

INWRITING

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Students in Sheridan Steelman's WRT 150 Pilot Course (photo: Kallie Crouch)

Progress & Process: Meeting First-Year Needs in the Writing Classroom

Sofia Ellis

All curricula eventually become outdated, especially as new technologies develop and alter the world of education entirely. For over twenty years, first-year writing classes at GVSU have graded students on a final portfolio of three polished essays at the end of WRT 130 or WRT 150. Associate Professor Jerry Stinnett, Director of First-Year Writing, said this is an unusually long time for one pedagogy to remain effective. He explained the factors at play that have prompted discussions surrounding change.

"The way that universities get funded has changed," said Stinnett. "We're bringing in new admission practices. We're bringing in more students from less traditional backgrounds. The costs of education have gone up. So a curriculum that used to say, 'Hey, try this, and if you fail, take it again,' now becomes much higher stakes for students." These changes led writing faculty to begin testing new models for first-year writing courses.

Elements of the current writing curriculum have served students well for years, primarily the three-piece final portfolio, which accounted for the majority of students' grades. However, as a foundational course of college education, first-year writing needs to adapt to changing student needs. Other external factors have played into this decision as well.

"Research in writing studies has developed since that time, and we know some things we didn't know before about what works well for students. And then, of course, the big elephant in the room is AI. It has become a big thing, and it's going to become even more, so it's not even a question of if our students are going to use it; it's going to be integrated into things. And so we feel compelled to teach students how to navigate that. You put all those pieces together, and our curriculum needs to be updated," Stinnett explained.

In order to adapt to these changes,
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Back Where It All Began: WRT Alumni Jeremy Llorence

Arianna Bevier



Distinguished Alumni-in-Residence Jeremy Llorence (photo: Kallie Crouch)

On Nov. 6, alumni Jeremy Llorence visited GVSU as the Writing Department's Distinguished Alumni for the 2025 CLAS Alumni-in-Residence program. The program began in 2001, providing students with a chance to see what alumni accomplish after graduation, and, for students in the Writing Department, how a degree in writing can impact their personal and professional lives. Department Chair and Associate Professor Amy Ferdinandt Stolley, who coordinated this year's event, said, "It's a great chance for students to learn from those who went before them, and we hope it helps students feel more connected with the department, their faculty, and fellow classmates."

Jeremy Llorence is a Black American playwright who received a BA in Writing from GVSU in 2012, and an MFA in Creative Writing and Playwriting at Western Michigan University in 2015. Llorence works at Otterbein University, where he teaches courses in playwriting, fiction, and advanced narrative. He has received multiple awards for his work as both a writer and a teacher, including the 2022 Individual Excellence Award from the Ohio Arts Council and the New Teacher of the Year Award from Otterbein. His ten-minute, one-act, and

full-length plays have been performed in venues across the Midwest.

Llorence's visit began with a craft talk at the Kirkhof Center entitled "Form, Genre, and Finding Your Voice After Graduation." During the talk, Llorence discussed the challenges of finding one's voice as a writer following graduation. He emphasized the importance of reading, and understanding one's creative influences. He said, "I think one of the things writers struggle with when they graduate is, 'How do I keep writing?'" He asked students to reflect on their favorite readings, both assigned readings from class and personal readings, and identify common themes in their interests. He also encouraged students to journal about their reading experiences and to continue exploring how their interests—such as hobbies and current events—can influence their writing. Personal interests and intersections between them drive Llorence's writing process: "Looking for common territory, and what your favorite artists or characters might say about your interests ... inform, in genre, how this all works together. So this is where most of my writing comes from, this idea of how my interests line up with the form of what I'm trying to do."

In the evening, students and

faculty gathered in the Mary Idema Pew Library Multipurpose Room for a reading of Llorence's work. The event began with a performance of his ten-minute play *Shiawase* (幸せ) by students from GVSU's theatre department. The performance was coordinated by Dr. James Bell, with student Ahmir Wiggins playing the role of Keith, Malik Immoos in the role of Cujo, and Tracey Richards as the stage director.

Following the performance, Llorence read chapters from his in-progress book, entitled *The Legend of Black Jaxon*. The book explores themes of identity, family, and the legacy of black exploitation films, and was inspired by Llorence's diverse academic background, personal experiences, and interests, including the loss of his father, and 90s kung fu movies.

