

“This is a shining example of a win-win situation. A perfect combination of college and community. We love Montclair State, and I think the feeling is mutual.” This is the sentiment of Montclair resident Sheila Crowell, when talking about the Writers' Room, which she and writing partner Ellen Kolba founded in 1993.

Working in Montclair's public high school and middle schools, Writers' Room volunteers help students develop writing and editing skills. Thanks to outreach on the part of Sara Jonsberg of English, many of those volunteers come from MSU.

“Montclair State provides important support for the Writers' Room,” Jonsberg said, “and the Writers' Room provides important experience for our student teachers. By the time the students are English majors in college, the writing comes easily for them; they have forgotten how very hard it once was to write. Working with younger students reminds them and provides wonderful preparation for their return to the classroom as teachers.”

Crowell said that she hoped Montclair State would be a part of the writers' Program since its inception. “Involving Montclair State was always in our five-year plan,” she said, “but Sara met one of our coaches out in the community and became a volunteer herself. Later she realized that this experience was exactly what she wanted her teacher education students to have, and a wonderful collaboration was born a year earlier than we had even hoped.” Crowell also mentioned Anne Baldinger of Professional Studies as a key figure in the thriving town and gown relationship.

“When Sara began working with the Writers' Room, I was handling field placements,” Baldinger explained. “My son had been involved in the program and it had been very helpful, so I knew something about it from personal experience. I also thought it was great for our students to see a school district that was so willing to take risks and be innovative.”

Participation in the Writers' Room has been recognized as a valid part of the student teaching experience for MSU students, who spend time in the classroom as well as teaching writing skills to students one-on-one, which many volunteers call the single most rewarding and significant part of their field experience.

Crowell is equally impressed with them. “MSU students are terrific. They have new ideas and techniques under their belts when they walk in the door. Their preparation in writing process is wonderful.”

Crowell said she hopes MSU will propose the concept of the Writers' Room to other school systems across the country. “This program works and it can be replicated. As a community, Montclair has an unusually high number of residents who are writers. But even in places without that kind of resource, the existence of a nearby college can make it work,” Crowell said.

Another necessary component, she says, is a teaching staff that knows how to collaborate with Writers' Room volunteers. "I have never worked with a staff that knows how to collaborate as well as Montclair teachers do," said Crowell.

Writers' Room volunteers help students develop ideas and follow up with individual sessions. "We show up in language arts, then in math," Crowell explained. "By the time we appear in their science classes, the kids are saying, 'You really mean it. Writing is important everywhere.'"

Both Crowell and Kolba come from publishing backgrounds and have been writing and consulting as a team since 1961. Crowell pointed out that since its inception, the Writers' Room has accumulated close to 3,000 student papers that can be made available to scholars for research. "We are actively pursuing student teachers and people who want to observe what's going on. We welcome any university people who would like to become involved," said Crowell. "There is no other program like this in the country, and Montclair State is an important part of its success."