Finding Our Tribe: Response to “Creative Writing at the Community College: Creating Opportunity and Community” by Kris Bigalk

> Maria Brandt

My first thought when reading Kris Bigalk’s thoughtful essay about creating community in two-year college creative writing programs was that we’ve been very lucky at Monroe Community College. Bigalk opens her essay by describing the “resistance” she met from colleagues, administrators, and even four-year transfer partners when establishing a creative writing program at her college, whereas at MCC we’ve encountered only support. But it soon becomes clear in Bigalk’s essay that this resistance subsided and that her program has emerged a model for two-year colleges across the country.

This shift does not surprise me. Anyone who has worked with student writers knows that, as Bigalk comments, “writing can help these students find their voices.” I’m thinking of a continuing-education student I met three years ago in college composition. Something sparked inside this student while writing about water shortages in the southwestern United States. He discovered he had something to say, and that what he had to say mattered. Currently, this student is taking our upper-level playwriting workshop and can’t stop writing. The discovery of his voice initiated a conversion through which he redirected his life. He considers structure and language and audience in ways he never had before, and he recognizes his growth as a thinker and as a citizen—not only as a writer.

But this conversion, for any of our students, requires more than “finding their voices,” as Bigalk also suggests. This conversion requires movement through programs that contain enough academic rigor to push our students toward sophistication and integrity. As Bigalk claims, “While creative writing can be therapeutic and emotionally enriching, we must also stress the academic rigor of creative writing—the mastery of craft techniques. As they master these techniques, students begin to know themselves better intellectually and academically, developing the confidence they need to succeed both as writers and students.” This point is crucial to consider when developing a program in the two-year college. In addition to providing opportunities for students to “find their voices,” we also must provide opportunities for students to learn how to harness their voices into effective writing. This process entails careful program structuring that scaffolds skill development from course to course so that students emerge equipped to move into the next stages of their academic or professional lives. And students know when this happens. My continuing-education student, for example, looks back at the work he did in college composition with compassion for his younger self. He recognizes
that he “found his voice” in that earlier class, but he also recognizes how much he has grown as a thinker and writer since then, and he attributes the confidence he eventually developed not to that first spark but to his awareness of how far he has moved since that first spark.

In addition to emphasizing the importance of strong curricular decisions, Bigalk highlights the importance of strong co-curricular decisions. She writes, “A successful community college writing program creates a space for creative writers to flourish, both in and out of class.” This has been especially important to us as we continue to develop our program at MCC. In addition to constructing courses that would scaffold into each other so that our students could strengthen their skills from semester to semester, we’re also cohering opportunities for our students beyond the classroom: we’re strengthening our visiting writer series, we’re partnering with our student literary magazine, we’re maintaining college-wide competitions for our student writers, and we’re developing relationships with community arts organizations. We’re also paying special attention to all of this in our capstone course, which will teach students how to prepare their work for submission to literary journals and for public readings, their applications for transfer, and themselves for professional careers that involve writing. As Bigalk reminds us, we’re ultimately preparing our students for the rest of their lives, and that begins with nurturing pathways from the classroom into aspects of those lives right now.

Indeed, this is the real reason I’m not surprised the resistance Bigalk’s program initially received shifted to acceptance and support. The program at her college is built responsibly with an eye toward nurturing pathways for students into the rest of their lives. This is evidenced by the inordinately high rate of completion in her program: 75 to 80 percent of students in her college’s AFA program graduate within three years of enrollment. This also is evidenced by the multiple articulation agreements her college has negotiated between her program and its four-year partners. As MCC continues to emphasize completion as a college-wide goal, and the development of pathways beyond completion, it makes sense that our new degree also is meeting with support from administrators and four-year partners. There are practical benefits to supporting a degree rich with academic rigor, co-curricular opportunity, and intentional pathways beyond its own limits. These benefits include, at the very least, better numbers during an era when numbers count.

At the very most, these benefits include transformed lives—for our students and for us, too. Bigalk reveals that the “unofficial motto” of her program is derived from Lucille Clifton’s celebration of “finding your tribe.” Bigalk describes a successful community college creative writing program as one in which “student writers find community, and a path to another degree or a career in writing is paved for them; they find mentors in faculty and other students as they become the disciplined, enthusiastic writers they were meant to be.” I’m seeing this happen right now with the student writers in our upper-level playwriting workshop as they meet after class to perform in each other’s plays, preparing for a Scholars Day presentation at the college. I’m seeing this as students from our introduction to creative writing class move with each other into an upper-level genre workshop. I’m seeing this
as my continuing-education student confesses to his peers during a co-curricular workshop led by a visiting writer that he is terrified to transfer to a four-year college, but that he *will* transfer despite this terror. I’m seeing this as our visiting playwright observes our playwriting students walk together through a hallway and comments, “This is how theatre companies form.” Bigalk writes that in a successful program, student writers “find their tribe, and they are never the same.” My final point is that as I witness these moments of transformation in my students, I know that I too am no longer the same. As I share these moments with my colleagues, and celebrate the readings and publications produced by my colleagues, as well as the successes experienced by our students, I know that dedicating ourselves to the construction and maintenance of a first-class community college creative writing degree has the power to change us all.