After reading, Llorence answered questions from students, including how he develops characters and how his

"[This] is where most of my writing comes from, this idea of how my interests line up with the form of what I'm trying to do."

diverse educational experiences affect his dialogue. Llorence discussed the importance of voice when it comes to developing characters. He encouraged attendees to think about how different characters would communicate their desire and needs: "Think in terms of, what do I want my reader to see?... How do these characters speak?... It helps to know where [and when] the characters are from, [and] what words would they use."

Llorence closed the event by encouraging aspiring writers to continue pursuing their passion despite the challenges that might arise.

SEE ALUMNI EVENT ON PAGE 11

Interning for Change: Students Reflect on WRT Scotland Study Abroad Program

Annelise Racely

When GVSU students Cole Simpson and Sophie Gemmen boarded their flight to Scotland, they carried the usual mix of excitement and nerves. What awaited them, however, wasn't just a new country; it was a new way of seeing themselves as writers, professionals, and people.

For four weeks, both students participated in WRT 357: Professional Writing in International Contexts and INT 490: Internship Abroad, part of GVSU's faculty-led program based in Edinburgh, Scotland. The group began their journey with a few nights in the Edinburgh Youth Hostel before settling into the University of Edinburgh's Pollock Halls, just a short walk from the city's historic center.

"It was the perfect balance of structure and independence," Gemmen recalled. "We could explore the city, but we always had support nearby."

Each student was paired with a local charity to gain hands-on experience in

"I'm really here, and I'm doing it, with some pretty amazing people."

writing and communication. Simpson interned with Edinburgh Leisure, a nonprofit promoting community health and wellness through accessible recreation. "I wrote case studies by interviewing volunteers and participants," he said. "Those stories were later used in funding applications. I was surprised by how much I enjoyed talking to people and sharing their experiences; it pushed me out of my comfort zone in a good way."

Gammen's placement was with Family Journeys, an organization supporting families navigating separation. Though the internship was centered around writing, she was



WRT students on the 2025 Scotland Study Abroad trip (Photo: Sophie Gemmen)

able to tailor her work to her interests in data and design. "I analyzed client demographics and service pricing, wrote reports, and helped rebrand materials for their new visual identity," she said. "It was incredible to see how my coursework translated into something meaningful."

For both students, involvement at GVSU helped prepare them for the leap abroad. Gemmen, a current member of the Student Senate, said her leadership experience made a big difference. "Student Senate taught me how to handle unfamiliar situations and build confidence in myself," she explained. "That confidence made studying abroad feel like an actual possibility."

Their first week in Edinburgh brought its share of unforgettable moments. For Simpson, visiting a dance class for adults with special needs through Edinburgh Leisure left a lasting impression. "It showed me how joy and inclusion were built into their work," he said.

Gammen remembers a picnic dinner on Calton Hill as the moment the trip truly sank in. "The view was unreal," she said. "We sat watching the sunset, eating our first meal deals, and I thought, 'I'm really here, and I'm doing it, with some pretty amazing people.'"

Academically, the program struck a balance between structure and freedom.

Most of the coursework for WRT 357 was completed before departure, while the internship component provided hands-on learning. "It was a different rhythm," Gemmen said. "Classes at GVSU tend to be more rigid, but in Edinburgh, we had space to apply what we learned right away."

Simpson added, "I expected a 9-to-5 schedule, but the internship was hybrid, with flexibility to explore. It felt more trusting and less stressful."

Adapting to life in another country brought both challenges and discoveries. "The hardest part was being away from my friends," Simpson admitted. "The time difference made it tough to stay connected."

For Gemmen, small cultural differences — like learning to flag down waiters or paying with cash — proved surprisingly stressful. "Even walking on the sidewalk felt like something to overthink at first," she said. "But the people were patient and kind."

Both students emphasized the value of the faculty-led format. Affiliate Professor Samantha Dine and Professor Christopher Toth served as mentors, planners, and on-site support. "They made everything feel manageable," Gemmen said. "I never felt stuck or alone."

