statement for its approach to writing, other institutions are still wrestling with selling the idea to faculty that whether “you’re teaching English or biology or accounting, you have responsibilities for teaching students how to write in those areas,” Smith said. “That turns out to be a very large challenge for most colleges and universities to address, because the general response of most faculty is to say writing is ‘not my job,’ and that somebody else needs to teach them how to write, so when they come to my class I don’t have to do it.”

Millsaps has embraced a philosophy that says writing cannot be taught in one semester of freshman comp. “It’s something that’s taught over a four-year period, it has to be taught repeatedly, and it has to be taught within the context of the discipline,” Smith said. “It’s in those ways that students really learn how to write well.”

Writing also requires repeated instruction and a lot of practice. “The common notion through the 1970s that you could teach students how to write in an English composition course is an idea that we don’t accept here at the College,” Smith said. “Yet it’s still a dominant model out in the academy: You take your writing requirement and move on. And sometimes at those universities and colleges that’s the only intentional emphasis that is placed on writing. We’re trying to say that intentional emphasis must be placed on writing throughout the four years, so students really learn how to

write well. It’s a different philosophy of how to teach writing. It’s a philosophy that requires a lot of buy-in and support from faculty, and that’s why it’s so hard to get it established at other colleges and universities. We’re further ahead because our faculty has much more of a longstanding interest in writing, and they see writing as an integral part of what it means to teach well.”

In fact, faculty commitment has been the backbone of the program. “We have a faculty here that is intensely interested in the

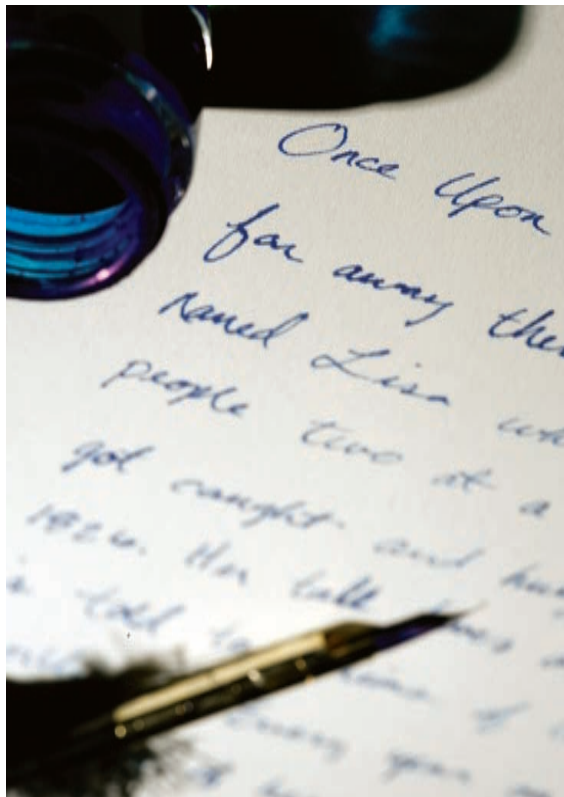
learning of our students and sees writing as an integral part of that,” Smith said. “So while they might wish that somebody else would magically teach these students how to write, you can talk to them about how it’s difficult for someone outside of the biology department to teach students how to write for a biology audience and understand how to write a scientific article.”

Increasingly, Smith said, the faculty has recognized that writing is another form of thinking. “To write clearly requires clear thought, and writing is often a way to help clarify your thinking,” he said. “And so this intimate connection between clear thinking and clear writing is something that also is part of what the faculty respond to.”

THE MILLSAPS Writing Program provides a powerful lens through which both students and faculty can examine the written word. “The program allows individual students to focus on their

specific writing needs and to improve in areas that are specific to those needs,” said Dr. Sarah Lea McGuire, associate professor of biology. “One of the values of the program is to allow students who enter with vastly differing writing and thinking skills to work beyond where they were when they entered Millsaps. I have seen freshmen improve significantly in their organization and critical thinking as a result of the program. So, as a faculty member (particularly one who was never taught how to design a good writing assignment—who in fact had never *seen* a good writing assignment!), I have learned how to structure assignments that allow the greatest opportunity for success. This makes it less stressful for the student and me—we both know what I expect. It has also helped me learn how to grade assignments more carefully and provide the right kind of feedback to the student.”