**Response to “Pragmatic Impulses: Starting a Creative Writing Program at the Community College” by Maria Brandt**

> Kris Bigalk

Our program at Normandale is much like the one being developed at Monroe Community College; we’ve built in community engagement, both within the program/campus and with other colleges and community partners; we have a rigorous curriculum and a capstone course. While providing students with information on career paths and jobs is undoubtedly very important, especially when it comes to convincing administrators to support and fund a creative writing program, it is also necessary—and pragmatic—to keep in mind the reason that students gravitate toward creative writing: because writing brings them fulfillment, joy, and purpose.

After directing our program for eight years, what I’ve found is that while all of our students write well by the time they graduate, and most students do well academically, there are always some students who do poorly academically. The ones who keep their GPAs high have a 100 percent graduation rate at the four-year schools into which they transfer; they get significant financial aid, complete internships, and go on to get fulfilling jobs. The others usually fall by the wayside, not graduating or not writing anymore and staying in service jobs or other unskilled work. The best career options are only going to be available to those students who make a commitment to developing the study and time management skills necessary to succeed in the classroom and on the job. While it’s important to make possible majors, colleges, and career paths clear to students when they declare the AFA major, it’s equally important to encourage them to develop good study and time management skills, to learn about life balance, while also encouraging them to explore some options with internships or volunteer experiences if they wish. Would it be more reasonable to open the major only to those students who could
do honors-level work? Perhaps, but that would also fly in the face of the open-door mission of most community colleges.

So, what are the pragmatic reasons students should major in creative writing, whether their GPAs are high or not? Most of us who are writers can answer that question easily. Because creative writing improves students’ lives in multiple ways. In a creative writing program, students will find a community of other student writers with whom they share much in common and will make lifelong friends. They will improve their writing, thinking, and emotional processing skills. They will improve their self-confidence by sharing and publishing their work. They will express themselves as artists and develop a stronger sense of identity and purpose. These are the pragmatic, lifelong effects of majoring in creative writing that I notice in all of my students, whether or not they achieve academically or go on to careers in the field. Writing improves (and sometimes saves) their lives. The problem with presenting this as a “pragmatic” reason to major in creative writing is that improving students’ lives is not the top goal of administrations; they want statistics on job placement, on how creativity enhances job prospects, and so forth.

As writers and professors of creative writing, we value the art and craft of writing and the benefits that writing can provide for our students, and it’s obvious that Maria Brandt and her colleagues at Monroe Community College not only care about their students’ fulfillment as individuals but also their ability to thrive in their community, using the skills they’ve gained from the craft of writing and a background in humanities. What is hinted at but not stated in this article is that the main roadblocks to designing a thriving, viable creative writing program at a community college are time, administrative support, and money—and that these priorities drive the need to justify the existence of the program by using terms like pragmatic.

Support from administration and the money that’s attached to that support are usually the deal-breakers when it comes to creating something new at the community college. What’s needed to gain the support of administrators is adoption of their values and their priorities, which can vary greatly from one campus to another, depending on the population served. In the case of Monroe Community College, Brandt identified the priorities of providing students with clear employment options upon completing a degree, as well as clear transfer options into various majors at local colleges and universities. What Brandt draws for us here is a roadmap to her administrators’ sympathies—how she showed them the ways creativity relates to science with good data; how she translated the “softness” of anecdotes and stories (the language of humanities) into hard numbers and spreadsheets (the language of administrators). This isn’t easy for an English major (at least in my experience), but it is necessary in order to garner the support, both public and financial, of the administration. By giving administrators hard data, we give them the tools they need to present the benefits of our programs to other stakeholders with influence, such as state legislators, a board of trustees, or chancellors. Providing hard data and good copy is also useful to college marketing departments, which are often small, overburdened, and happy to receive press-ready copy.
Brandt’s strategies for encouraging community involvement and collaboration also fit the original mission of the community college quite well, so they are likely to garner administrative support. These opportunities create stronger relationships between the college and the community and provide students with a preview of possible career options. At the very least, as she points out, these opportunities encourage students who are likely to stay in the geographic area to develop lifelong relationships with the literary community.

Obviously, community college creative writing programs vary greatly in the populations they serve, and they are governed by very different administrative priorities, state laws, regulations, and union agreements. Though capstone courses may be rare in Brandt’s area of the country, they are part of every two-year program in my region. Moreover, while Monroe’s ability to require faculty to be active in their genres is a wonderful advantage, it would violate our union contract (we can suggest or encourage, but not require publications). Associate of fine arts degrees (AFAs) are not allowed in some states, so AAs with emphasis are more common in those states. These are just a few examples of regional differences that affect program design and approach.

Because of all these variables, neither my program design nor Brandt’s is likely to be the perfect program design for any other college. When designing a program, each college needs to identify its students’ needs, administrators’ priorities, and the unique regulations, laws, and contracts that will affect the design and implementation of its program. In the end, approaching administration with Brandt’s pragmatic arguments, which include providing her students with the best options for learning how to be better writers and in turn using those skills toward a workable major and a fulfilling career, is a good place to begin. If the needs of the students, faculty, and administration are taken into account when a program is designed and promoted, a program has a much higher chance of success, both long-term and short-term. However, once we are done speaking the language of statistics and pragmatics, we must always remember the real, most practical reason students should (and do) major in creative writing—because it enhances their lives in ways they never could have imagined. We need to always remember how lucky we are to be a part of their journey as writers and students and to never let ourselves view the art of creative writing as a list of job skills or a spreadsheet.