Simpson agreed: "They pushed

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New Faculty Profiles

Assistant Professor Profile: Sasha Debevec- McKenney Emma Cervantes



Assistant Professor Sasha Debevec-McKenney (photo: Kallie Crouch)

The GVSU Writing Department has welcomed poet and Assistant Professor Sasha Debevec-McKenney, commonly known by her students as Professor Sasha, to our faculty.

Debevec-McKenney was born and raised in the eastern part of the United States, yet has always found herself drawn to the Midwest. She began writing at a young age, since it was a subject that she has always adored, and has been able to hone her skills through attending an “arts magnet” high school and by studying Creative Writing at Beloit College in Wisconsin. After a short break, she returned to school at NYU, where she received her MFA in Poetry.

Debevec-McKenney, despite a fear of public speaking, decided to pursue teaching and started her career in the fall of 2020, and has been teaching ever

since. “Since then, I’ve been bopping around to different fellowships,” she says, alluding to her time teaching at Emory University in Atlanta, GA, before moving to Michigan, “but I’m happy I landed at GVSU.”

Debevec-McKenney shared how writing is a way for her to work through her feelings in a controlled manner. To this day, she writes about American history, race, the body, and more, and has come out with a poetry book, *Joy is My Middle Name*, this year!

When she is not writing, her other hobbies include watching movies, reading books, doing yoga, and taking long walks, which are factors in her writing process as well as making her feel better physically.

Her love of poetry and writing in general has directly impacted her teaching, like in her WRT 219: Intro to Creative Writing and WRT 320: Intermediate Poetry classes, where she implants creative inspiration in her students’ work through examples of her favorite works from other authors.

Debevec-McKenney hopes that with every student she encounters and every class she teaches, she fosters a learning environment where students end the term with a stronger relationship to writing and that they,

“[With] every student she encounters ... she fosters ... a stronger relationship to writing.”

“Can always open a notebook and take some pressure off their brains by writing about how they feel.”

Debevec-McKenney is delighted to be a part of a welcoming, supportive team at GVSU, and the Writing Department is excited to see what she does with her time here!

Assistant Professor Profile: Jane Morton Annelise Racely



Assistant Professor Jane Morton (photo: Annelise Racely)

When Assistant Professor Jane Morton joined GVSU’s Writing Department, they were immediately drawn to its distinctive identity. “It’s not common for a university to have a stand-alone Writing Department,” Morton explained. “GVSU’s Writing Department seemed so unique, creative, and innovative in its culture and what it offers students.”

Originally from Texas, Morton spent most of their twenties in Alabama before moving north to Michigan. “Before coming here, I didn’t have a reference point outside of the South,” they said. “So far, I love Grand Rapids—the lake, the trails, the river, and the summer weather are all breathtaking. I’m even trying to romanticize the coming winter!”

Morton’s teaching philosophy centers on developing habits of thought that extend beyond craft. “Writing

skills are important,” they said, “but I hope students also gain critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and mindfulness through sustained writing and reading practice.”

This semester, Morton put their philosophy to work in the two sections of WRT 219 and one section of WRT 320 they teach.

Outside the classroom, Morton’s creative work spans multiple genres. They consider themselves primarily a poet but also a writer of fiction and hybrid forms. Their debut collections, *Snake Lore* and *Shedding Season*, were both published by Black Lawrence Press. “When I first started

“Writing skills are important ... but I hope students also gain critical thinking, emotional, intelligence, and mindfulness through sustained writing and reading practice.”

submitting, I was overwhelmed,” they admitted. “But I learned that believing in your work—and taking the risk to put it out there—is essential.”

Morton’s perspective as a writer was shaped in part by her Fulbright Fellowship on Jeju Island, South Korea. “Before the Fulbright, I didn’t write much poetry,” they said. “Being abroad gave me the time and solitude to listen to myself and find poetry.”

For them, the value of writing lies in connection and authenticity. “At the lowest points in my life, I’ve thought, ‘At least there are still books,’” they reflected. “Reading and writing can save us,” they said. “If your work is honest, it’s good work. The key is to be true to yourself on the page.”

Assistant Professor Profile: Rebecca Gerdes-McClain Emma Cervantes



Assistant Professor Rebecca Gerdes-McClain (photo: Kallie Crouch)

Assistant Professor Rebecca Gerdes-McClain, a new member of the GVSU Writing faculty, believes everyone can learn something new when it comes to writing.