Unlike many schools, Millsaps has developed a Writing Program that is independent of the English Department. “That is intentional,” Garrett said. “The person who directed the Writing Program before



At the Writing Center, Tutors Bring Their Own Perspectives to Peers' Assignments

An important component of Millsaps' innovative approach to writing is the Writing Center. Located in John Stone Hall (named for the physician-poet who earned his B.A. from Millsaps in 1958), the cozy building in the shadow of the Christian Center is also home to the Department of Classical Studies. The Writing Center is a nurturing environment where peer tutors are on hand to help fellow students gain perspective on their writing assignments and their responses to those assignments.

In her work at the center, coordinator Kathi Griffin serves as a liaison between faculty and students. "In contrast to my position as a resource for faculty, Kathi is primarily a resource to students," Garrett said. "She works with student tutors to prepare them to staff the Writing Center; she keeps the center up and running, and she assesses the writing portfolios. She has dozens of one-on-one conversations with students about their writing in any given week, whereas I have dozens of one-on-one conversations with faculty members in any given week. The lines are, of course, blurred. I work with students often, and she works with faculty. But this is the way that our jobs are set up."

Currently, Griffin oversees about 10 peer tutors. "All peer tutors take a one-hour course for one semester before they can tutor," Griffin said. "They have to learn how to talk about writing and respond to writing without being authoritative, without taking authorship from the person who's writing the paper. And that takes particular skill."

Participation in the Writing Center—which was profiled by Jessica Hoffpauir, a Millsaps peer tutor, in the January issue of *Southern Discourse*, published by the Southeastern Writing Center Association—is strictly voluntary. "Students aren't required to come—it's a drop-in situation," Griffin said. Typically, "the student comes in and the tutor is here waiting. The tutor will ask, 'What are you working on?' and the student will share the assignment. The tutor will then ask the student, 'Where are you in your process? What have you done so far?' The tutor may ask them to describe what they're writing—challenges, problems—and that's where the conversation begins."

Many times students can't identify their own needs, so the tutor has to determine where their writing needs improvement, Griffin said. "They may need to talk about the introduction or the lack of a thesis statement," she said. "They might say, 'I'm expecting a thesis here and not getting it.' They need to know the professor is going to expect an introduction and a thesis. The conversation is about identifying what the student needs help with. A lot of times it is about organization."

Griffin underscores, however, that the Writing Center is not an editing service.

"Students sometimes think we're here to fix papers for them, and the faculty sometimes thinks we're here to make papers perfect," Griffin said. "But we're here to encourage students to work to the best of their ability. We just try to point to what doesn't sound right. Sometimes they don't know how to identify a run-on sentence or a comma splice."

Anna Ellis, a senior who has tutored at the center for the past two years, said that as a result of her peer counseling her own writing had improved. "I think that teaching writing is such a challenge, because outside the parameters of grammar and citation there is no distinct right or wrong, and writing itself becomes a vaguely defined skill," she said. "I now have the utmost respect for professors who spend time with students individually to discuss their writing, and I recognize the dire need to have a writing center on all college campuses."

Jewel Johnson, a senior who writes for *Millsaps Magazine*, said that as an incoming student the concept of writing across the curriculum was new to her. "I could not understand how or why students would be expected to write papers in every class, especially math. I now see that this program, the Writing Center, and the writing portfolio are just a few of many qualities that distinguish Millsaps from other colleges and universities. The program helps students develop the art of communication, an essential life skill that can be used in any major or career. The Writing Center does an outstanding job of helping students think about their writing and what they want to say, rather than merely correcting the mistakes for the students. This approach allows students to eventually learn what questions to ask themselves as they write."

