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CANADIAN MENNONITE UNIVERSITY

EDUCATING FOR THE 'W'

By Geoff Kirbyson for the Free Press

Canadian Mennonite University is taking a page out of the books of some of the most prestigious schools in the world with its latest academic offering.

The Winnipeg-based post-secondary institution is preparing to welcome students for a second year of "W" courses, all of which are designed to develop and fine-tune students' writing skills.

CMU has always been a writing-intensive school, according to Jonathan Dueck, its academic dean, but it started to shift a couple of years ago towards a new model of "W" courses, in line with what's being done at a number of high-profile schools in the U.S., including Duke University, George Washington University, Harvard and Princeton.

"Writing for us is real. It's not an exercise. We learn best when doing something real. (Our

students) are writing for a real audience. When you write for different audiences, you write in different ways," Dueck said.

"What we've done is design courses to engage students in the way professors really write and give them a chance to interact with as close to a real audience as they can and revise their work for that audience so they have practice. Feedback is really helpful in writing when it's provided and you have to use it."

After running 14 "W" courses during the 2018-19 academic year, CMU will offer a dozen this September across a wide variety of disciplines, including business, biology, music, English, philosophy, theology and psychology.

"In biology, you don't write the same way as you do in English. The students are improving in their thinking and argument and in clarity, correctness and citations," he said.

A lot of post-secondary courses provide feedback at the end of a term, which tends to be far less impactful than if it's done on an ongoing basis, he said.

Dueck knows of a writing program at the University of Toronto but he's not aware of other course work in Canada where the discipline of writing is taught by professors with PhDs.

There are also non-"W" versions of these courses. While there are more tests in a non-"W" version of a course and more writing in the "W" class, the latter isn't ignoring the curriculum but is instead engaging and interacting with the course work with people outside a classroom, he said.

"The classes are meant to draw you into writing in a real way. The work (students) do will come in drafts and they'll get feedback from peers and professors and, depending on the class size, from writing fellows, which are upper-level undergraduate students we train in

measuring so CMU accumulated data during the previous winter term by surveying students who took the "W" courses and also gathered the first item they wrote in the class as well as the last one.

"We found students really understood these courses as improving their academic writing. They felt they were engaging deeply with the course content and valued most feedback on their writing. When we looked at their work, we saw their writing improving at all levels," he said.

Despite the increased use of acronyms in

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the writing in the disciplines," he said.

A good example of the benefits of focusing on writing for a specific audience was a "W" course in music theory last year. The students not only wrote papers but they also wrote their own musical pieces using the same skills to revise musical notes and words on a page.

If something is worth doing it's worth

many forms of communication today, including texting and social media, Dueck said people of all ages, but particularly young people, are very aware of their audiences when they post something online.

"The shift to digital media isn't destroying writing," he said.

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