Gerdes-McClain was born and raised in the Midwest. While she spent most of her college career in the South, she attended Indiana University South Bend for her BA and subsequent master’s degree in 18th-century British literature. She then pursued further education at the University of Oklahoma, where she graduated with a doctorate in Composition and Rhetoric.

She secured her first faculty position at Columbus State in Georgia, where she taught for seven years before ultimately deciding to return to her roots. When looking for a new job that was closer to home, she

decided it could “only be a job [she] was excited about and a place [she] wanted to live,” and GVSU fit the bill!

While there wasn’t a Writing Major offered at her undergraduate institution, Gerdes-McClain was an English major with a dual concentration in Writing and Literature. She loves everything to do with language, from classic literature to sentence construction. As a scholar, she’s interested in Writing Studies, especially the question of how to most effectively teach writing.

As a professor teaching for fifteen years, Gerdes-McClain has found it to be a fulfilling intellectual challenge, and to this day, she enjoys teaching all forms of writing to students of all years. “I like to treat my students’ ideas as complex,” she said, and by engaging fully with their writing, she finds

“[Students] leave her class with new tools to improve their writing ... and to keep in mind that ‘the first draft is always the hardest.’”

enjoyment indeed.

As a professor who mostly teaches freshman classes, she occasionally has the opportunity to teach upperclassmen and gets to see how her students progress throughout the years, beginning as freshmen and growing into juniors and seniors. It is a full-circle moment for her where she gets to see the fruit of her academic labors. Gerdes-McClain hopes that her students leave her class with new tools to improve their writing prowess and to keep in mind that “the first draft is always the hardest.”

The Writing Department is excited to see what other forms of wisdom she has in store for her students!

Special Topics in Writing: The Novel Writing Classroom

Claire Sackett



WRT 380 students in class (photo: Claire Sackett)

After many student requests, GVSU's Writing Department is now offering WRT 380: Special Topics in Writing as a 3-credit novel writing class. This is something Professor and author Caitlin Horrocks and her colleagues have been discussing for a while. Current modules offered by the Writing Major provide opportunities for students to write short fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry, but this is the first class designed to get students working on a book-length project, a goal for many writing students.

When designing WRT 380, Horrocks wanted the course to be a place where students could develop their novel, regardless of what part of the process they were in.

To help all her students succeed, she prioritized building a consistent writing habit and teaching about structure. "Structure is one of the hardest things for students to wrap their heads around when moving from short fiction to longer projects," she said. "I wanted to give students alternate ways to visualize their novel."

On a day-to-day basis, Horrocks implements both flexible and collaborative classroom structures when it comes to what students

want to learn most. As such, the class has fallen into a pleasant flow of workshops, ten-minute writing prompts, reflection on longer fiction pieces, and fun in-class activities like map-making, world-building with dice, and character arc plotting.

Outside of class, weekly reading assignments help students explore structure. A two-thousand-word

"Structure is one of the hardest things for students to wrap their heads around ... I wanted to give students alternate ways to visualize their novel."

weekly word count keeps students on track to make consistent progress on their projects. And, two thousand words at a time, students steadily work towards a rough draft and think about their stories on a weekly, if not daily, basis.

Throughout the semester, students also complete several other projects, including a mid-semester book

mapping project where they translate a book of their choosing into a visual form, such as a board game, a timeline, or a map. Additionally, they read a full novel and have in-class discussions about the decisions the author made.

Then, at the end of the semester, students submit revisions of what they have written alongside a query letter for their final project. Together, these serve as tools to help students search for agents when they are ready for that

"... a cozy and welcoming community of student writers ..."

stage of the publication process.

For anyone considering taking this novel writing class in future semesters, I would wholeheartedly recommend it. The class is a cozy and welcoming community of student writers who work on a wide variety of projects, from thrillers to romances and everything in between.

Students are not expected to finish their novel draft before the end of the semester, and the only prerequisite is WRT 219: Introduction to Creative Writing.

Unfortunately, WRT 380's test-run new courses and cannot be offered indefinitely. Novel writing can only be taught one more time before GVSU must decide whether to make it a permanent part of the curriculum.