Garrett and Griffin took three students to the Southeastern Writing Center Association conference in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in February 2006, and Griffin and peer tutors Mike Parks, B.A. 2005, Wes French, B.A. 2004, Megan Parks, B.A. 2004, and Michael Pickard, B.A. 2004, published an article from their 2004 panel presentation, "Becoming Mindful of the Absent Professor," in the *Purdue Writing Lab Newsletter* in January 2006.

"Every writer has questions, needs feedback, and can benefit from some one-to-one conversation with a writing tutor," said Muriel Harris, professor of English and director of the Writing Lab at Purdue University. "In addition to what classroom teachers can offer writers in class, writing center tutors can provide close attention to each writer's concerns, from the earliest planning time for papers, to later drafts that may just need some responses as to whether the reader finds the writing clear, organized, and effective. As hundreds of students I've tutored have told us in our Writing Lab, they feel more confident about their writing after a tutorial!"

"The Writing Center does an outstanding job of helping students think about their writing and what they want to say, rather than merely correcting the mistakes for the students. This approach allows students to eventually learn what questions to ask themselves as they write."



John Stone Hall is home to the Millsaps Writing Center, where students tutor their peers.



“It never fails. Faculty from other schools are inevitably envious of our community and the campus-wide involvement in this conversation about writing.”

me was Dr. Ted Ammon, a philosophy professor. The ad for my job called for a person with a Ph.D. in an academic discipline *and* with an interest in writing program administration. Though I have a Ph.D. in English, the position did not require one.”

“The English Department’s primary focus is on the teaching of literature and the analysis of literature—not on the teaching of writing,” Smith said, “so I don’t think they necessarily see a conflict. If we had an English Department with a lot of people hired to teach writing and composition, there might be a conflict there. Generally, we think it is the job of English departments to teach writing, but the approach here is that there is no particular department that has the unique responsibility to teach writing. It’s the responsibility of all departments.”

THE SEPARATION between the Writing Program and English Department facilitates writing across the curriculum, or WAC, as it has come to be known. “It seems to me to be a mixed message to say that we all have a responsibility to teach writing on this campus, that it isn’t the purview of the English Department, but then give the English Department the final say in the way writing is taught,” Garrett said. “I think that’s how a lot of schools get stuck. Ultimately, by putting the Writing Program in the English Department, they are really saying that it’s the English Department’s job. If I were a faculty member in another department, I would read that message loud and clear.”

While Garrett’s disciplinary home is the English Department, where she teaches upper-level courses, she tries to stay open and accessible to every department on campus. “Although my colleagues in the English Department are fantastic teachers of writing, so are my colleagues in math and in accounting,” she said. “I’m clear on that. And I think I deliver that message campus-wide with great credibility, because I spend as much time with other departments as I do my own. That’s how I understand my job.”

Both Garrett and Griffin have raised awareness of the Millsaps Writing Program by their vocal roles in the national debate on literacy. Griffin has worked to develop a Mississippi Writing Center Association and hosted several state conferences here to share the strengths of the Millsaps program with other schools in the region. “We both go to conferences to give presentations on various ele-

ments of our Writing Program,” Garrett said. “Kathi usually organizes at least one panel of student tutors at a conference each year. We try to do one a semester, depending on budget issues. She gets the tutors to think through an angle that would be of interest to other schools. She has taken students to regional writing center conferences frequently. I have joined these panels a couple of times.”

As Griffin serves as Millsaps’ voice in the conversation about campus writing centers, Garrett participates in the broader dialogue about writing programs across the nation. “I try to attend the Conference on College Composition and Communication and/or the National Conference of Teachers of English each year, as well as the annual meeting of Writing Program Administrators,” Garrett said. “I almost always make a presentation about the innovation of our Writing Program. The hallmark of our Writing Program is that we have made writing across the curriculum work.”

