Many writers view teaching as a natural extension of their craft, and subsequently turn to education as their primary or secondary profession. Graduate students in the writing division of the School of the Arts created the Columbia Artist/Teachers (CA/T) writing program to better prepare themselves for a possible career in education.

“One of the best things that writers do, in terms of jobs, is teach,” said Stephen Johnson, CA/T director and third-year MFA student. “And we wanted to provide all of the writing students with a chance to teach—specifically to teach writing.”

Now entering its second year, the program provides teaching opportunities to MFA writing students through relationships with organizations throughout the city. Last year, the program placed students with teaching positions at nine organizations, in settings ranging from elementary school classrooms to senior citizen recreation rooms.

Class Started

The concept for the program was hatched in the spring of 2002 when several students approached Alan Ziegler, chair of the writing division, about the lack of teaching opportunities available to graduate writing students at Columbia. Little did they know, but Ziegler already had an idea of creating a student teacher program for graduate students.

The day after a rewarding teaching experience he had while teaching as a graduate student in the early 1970s, and he felt now was the ideal time to offer today’s students the same opportunity. Unfortunately, he feared that by the time the program was in place it would be too late for the students who had petitioned him to act. So, he met with Joanne Straley, Stephen Johnson, Ryan Bartelmay and Ani

“The first year was far more productive than I ever would have imagined it to be”—Alan Ziegler, chair of the Writing Division

The program also developed a relationship with the Creative Writing (INTRO), a non-credit writing program for undergraduate students from Columbia College, Barnard College, and The School of General Studies. The program offers four-week workshops in poetry, fiction, nonfiction and dramatic writing. Cynthia Rogers, the director of grades 5 thru 8 at Manhattan Country School, raved about the program. A participant in the program taught a writing workshop to 6th, 7th and 8th grade students at the school last year and is returning this year. “I felt it was an amazing collaboration between our two worlds,” said Rogers. “They were so willing and so able to really get kids excited about writing.”

Dustin Smith, right, works with students taking the non-credit writing workshop. Introduction to Creative Writing.

The first year was far more productive than I ever would have imagined it to be”—Alan Ziegler, chair of the Writing Division

Students need teachers they know they can come to Columbia and get them.

With these aspirations came great challenges, as the program faces several obstacles in the coming years. Funding will undoubtedly become a focal point. Some of the student teachers are being paid through the America Reads Federal Work Study Program, but many are volunteers.

For Ziegler, the main challenge will present itself when his current student directors graduate. “The challenge will be training three or so people who can seamlessly take over,” said Ziegler. “That is a major challenge that we will always have to give the students a greater sense of ownership of the organization so it can be self-sustaining.”

Arthur Helton, Adjunct Professor and Chair on Foreign Relations Fellow, Dies

Arthur Helton, CC ’71, adjunct professor in the Law School, director of the school’s conflict studies and senior fellow for refugee studies and preventative action in the Council on Foreign Relations, died on Aug. 20, at the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad.

Beloved by all, Helton was a renowned advocate for refugee and humanitarian policy reform. Helton was invited to meet with Sergio Vieira DeMello, the UN special representative in Iraq. Both were killed in the August bombing of the UN headquarters.

Arthur was one of our most senior distinguished fellows in the world,” noted expert on refugee and humanitarian issues and international law Cynthia Rogers wrote in statement. “With his death, the world has lost a dear colleague and a leader of the rights of the displaced.”

As an adjunct professor at the University, Helton taught a seminar on refugee rights. “Arthur was an important figure in human rights, an expert in the field and a eloquent advocate for refugees,” explained David Leibron, dean of the Law School. Helton had been working to bring new educational opportunities to Columbia students interested in human rights. “This is a serious loss to Columbia, but much more importantly to all those who care about the rights of those most vulnerable in our world. Our deepest sympathies go out to Arthur’s family and his colleagues in many endeavors,” Leibron said.

While at the Council, Helton oversaw a major study on refugee policy alternatives—the results of which provided the content for his book The Price of Indifference: Refugees and Humanitarian Action in the New Century, published by Oxford University press in 2002.

The book draws on the humanitarian and preventative policy going forward. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan praised the work for its practical recommendations on refugee crises, suggesting the book would assist UN humanitarian policy in the future.

Envisioning new approaches to international migration, Helton was organizing his next book to address the problematic nature of asylum and trafficking of refugees in the era of globalization.

He is survived by his wife Jacqueline Gilbert.