Writing faculty are discussing a longer commitment, but if accepted as a permanent course offering, it would likely be an advanced course in the writing curriculum and have additional prerequisites.

If you would like to see this class become a permanent part of the curriculum, Horrocks recommends directing feedback to Department Chair, Amy Stolley (stolleam@gvsu.edu).

The World of 1's and 0's: How Digital Studies Helps Writers Succeed

Eli Pszczolkowski

When most students hear about “Digital Studies,” they probably imagine spending hours learning industry-specific programs and technical jargon. In reality, Digital Studies is one of the most diverse, flexible, and broadly applicable minors available at GVSU. Its main focus is the concept of “digital literacy,” which GVSU defines as the ability to use digital tools safely and ethically.

After taking several classes within the Digital Studies program, I’d define it like this: an awareness of how to find online information, evaluate how it was collected, and understand how different presentations of information affect an audience, while learning how to use digital tools. Digital Studies gives students, especially writers, a foundation of digital skills that are invaluable for students’ lives and

“Most transactions today, in our everyday lives, happen online.”

careers in today’s world.

GVSU’s Director of the Digital Studies program and Writing Professor Laurence José has been a major advocate for writers in Digital Studies. Emphasizing the importance of digital skills, she said, “Information literacy in 2025 cannot be taught or understood without digital literacy.... What is it you can still do if you don’t have access to a cellphone? If you don’t have access to a laptop? ... Most transactions today, in our everyday lives, happen online.”

This is especially true for today’s writers, who now operate almost exclusively in digital spaces. From word processing and communication to research and publishing, almost



*WRT Major and Digital Studies Minor Eli Pszczolkowski
(photo: Kallie Crouch)*

all professionally written content is planned, researched, created, and circulated online. Digital Studies gives writers in all genres, not just technical writers, an insight into the tools that govern our work and agency within those conversations. Effective communication requires thorough knowledge of the audience, content, and context of the message; for online spaces, Digital Studies provides the tools to find those answers.

Other students’ experiences have also echoed Professor José’s sentiments. Senior Christina Bilko (she/her), a Writing major and Digital Studies minor, said the skills she developed in the Digital Studies program have paralleled the skills acquired in her writing classes, because “online and real world spaces have become so interconnected with each other that writing is almost always in conversation with digital technology.” When asked how she can apply those skills to her writing or daily life, she said, “This has affected all aspects of daily life, especially when it comes to the process of job searching. There’s a huge amount of online resources, networking platforms, and job boards to sort through. I’ve learned a lot of valuable skills from coursework that has

prepared me to tackle the amount of research required to find a position that will fit my qualifications.” Digital Studies, for her, recontextualized the way she interacted with technology to be safer, ethical, and useful.

For both Bilko and me, Digital Studies provided new insights into how technology is and can be used, both on a personal and societal scale. We took different paths to arrive at that conclusion. For Bilko, it was DS 310: Digital Preservation & Archiving and CJ 335: Digital Crime, Media, & Culture. For me, it was FVP 125: Media Production and DS 360: Ethics of Digital Culture. The program excels in teaching analysis and investigation skills, which is impressive given Digital Studies has only three mandatory courses, including the capstone. The rest is built by the student. The minor requires 21 credits total, some of which, like WRT 351: Writing for the Web and WRT 455: Composing with Digital Tools, cross-pollinate with the Writing Major.

Digital Studies is a program that students can tailor-fit for themselves. By understanding how we interact with digital technologies and what their consequences are, writers can gain a suite of skills related to their

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“There Are No Real Rules”: Form and Freedom at Poetry Night with Tyehimba Jess

Kallie Crouch

On Thursday, Oct. 16, GVSU and Grand Rapids community members joined award-winning author and performer Tyehimba Jess for Poetry Night at Loosemore Auditorium on the City Campus as part of the annual GVSU Arts Celebration. On the stage, Jess, the author of poetry collections *Leadbelly* and *Olio*, blended poetic form, linguistic freedom, and performance, to step into the voices of the historical figures he portrays in his writing.

Jess's visit to GVSU began with a Q&A session in the Kirkhof Center, where attendees asked questions about his work and process. Jess, whose roots are in slam poetry and performance, said of his background, “What I did learn under those circumstances [is that] if you don’t have the audience’s attention within the first twenty seconds, it’s not going to work. What I adopted from that is to grab the audience. Grab the reader’s attention from the very beginning of the poem, then hold onto it for dear life until the end.”