At many schools, it doesn’t work. “Either there’s no accountability, or schools are too big to maintain serious dialogue about the teaching of writing in every area of the campus,” Garrett said. “But our interdisciplinary writing council and our intimate faculty make such a conversation a delight to facilitate. That’s not to say that all of the conversations that I host are easy. In fact, few of them are easy. The typical conversation I host with a department is full of questions and challenges. But the fact that we are talking about teaching writing in every single department on our campus is a delight.”

“So I go to national conferences to talk about just how we make it work—about the role of writing and other faculty development initiatives, about our interdisciplinary writing council, about what has and what hasn’t worked in trying to keep this conversation alive. It never fails. Faculty from other schools are inevitably envious of our community and the campus-wide involvement in this conversation about writing.”

Several years ago, Dr. Kim Burke, associate professor of accounting, and Garrett attended a National Conference of Teachers of English in Milwaukee. “It was absolutely hilarious to watch the facial expressions when Kim introduced herself as an accounting professor and then continued to describe an experiment with defining ‘analytical writing.’ Faculty at other schools just don’t expect an accountant to speak this language, let alone to care about these issues.”





This past summer in Anchorage, Alaska, at the Writing Program Administration Conference, writing program directors honestly confronted the challenges of their jobs. “It was so refreshing to have this community, and also to hear about their envy of our program,” Garrett said. “This became even clearer when I was asked by a small, liberal arts school much like our own to give a talk about our Writing Program. This was a very good school, but, wow, we are so far ahead of them. They have a WAC agenda but no real dialogue about standards, skills, or who teaches what. It made me realize how much I take for granted with the collegiality and commitment of Millsaps faculty.”

While Garrett is pursuing a literacy agenda that transcends the boundaries of the academic disciplines, Griffin is concerned at state writing center conferences with “talking across boundaries” from high school to college, from two-year college to four-year college, from public to private school, and from four-year private college to public university. “We need to have these conversations

if we are really going to help Mississippi students move forward,” Griffin said. “And we have to identify expectations before we can help students meet them.”

Meanwhile, Millsaps is becoming synonymous with good writing in the eyes of regional educators. “Kathi is really trying to provide a service to higher education in the state and surrounding states by providing a venue in which writing program professionals can talk about writing by sharing experiences,” Smith said. “The Millsaps program is seen as a model for how to run a successful writing program, but there is also dialogue between Kathi and her colleagues in which ideas are shared that help us improve our own program. My sense, having gone to a couple of those conferences, is that we are seen as the leader in the region in thinking about writing.”

Other schools look to Millsaps for guidance. “When we were working to establish a writing center at Jackson State, we sought guidance from the Millsaps center since, in many ways, they were

I have worked with three Millsaps interns over the years, and I can attest to the fact that all were extremely professional and had strong communications skills.

—Maryann Jacobson
National Manager Major Donor Relations
Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation



Dr. Paula Garrett, left, director of the Millsaps Writing Program, and Kathi Griffin, coordinator of the Writing Center, in Garrett's office in John Stone Hall.



taking a leadership role in the state with respect to writing across the curriculum,” said Dr. Monique Guillory, formerly executive director of the Mississippi Learning Institute and a former English professor at Jackson State University. “The College was very involved with the annual Mississippi Writing Center Association conference, which was where I first met Kathi Griffin and some of the students from the Millsaps Writing Center. We eventually brought the two centers together, and the Millsaps students were very encouraging and supportive of the work we were beginning at Jackson State. You could see from their enthusiasm that working at the Writing Center really had a significant impact on their educational experience at Millsaps.”

Griffin is committed to creating a sense of camaraderie among literacy educators in Mississippi, and she helped found in 2001 the annual Mississippi Writing Centers Association Conference. The idea took root when Griffin attended a Southeastern Writing Centers Association conference at Auburn, where she met Bruce O’Hara, dean of Arts & Letters at Tougaloo College.

