For Graduate Instructors of First-Year Writing Seminars at Cornell University: Apply for a PREPARE Writing Assessment Grant by February 18, 2015

For the past two years, the Center for Teaching Excellence and Center for the Integration of Research, Teaching, and Learning (CU-CIRTL) have jointly supported the professional development of graduate student instructors of First-year Writing Seminars by offering a fellowship opportunity in how to conduct Teaching as Research projects on assessing student writing. These Council of Graduate Schools/Cornell University PREPARE Writing Assessment Grants are designed to promote research on teaching methods, as well as to foster inquiry into and assessment of student learning outcomes.

Up to ten (10) grants of $250 per individual will be awarded to graduate instructors who propose projects in keeping with the project mission: to build skills of future faculty members in assessment of student learning. Since such goals can often be most effectively pursued collaboratively, we strongly encourage applications by pairs of students interested in collaboratively exploring similar topics in their individual writing seminars.

PREPARE Writing Assessment Grants are similar to Peer Collaboration or TA Mentorship programs in the Knight Institute, but distinct from these in crucial respects. Each proposal should address a plan, modest in scope, with two parts: 1) to explore a specific pedagogical strategy, and 2) to assess directly one or more specific student learning outcomes. (Some suggestions about sample activities will be outlined below; the staffs of the Knight Institute and of the Center for Teaching Excellence are also available for further consultation.)

Outcomes-based assessment will shape the future of higher education, so all Ph.D. candidates can benefit from preparing themselves for that future. Moreover, there are many advantages to exploring assessment within the structure of the First-Year Writing Seminar program. First, a robust tradition of collaborative pedagogy already exists there. Second, First-Year Writing Seminars are explicitly focused on discipline-specific learning outcomes. Since departments are not always aware of the remarkable and innovative work done by their graduate student instructors in First-Year Writing Seminars, one goal of these grants is to raise the profile of their students’ innovative teaching approaches by presenting the results of PREPARE Fellow research at a campus-wide Classroom Research and Teaching Symposium in May 2015.

To these ends, the fellowships will operate under certain formalities:

- **Each individual or pair will recruit at least one faculty member** to participate in planning and executing the proposed activity. This faculty member could be, but need not be, the course leader of one or more of the instructors; some grantees may instead wish to work with a dissertation committee member or chair. The level of participation can vary and need not be burdensome, but the faculty member should at least take part in the process of assessing student work.

- **Each instructor will participate in a series of five two-hour “Teaching as Research” workshops** led by staff from the Center for Teaching Excellence. These workshops provide critical training for the Teaching as Research process, including responsibilities with regards to human subjects protection and
Institutional Review Board submission. As part of this research, you should plan to gather preliminary data about student learning at a mid-point in the course through surveys or mid-semester evaluations, with help from the Center for Teaching Excellence. A draft schedule of these practically focused workshops is available; they will occur on Friday afternoons beginning February 27, 2015.

- Each individual or pair will present the results and implications of the research at one or more symposia convened by the Center for Teaching Excellence; ideally, the results would also be presented to the department(s) involved. For 2015, the Classroom Research and Teaching Symposium will take place on Friday, May 15 in room 423 ILR Conference Center (King-Shaw Hall).

Some discussion and illustrations of sample “learning outcomes” in various disciplines may be found in the Knight Institute pamphlet *The Indispensable Reference for Teachers of First-Year Writing Seminars*. An excellent overview of outcomes-based assessment is provided by Barbara Walvoord’s *Effective Grading* (Jossey-Bass, 2009). In simple but general terms, assessment involves articulating a specific learning outcome; identifying an instrument to measure it (i.e., student writing); creating a “rubric” to describe performances that meet, exceed, or fall short of an acceptable standard; and then gathering and evaluating a body of student work (i.e., a sample batch of student papers). Instructors might wish to investigate such student writing competencies as the following, which by no means represent a comprehensive list:

- The ability to articulate a “close reading” of a passage or text
- The ability to summarize and/or paraphrase accurately and effectively
- The ability to incorporate source material properly
- The ability to imitate a specific genre or craft a specific section of a genre
- The ability to analyze, critique or construct arguments
- The ability to incorporate and respond adequately to competing points of view
- The ability to synthesize multiple texts or perspectives, as in a “literature review”
- The ability to tailor sentence patterns or diction appropriately to an audience or occasion

Pedagogical strategies worthy of experimentation and research could include role-playing exercises, classroom debates, alternative strategies for peer review/editing or instructor response, style exercises, library instruction, applications of technology, etc.

As noted above, the Center for Teaching Excellence and the Knight Institute staffs are available for further consultation and bibliographical suggestions. Examples of past classroom research on assessing student writing are available in the Center for Teaching Excellence’s office in 420 CCC Building or upon request.

Depending on the nature of the proposal and the interests of the instructors, project results may also be written up for a working paper series in Summer or Fall 2015.

**Brief project proposals of approximately 300 words should be submitted to: prepare.cte@cornell.edu by February 18, 2015. Please identify the name of your project partner (if any), writing course, and faculty course leader. Only one jointly developed proposal is required for paired projects.**