

Arthur Vining Davis Grant Letter of Inquiry – Project Description

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A recent survey of business executives and hiring managers sponsored by the Association of American Colleges and Universities demonstrated that employers identify the skills cultivated in a liberal arts education as most valuable to hiring and long-term career success.¹

¹ Hart Research Associates, *Fulfilling the American Dream: Liberal Education and the Future of Work: Selected Findings from Online Surveys of Business Executives and Hiring Managers* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2018).

Specifically, the most important educational outcomes include oral communication, critical thinking, ethical judgment, working effectively in teams, written communication, and real-world application of skills and knowledge. The University of St. Francis in Joliet, IL is a “welcoming community of learners” that prepares graduates to succeed in the workplace and lead lives of purpose. In order to fulfill our mission to “strive for excellence in all programs,” coupled with analysis of assessment data, the university has identified written and digital communications as key areas to strengthen in the next 3-5 years.

The University of St. Francis seeks funding for a writing initiative that will promote faculty leadership and improve student learning outcomes across the university. Curricular innovations will build upon the College Writing and Foundations (First-year Seminar) experience to include digital technologies and create a new sophomore-level writing enhanced course. This sophomore experience will scaffold to a capstone experience, in which writing is reinforced as an essential, transferable skill. Increasingly, writing encompasses multimodal composition and digital literacy, even as it remains a fundamental skill that connects the liberal arts and transfers to all professions. Grant support will enhance faculty leadership by funding release time for a new writing program director who will provide professional training and pedagogical resources to university faculty who teach writing across the disciplines. The writing program director will be responsible for overseeing General Education writing outcomes across the university and their assessment. The writing program director will also address graduate student needs. The director will bring visibility to the critical skills of written and oral communication, as well as digital literacy.

Currently, a number of faculty and staff members oversee aspects of General Education writing across the university. Our Academic Resource Center oversees peer tutoring; an ad hoc faculty working group pursues Writing Across the Curriculum initiatives; and the responsibility for writing assessment has shifted between faculty and administrators in recent years. The university does not have a Center for Teaching and Learning. A new writing program director with a realistic position description would bring these responsibilities under the purview of one faculty member with adequate support to oversee ongoing projects and pursue new initiatives, enhancing faculty leadership. Furthermore, the writing program director will arrange for professional development opportunities for faculty to expand strategies for helping student writers. This might include assignment design workshops and student writing feedback tips. The university will build capacity across the university by creating a team of trained, dedicated writing in the discipline instructors across the university. We envision a structure to incentivize faculty in different disciplines to participate in training, thereby enhancing faculty ownership and leadership in writing. Student writing mentors will partner with writing faculty to support efforts inside and outside the classroom. The writing program director will collaborate with the Academic Resource Center to build the peer writing mentor program, providing leadership opportunities for students.

The new writing program will strengthen ongoing digital initiatives focused on writing. Working with faculty leaders of an NEH-funded initiative to develop a General Education Pathways program, the writing program would improve student outcomes through Eportfolio development. Showcasing student writing across a thematically-unified “pathway” of general education courses, which consider complex problems from multiple perspectives, Eportfolios will also reinforce the iterative practice of writing and facilitate metacognition to improve transfer of skills. Student learning outcomes and some regional recognition would be improved by affiliating the St. Francis Writers’ Conference, now in its twenty-ninth year, with the writing program. The conference has already broadened its appeal by calling for presentations across disciplines and recruiting keynote speakers with diverse writing careers, including journalists and teachers. A writing program director charged with General Education assessment could harness students’ conference presentations as experiential learning components or capstones to their General Education courses. At the graduate level, a writing program director would assist students in research courses and in the Ed.D. program to hone writing skills and strategies.

A writing program with a dedicated faculty director would provide the visibility and resources to incorporate sound, discipline-specific writing pedagogy across our general education curriculum and the university, improving student outcomes and enhancing faculty leadership. It would amplify our broader aim: to restore writing to its central role in the undergraduate liberal arts education at the University of St. Francis. This is needed now more than ever, as the tumultuous times of our world require clear communication and civil dialogue to promote truth and justice.