She was invited to tour Tougaloo’s writing center and to meet Phillip Gardner, director of the Writing Center at Francis Marion University and a regional expert gaining in national recognition. “I asked if I could bring some tutors and whether we could invite other writing center staff from area colleges. The answer was yes, of course, and peer tutors came with their advisers from around the city—from Mississippi College to Jackson State University. Phillip helped us reflect on our experiences, and afterward we realized how important this conversation had been. It was an impromptu conference, but as a result we decided to meet again the next year.

Thus the first Mississippi Writing Center Association Conference was born at Tougaloo. “At the end of it we were all sitting around talking, and we realized how hungry we were to talk to people doing what we do, where we do it,” Griffin said. “We go to national conferences, we go to regional conferences, but Mississippi, just like many other states, has its own issues. This is where the conversation began, and we all realized we had common goals, common issues, and common challenges. And we all felt like we were reinventing the wheel when we could use each other as experts and move forward much more effectively as colleagues.”

The fifth annual conference, “Tell It Like It Is: Using Our Stories to Shape Our Future,” featuring a keynote address by former Governor William Winter (*see sidebar, next page*), was held last year on the Millsaps campus and featured symposiums on “Learning from WAC Assignments,” “Understanding—and Meeting—Nontraditional

Students Needs,” “Preparing Tutors of Writing,” and “Designing Effective Writing Assignments.”

Griffin, who believes that Mississippi provides an extraordinary field laboratory for the study of literacy issues, said: “One of the wonderful things about this state is that here we have the opportunity for working and talking across boundaries, not to homogenize

our populations but to respond to and help encourage those different voices. We can also help them become aware of similarities and differences to help young people excel and do what they want to do, instead of being hindered by those boundaries.”

How students communicate through the written and spoken word can contain “markers” that either move them forward or

—Frank Buchanan
StateStreet Group, LLC

hold them back, Griffin said. But she maintained that these markers, these stumbling blocks, can be turned into challenges. “You only stumble over something you don’t see,” she said. “It makes things visible for you to talk about them, use them, work them, and move on and not be stuck. That’s why conversation is so important. I don’t know what is a stumbling block or a challenge for somebody else without having a conversation with them.”

FURTHERMORE, GRIFFIN BELIEVES that conversation, that direct human contact, cannot be replaced by computers. “I feel like the state wants to throw money at technology and put computers in every classroom, when really all students need are good texts to read and small classrooms where teachers and students can interact,” Griffin said. “I think technology is important, and we need to know how to use it, but you can learn that in a summer program. You don’t need to learn it in school every day. You do need to learn how to read and how to respond to texts. It happens in conversation, one on one, not between you and a computer. Computers can’t take the place of being in a room and talking with another human being about something you’ve read or written or getting some response to something you’ve written. That is much more valuable than having a computer tell you if you’ve gotten your grammar right.”

These are just some of the kinds of conversations taking place at writing center conferences. “The dialogue can then be taken back to schools and be incorporated into classrooms,” Griffin said. “They are the kinds of conversations that need to be ongoing. There is no one right answer. Education, as it has been from the time of Locke, is an experiment in helping people participate successfully and effectively in their communities.”

Garrett would like to relate the Millsaps experiment—the



Governor William Winter:

College's emerging research on writing—to the broader, growing research on learning. “I also see the Writing Program as providing a model of assessment for other areas on campus,” she said.

Each Millsaps student must contribute papers to a writing portfolio that the faculty can use to assess the student's strengths and weaknesses. “My immediate goal for the future of the Writing Program is to make sure that we are closing the feedback loop with the portfolio,” Garrett said. “We collect papers, we assess them, and we give them back to students. Now my job is to begin thinking about ways to understand these assessments, to see the big picture that they paint, and to translate this to faculty members so that these assessments inform our decisions about the curriculum.”