One way Jess manages to keep the

“Grab the reader’s attention from the very beginning of the poem, then hold onto it for dear life until the end.”

audience’s attention is by creating poems that challenge the constraints of form. “There’s one other little twist inside that idea of there being rules, which is that often there’s a breakage of the rules within the actual ruleset,” he said. “The poet strains against the idea of these rules, and so they kind of silently break the rules.” Using gate folds and tear-out pages, Jess’s



Poet Tyehimba Jess at GVSU’s Poetry Night (photo: Kallie Crouch)

Olio features poems that can be read up and down the page, diagonally, and around in a loop. In doing so, Jess uses physical and visual space to break form, even while his poems bend to the conventions of the sonnet, for example. “Almost anything can happen in poetry. It’s probably the most experimental literary form with the most rules,” he said. “But also, there are no real rules.”

Jess shared that much of his work draws inspiration from the lives and times of Black American blues musicians. In tracing back this history, Jess said he found himself drawn to questions of legacy and lineage, beginning with *Leadbelly* and continuing with *Olio*: “The things that I’m choosing are about some fundamental questions: ‘Who am I? And where am I? And what’s going on?’ Because I am in the lineage, I am in the ripple of the path [of Leadbelly].” As a Black artist, Jess sees similarities between the kind of terrain Leadbelly navigated and the one Jess navigates today. “For me, that became a project that was about American history,” he said. “And it was also about myself. So, it was about ... trying to figure out, ‘How did he

[Leadbelly] navigate this terrain that I am trying to navigate?”

Poets, Jess said, are constantly grappling with those questions: “Who am I, where am I, and what’s going on? “And in order to understand that,” he said, “it really is imperative that you have some understanding of the history of the country where you live.” He recommended writers not only consider this history, but also

“Poets ... are constantly grappling with those questions: Who am I, where am I, and what’s going on?”

use it as a tool to develop their work: “Understand that history will help you really deepen your work because, when you draw from history, it’s like you imagine yourself yelling down into a well and the echo comes back to you and stretches beyond you.”

Drawing from this lineage, Jess began his reading at Loosemore Auditorium by invoking the legacy

SEE POETRY NIGHT ON PAGE 11

Chasing Obsessions: Bonnie Jo Campbell at the GVSU Writers Series

Hannah Ritchey

On Oct. 7, GVSU students had the opportunity to hear from a Michigan native, Bonnie Jo Campbell, for the first Writing Series Event of the 2025 Fall semester. Campbell offered students and faculty a Q&A, readings of her works, and a craft talk. By attending the event, students had the opportunity to receive special, face-to-face advice about strategies for succeeding as a writer. Taking the time to hear advice from an award-winning writer like Campbell was an enlightening and impactful experience for the students and community members who attended the event.

Campbell began the craft talk with a reading of an excerpt from her essay, “Crimes Against a Wrecker Driver,” which she used to emphasize the art of using ordinary, everyday life to write something extraordinary. Her

“Do not be afraid to be obsessed.”

“obsession” with a crime committed against her hometown tow truck driver inspired her to write the essay, which then turned into the short story “King Cole’s American Salvage,” and eventually, a poem, too. “Do not be afraid to be obsessed,” Campbell said. She learned this after spending hours immersing herself in research that involved spending hours in the passenger seat of a tow truck.

Campbell’s fixation on the crime motivated her to experiment with genre. Campbell’s poem and short story based on the event showcased the technical differences involved in each style, with each approaching the event from a different angle. Campbell encouraged writers with the advice, “If you are stuck, try writing in a different genre.”

To introduce the second half of the event, the reading, Campbell shared a few pages of a section called “Times Change Faster Than the People in Them” from her novel, *The Waters*. She also shared two of her short stories,

“We are all connected by our love for writing.”

“Sleepover” and “My Sister is in Pain.”

With so much insight and information, students were welcome to ask Campbell questions to end the event. One question from a visitor started a great discussion about first-time publication for students. Campbell shared, “We are all connected by our love for writing,” and urged the students to share their work with other writing peers and to seek out opportunities to do so.

