

JACOBSON CENTER TELEGRAM



NEWS & DEVELOPMENTS

Issued in early fall and spring, the Jacobson Center Telegram informs Smith staff, faculty, and students about newsworthy developments in the work of the Jacobson Center and the teaching of writing.

Greetings! Saludos! Salamu! Xin chào!

We are pleased to inform that the Jacobson Center welcomed two new colleagues this fall: Ren Llewellyn and Erin Butler. Ren is the new Learning Specialist & Tutorial Services Coordinator. In addition to supervising the content peer tutors in the non-quantitative disciplines, he teaches IDP 136, Applied Learning Strategies (for students who want to become more effective learners) and leads study skills workshops throughout the year.

Erin is a part-time Writing Instructor with the Jacobson Center this fall. She works individually with students and mentors thesis writers on their writing, working collaboratively with both the students and their advisers. She will continue to support the thesis writers in the spring.

The Thesis Writing Mentoring Program is off to a great start. We had 45 applicants—up from 34 last year—from all three divisions for 20 spots. The students we cannot accept into the mentoring program will, of course, still have the opportunity to work with the Jacobson Center writing instructors the traditional way (by making appointments through the online schedule).

We extend our heartiest congratulations to Naila Moreira and Sara Eddy at the Jacobson Center on the recent publication of new books. Naila’s middle-grade novel about budding scientists and naturalists is titled *The Monarchs of Winghaven* (Walker Books). The writing has been highly praised by critics, but just as praiseworthy are Naila’s illustrations—which she did herself! Sara’s acclaimed new book of poetry is called *Ordinary Fissures* (Kelsay Books). It contains moving, often funny poems about the natural world, relationship turmoil, and finding joy in small things. Check out these books!

And check out, too, the new issue of *Smith Writes*, a new collection of outstanding nonfiction pieces by first year-students in WI courses on topics as varied as Björk and domesticity and mass incarceration and ecojustice.

SPOTLIGHT

Teaching Circle, November 1
Going Public: Creating, Implementing & Curating Public Writing Assignments

Julio Alves (JC) & Abril Navarro (LRT)
 Campus Center, 12:15-1:15 p.m. with lunch available beginning at noon
 Please join us!

UPCOMING EVENTS

10/30, Seelye 301, 4:30pm
Note-Taking Workshop
 Ren Llewellyn

11/6, Seelye 301, 4:30pm
Time Management Workshop
 Ren Llewellyn

11/13, Seelye 301, 4:30pm
Collaborative Writing Workshop
 Sara Eddy & Megan Lyster

11/20, Seelye 301, 4:30pm
Public Speaking Workshop
 Peter Sapira

12/4, Seelye 301, 4:30pm
Test-Taking Strategies Workshop
 Ren Llewellyn

Public Speaking Courses in the Liberal Arts: Why They Matter & Where They Belong

Need for approval: 1,820,000,000; Fear of being judged: 100,300,000; Speaking anxiety: 643,000,000. These search results show that we all care deeply about how we present ourselves and how others perceive that presentation. Evolutionary biologists, social scientists and attachment theorists link this preoccupation to the days of our ancestors, when exile on the savannas meant death. And while we might not be cast into the desert after a substandard presentation, the pain of stumbling our way through a densely written script to a bored and befuddled audience still triggers this atavistic fear.

As social psychologist Jonathan Haidt states in his book, *The Anxious Generation*, this fear has only increased in our student-populations. Haidt argues that generations born from 1995 onwards are more fragile and sensitive to conflict, criticism, and exclusion, making them more easily discouraged and less likely to participate in endeavors they perceive as challenging. Liberal arts institutions have a powerful role in helping students overcome these challenges.

According to The American Association of Colleges and Universities, a liberal arts institution should “instill in students intellectual and practical skills, including inquiry and analysis, critical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, quantitative literacy, information literacy, teamwork, and problem solving,” in order to “prepare [them] for twenty-first-century challenges.” Such an education will help students thrive in a diverse world, but the diversity we celebrate will also expose students to differing opinions, personalities

and agendas. Questions then arise: How do we teach students to talk, work, debate, and negotiate with people and groups who disagree with them? How do we help them become advocates and leaders who can unite people from opposing sides? On a practical level, how do we help students perform well during job interviews, work within a team, and make the rounds at a conference among people who may be very different from them?

According to multiple research studies, public speaking classes are proven to increase students’ critical thinking, leadership, listening, and writing skills, as well as community building and confidence, all while reducing their social and speaking anxiety. In a 2021 article, “Take a Public Speaking Course and Conquer the Fear,” Dwyer and Davidson find that “Public speaking courses significantly help reduce public speaking fear and anxiety for students,” and that “Alumni who completed a public speaking course report higher levels of confidence across 12 aspects of presentations as compared to alumni who did not take a public speaking course.” This capacity building aligns with the liberal arts mission of helping students be advocates of reason amidst the cyclone of blaming, shaming, confirmation bias, fear-mongering, fundamentalism, and deflection that we see in many social, professional, and political realms.

In terms of where public speaking resources should be housed, George and Trimbur argue in a (2014) article, “A Writing Center Collaboration with a Hybrid Introduction to Public Speaking Course,” that a “Multimodal center” where “digital, oral, and visual communication in

Rhetoric and Composition intertwine and interact” is the most effective location to teach students these skills. Similarly, Lee Yook and Atkins-Sayre recommend in a 2016 article, “The Centrality of the Center,” “a combined center approach where speaking and writing are treated as part of the same whole, a unified set of communication practices,” from which “students become better writers and speakers simultaneously.” This makes sense. Professors sometimes lament students’ writing and presenting abilities, but also add that they aren’t equipped and/or don’t have the time to provide the proper instruction for either skill. This is when students looking for more guidance come to the writing center. Unlike classes that require but can’t provide instruction for writing and speaking, writing center academic support staff work individually with students over the course of a semester or even an entire academic year(s). And just as these centers teach writing through writing intensive classes, they also teach classes dedicated entirely to the elements of speech craft.

While much work remains to be done, we have taken a step in the right direction at Smith with the introduction of a new course, WRT 132, Public Speaking: Presentation of Self, Rhetorical Choices, and Agency. In this course, students will learn the craft of writing for the voice for different purposes and in different contexts. By the end, they will have developed an appreciation for their own unique voices and the power of oral argumentation, have lowered their fear of public speaking, and be well on their way to becoming effective changemakers.

Peter Sapira, Writing & Public Speaking Instructor