Griffin, too, is involved in assessment, as well as response. “I'm sort of the ‘gatekeeper of writing’ at Millsaps, yet the Writing Center has nothing to do with evaluation, so I go from one extreme to the other,” she said. “It's a schizophrenic job-teaching versus tutoring, evaluative versus responsive. It makes me more analytical about issues of literacy, from producing the text, to reading the text, to responding to the text, to reading the response to the text. It's a circular thing. I've become increasingly aware of that ‘literary cycle.’”

“When we were working to establish a writing center at Jackson State, we sought guidance from the Millsaps center since they were taking a leadership role in the state with respect to writing across the curriculum.”

I was meeting the old man for the first time. He was not really an old man—he was only 44—but I thought of him as old. People appear older to 13-year-old boys. That was my age when I saw him in the weather-



beaten cabin on the Bull Farm. It was during the Depression, and he was one of the countless displaced persons who had been roaming the face of the land in those bitter years of the mid-1930s—hungry, homeless, and in despair.

He was now working for the government—on halves. Dispossessed by the harsh economics of five-cent cotton, he had been picked up by a New Deal program called the Farm Security Administration and put back to work as a sharecropper with the U.S. government as his landlord. The land was rented by the government from a local

farmer, and it was derisively called the Bull Farm because of an ill-conceived plan to use oxen rather than mules to pull the plows. My family's farm was next to the Bull Farm.

My introduction to the man was through his son—a boy my own age with whom I rode the school bus. On this chilly Saturday morning in late February, I paid my friend a visit. There, in this bleak cabin huddled in front of a miserable little fireplace, was the boy's father. It was too wet and cold for him to be in the fields. This day in the dim light that came through the dingy panes of one little window, he was holding a large book. As we spoke, he put the book down. I noticed its title. It was the Sears, Roebuck catalogue. For so many of my neighbors in those bleak and desperate times the catalogue and the King James Bible were about the only literature that one ever saw in the homes of most tenant farmers, who constituted the overwhelming majority of the rural population.

I never knew if the man could read. I rather doubt that he could. That was not unusual in those days. Half of the rural whites and 90 percent of the rural blacks were functionally if not totally illiterate. Still, many cast about for ways to comprehend the mystery and wonder of a world that seemed to lie beyond their grasp and even beyond their imagination. Never having heard of Scott or Wordsworth or Longfellow, they could only browse through the Sears, Roebuck catalogue.

I have often contrasted my own life with that of my young schoolmate from the Bull Farm. Whereas his father was illiterate, my parents were both avid readers. And our home, modest by today's standards and lacking radio or electricity or indoor plumbing, nevertheless had a bookcase filled with great books. It was out of this early association with reading at home plus the encouragement of inspired teachers in my school years at Grenada that I came to regard writers with the same affection that I lavished on my sports heroes like Dizzy Dean and Lou Gehrig.

What I did not fully understand then but that I have since come to comprehend much more clearly is that for so many people—black people and white people alike—living and growing up in the rural South in generations gone by, there were these walls imposed by poverty and ignorance and class and race that left thousands of them marooned in permanent intellectual isolation and deprivation. A few escaped, but so many did not.

It has been an appallingly slow and tortuous journey out of that dark



Senior Anna Ellis with Kathi Griffin, coordinator of the Writing Center.

'We Must Create More Poets If We Are to Survive'

hole. As late as the mid-1950s, 20 years after my visits to the Bull Farm, only one white in four and one black in 40 was finishing high school in our state. Even today you can walk down the roads and streets of almost any of our small towns and rural communities, and at least one out of every five adults you meet will be functionally illiterate, and in some places it will be higher than that.

There is a strange and haunting paradox about all of this. In a state and region that has for so long prided itself on its commitment to taking care of its own, on sustaining strong family values, on helping each other; we tended to neglect that most essential of all our social responsibilities, and that was the extension of adequate educational opportunity to all of our people. And there is an even stranger and more intriguing paradox. In this state where for so long so many have lacked the very basic learning skills, we have produced such a disproportionate number of celebrated writers. That incidentally led the late Chancellor Porter Fortune to comment that we Mississippians may not be able to read but we sure can write. The late Willie Morris even suggested an explanation for this abundance of successful authors. "It beats trying to make a living farming," he said, quoting one of his Lafayette County neighbors who had lost several cotton crops to the boll weevil.