Campbell’s insight can reach any kind or style of writer. Throughout the event, listeners heard an abundance of different ways writers can become inspired to write.

Learning to relate real-life events to writing, to tackle writing in different genres, and to write what you are truly obsessed with were memorable strategies that students can apply to their future projects. Campbell left writers on an encouraging note: “You do not have to be a genius,” she said. “You have to be hardworking.”

It is not a part of students’ everyday routine to gain strong advice from a well-known writer, so be sure to look for more Writing Series visits in the future!

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Students and faculty with Bonnie Jo Campbell (photo: Hannah Ritchey)

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Study Abroad Continued from page 3

us to experience Scotland fully, and knowing they were nearby gave me confidence to try new things.”

The work culture in Scotland also stood out. Simpson noticed that “tea breaks weren’t just politeness—they were part of the rhythm of work.” Gemmen observed that slower pace, too: “Work felt more human. Meetings had more conversation, and people genuinely cared about balance.”

Looking back, both students say the experience changed them in lasting ways. “I was surprised by how well I adapted,” Simpson said. “I’m introverted, but I found myself loving conversations and interviews.”

Gammen added, “I didn’t have to force what I learned in class into my internship; it fit naturally. I trusted myself more than I expected.”

For those considering the program,

“I didn’t have to force what I learned in class into my internship; it fit naturally.”

both students stress accessibility and support. The program includes housing, activities, and a twice-weekly meal stipend, making budgeting easier. “Start early and apply for scholarships,” Gemmen advised. “Talk to financial aid; they can help you make it work.” Simpson said, “Use the free breakfast, find cheap local food, and remember it’s worth every penny.”

When asked to summarize their experience in three words, Simpson chose fun, warm, and adventurous. Gemmen chose life-changing, exciting, and gorgeous. Their advice to nervous students? Do it anyway. “Whatever you’re worried about, you can overcome,” Simpson said. Gemmen agreed. “You’ll be anxious, but you’ll grow in ways you can’t imagine.”

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interests that cannot be replicated by any other program offered at GVSU. Digital Studies gives students the opportunity to either specialize in their chosen field or explore topics outside their major, with courses in writing, sociology, computer science, film & video production, statistics, and more; you may have taken a course in the Digital Studies minor without even realizing it. As José says, “You build your own [Digital Studies] equation.”

The Digital Studies minor was built to be compatible with any major program because its teachings are so fundamental in the age of big tech, AI,

“You build your own [Digital Studies] equation.”

and digital interconnectivity. While students may think they need to have a high-level understanding of computers or software to succeed in the program, Professor José disagrees. In fact, she said the opposite is true: Digital Studies is for the students who want to learn the basics of how we use digital technology across all disciplines. By the end of the program, students will be able to find, analyze, and present digital information and use digital tools in the most effective way for their particular purpose, while also having gained useful knowledge in other fields along the way.

In the end, Christina Bilko words it best: “Looking back, I’m grateful that I decided to pursue Digital Studies even though I didn’t fully understand how wide its scope is. Taking this risk has given me a more fulfilling university experience that has taken full advantage of the digital tools and resources available to students. If you’re looking for a minor that will complement and enhance your major, digital studies is a strong option to consider.”

Poetry Night

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of blues musicians in several new poems, each preceded by a quick verse on the harmonica. The remainder of the poems Jess read were from *Olio*, including “Millie and Christine McKoy” and “Bert Williams/George Walker Paradox.” To demonstrate how form is the poem’s playground, Jess read each poem in several ways, playing off the historical voices he blended with his own in a combination of story, image, and structure.

“One is greater than zero, meaning it’s better to have one word on the page than nothing”

At the end of the day, Jess encouraged the young writers in the audience to, above all else, get words on the page. “One is greater than zero,” he said, “meaning it’s better to have one word on the page than nothing.” Beyond getting words on the page, Jess also told writers to follow their obsessions, ask questions about place and history, and said, “Just think about making the best kind of work that you know how to make.”

Alumni Event

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He emphasized the importance of supportive community and focusing on the creative process and the joy of storytelling. The day’s focus on personal interests and incorporating experiences was reflected in the work that Llorence shared, providing an opportunity for students to think about how their own experiences and topics of interest can influence their work. Llorence’s visit was especially impactful as a GVSU alumnus who could offer students a valuable perspective on where a Writing degree might take them in the future.