There are profound and complex explanations for this very real phenomenon of Southern literary achievement. But Willie Morris's friend may not have been too far off base. Sociologist Howard Odum, who began his distinguished career as a graduate student at Ole Miss before going off to Chapel Hill, thought that there was something to the notion that the tensions, frustrations, and deprivations arising out of our troubled and conflicted past helped create the elements of great writing. He speaks of how the whole range of human experience had combined to make this region a setting of such indefinable contrast that has provided a tantalizing and irresistible challenge to so many writers.

The South was American and un-American, righteous and wicked, Christian and barbaric. It was a South getting better; a South getting worse. It was strong and it was weak, it was white and it was black, it was rich and it was poor. There were great white mansions on hilltops among the trees, and there were unpainted houses perched on pillars along hillside gullies or lowland marshes. From high estate came low attainment, and from the dark places came flashing gleams of noble personality. There were strong men and women vibrant with the spontaneity of living, and there were pale, tired folk, full of the dullness of life. There were crusaders resplendent with some perpetual equivalent of war; and there were lovers of peace in the marketplace. There were freshness and vivacity as of a rippling green-white rivulet, and there were depth and hidden power as of gleaming dark water beneath an arched bridge.

Thus was described the cultural richness of our region that made it a place where great literature was inspired. It was the literature of Faulkner, of Wolfe and Welty and Warren—writing stories about people and places they knew, their own postage stamp, as Faulkner once said. It is this kind of storytelling that is the basis of great literature. And because it consists of exploring the lives of people, some ordinary lives but others complex and different, that we find in them mirrors of our own lives as well as fantasies of lives we could never know; but out of that reading we come to understand better who we are and how we relate to each other. There is a magic about this that has the power to transform people from spiritless apathy to an awareness of their full potential for creative thought and work.

This is an area too often underemphasized in our educational system. If we concentrate solely on technological achievement, we risk losing our souls. Now we are called on to create out of this new information age a cultural imperative that will preserve our common humanity.

That can be done only through an increased emphasis on writing and

reading about those experiences out of our own lives that go to affirm the strength and resilience of the human spirit.

In a time when there is a divisive political debate over values, why can't we let the words of Eudora Welty be our guide. In *One Time – One Place*, she tells why she started writing:

But away off one day up in Tishomingo County, I knew this, anyway: that my wish, indeed my continuing passion, would be not to point the finger in judgment but to part a curtain, that invisible shadow that falls between people, the veil of indifference to each other's presence, each other's wonder, each other's human plight.

All of us in this room today, whether we acknowledge it or not, are here because of the impact that meaningful writing has had on our lives. It may have started in little-remembered stories from our childhood that began to open us up to the magic of a world larger than we could then imagine. I know that is true in my own life. It has been my good fortune to have been enriched by the writings of my fellows of every age and from every walk of life, and whatever any of us has been able to accomplish in our lives has been grounded in the ideas and the ideals that have come from that experience.



The William F. Winter Archives and History Building in downtown Jackson is the repository for the manuscripts and papers of many Mississippi writers.

This must then be our continuing commitment—to see that in these more affluent times we do not let our pursuit of the fast buck or the superficial gain obscure the longer-range goals that should guide our society. The models are there, molded and shaped in the telling and retelling of the stories of our individual lives. It is there that we find the strength to see us through life's complexities and ambiguities and tragedies. We must insist that through good writing more of our fellow citizens be enabled to join in this incredible journey.

William Faulkner, in the conclusion to his memorable address on the receipt of the Nobel Prize, spoke of the writer's duty:

"It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail!"

In this complex and conflicted world we must create more poets if we are to survive.

Excerpted from Winter's keynote address at the fifth annual Mississippi Writing Centers Association Conference, held at Millsaps in the fall of 2005.