Finding Your Place: At the Career Center with Lisa Knapp

Sofia Pratt

Writing students who have visited the GVSU Career Center are likely familiar with Lisa Knapp, the Associate Director and Career Advisor for the Communication and the Arts Career Community. Knapp meets with students to offer guidance along their career path, from identifying career goals or writing a good resume to building a professional network.

“That moment when, all of a sudden, the student sees themselves how I see them ... that’s my favorite moment.”

Despite how passionately she feels about her career now, that wasn’t always the case.

Knapp grew up in Ravenna, MI before attending Hope College to study English, communications, and education. “I’ve always wanted to get paid to read, write, and talk,” Knapp said. After graduating, she was able to do just that by working as an English teacher, a college track coach, a newspaper reporter, a public relations communication specialist in the American Red Cross, a seventh- and eighth-grade teacher, and a program coordinator at Phelps Scholars.

She came to GVSU in 2009 for graduate school, where she ended up working at the GVSU Career Center with no idea what to do. “When I got placed in the Career Center for graduate school to pay for it, I cried,” Knapp said. “I couldn’t imagine I would ever be any good at this.”

For six weeks, Knapp met with students and helped with their resumes. At first, she assumed it



Associate Director and Career Advisor
Lisa Knapp (photo: Sofia Pratt)

would be purely transactional, but she quickly became invested. “I started begging people, ‘You have to tell me if you got the job,’” Knapp said. “I need to know.”

Everything clicked when Knapp was working with a recently graduated communications student who didn’t believe she had any worthwhile skills. Knapp strongly disagreed. “Something inside me broke,” Knapp said. While it was easy for Knapp to see all of the skills that this student offered, the student couldn’t see them for herself. At least, not until Knapp got involved.

“That moment when, all of a sudden, the student sees themselves how I see them,” Knapp said, “That’s my favorite moment.”

For any uncertain writing students starting down their career path, Knapp is more than happy to give her perspective—along with plenty of advice, support, and positivity.

WRT PILOT

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Steelman's WRT 150 Pilot Classroom
(photo: Kallie Crouch)

the department is piloting new courses. In Fall 2024, five professors volunteered to be a part of this pilot group. After meeting for the summer, they all agreed that more emphasis should be placed on the learning process, rather than those three final papers at the very end. Each developed their course with their knowledge of the current curriculum in mind; they know best what kinds of things are working in the classroom and what kinds of things present greater obstacles for students.

These courses have been developed with a different grading scale in common, but like current WRT 150 courses, specific alterations and assignments are up to the discretion of individual professors. Part-Time Professor Sheridan Steelman is one of the professors who first volunteered to take on a pilot course. For Steelman's class, the amplified focus on process took shape in the form of conferences.

In her first pilot class, conferences

“... they left each conference knowing what to do next...”

were optional. She took notice of how students appreciated and enjoyed conferencing time. This year, she made conferences required; her students met

with her three times throughout the semester in greater increments of time, relative to the length of the assignment. The final conference for students was an hour long.

“That was quite a bit of time for each student, but I think they left each conference knowing what to do next. And I started also implementing a post-conference assignment where they reflect on what we talked about and how it helped them. So, combining reflective writing with conferencing has probably been my two biggest changes,” said Steelman.

Another break from the traditional style has been the classroom itself. Typically, WRT 150 students have a lecture day and a lab day; one for

“... we’re going to certainly focus more on not just process, but on valuing process...”

learning, and one for writing. Professor Steelman prefers a more interactive approach. She teaches in a classroom with tables that group students together, rather than facing the front in a condensed lab space. This promotes more conversation among students before, during, and after class.

“Because they’ve talked so much about their writing, they’re getting together. I can see them leaving together and talking, and so the noise is my friend,” said Steelman.

Shifting the format of the class to foster conversation, both peer-to-peer and student-to-professor, shifts student perspectives on writing. These kinds of changes emphasize the writing process over the final product, showing students that learning is important, not just the final paper.

“For the future, we’re going to certainly focus more on not just process, but on valuing process: with our grades, with our assignments, with what we ask students to turn in,” said Stinnett.

INWRITING

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