

Title: A Developmental Disciplinary Approach to Student Writing

Summary:

This proposal seeks to enhance instruction in writing based on a developmental and discipline-specific model for student learning. By targeting undergraduate majors as well as professional and graduate programs, the plan supports and encourages the development by faculty of writing-focused curricula across the university. The assessment of developmental expectations for student learning will be enabled by electronic portfolio technology. Potential employers and community members will have opportunities to provide feedback on student writing needs and achievements.

Concept:

As part of its mission, the University of Houston sets out to “to prepare a broad community of students (undergraduate, graduate, professional and non-degree seeking) to make lifelong learning commitments that result in personal, social, economic and community contributions to an increasingly globally interdependent world.” Through the creation of an autonomous Writing Center in 1999, the recent decision to include a discipline-specific writing intensive course as part of the CORE undergraduate requirements, and a burgeoning number of writing in the discipline (WID) programs at the undergraduate and graduate level, the university has laid the foundation for a curriculum that makes lifetime learning through writing central to its educational mission. Nevertheless, current Writing Center programs serve only about 14% of the student body, and the Undergraduate Writing Assessment conducted in 2005 indicated a clear need for more concerted attention to writing across all disciplines and at all levels of the curriculum (lower division, upper division, professional and graduate) and in particular the role that writing for contextualized purposes and audiences with a clear sense of expectations plays in student learning.

This proposal seeks to enhance students’ ability to participate in academic and professional communities through a series of initiatives designed to generate, enhance, and assess programs of writing instruction that align with the increasing specialization of university curricula.

Proposed elements:

- university grant program to encourage departmental WID initiatives; grants could cover hiring of undergraduate or graduate writing consultants and graders, reduced course quotas, and faculty-development programs;
- use of electronic portfolios to promote student investment in learning to write within the CORE, majors, and professional or graduate environments; portfolios serve as a basis for individualized feedback to students as well as an assessment mechanism for particular segments of the curriculum; community advisory boards could be created to help with assessment of sample portfolios for different disciplines and professions
- creation of a tenured Writing in the Disciplines professor whose responsibilities could include helping departments develop writing goals, conducting assessments of program needs and student learning, facilitating development of departmental initiatives;

- teaching in graduate concentration in rhetoric and composition or other related courses;
applying for external funding to support writing initiatives;
- enhanced support staff for WID initiatives; responsibilities would include developing faculty workshop series, providing faculty members with individual counseling related to the teaching and assessment of writing, participating in assessment initiatives;
 - creation of University Writing Scholar program for faculty from different departments; in exchange for a course-reduction scholars would serve as a resource for their departments, agree to teach writing intensive courses, and participate in a semester-long reading seminar coordinated by WID faculty member;
 - enhanced training program for teaching assistants assigned to CORE composition program that would allow for reduced course loads initially while serving as writing consultants for program
 - training program conducted by Writing Center for discipline-specific writing consultants and teaching assistants;
 - option for Writing Center to offer credit-bearing writing courses linked to departmental courses
 - “University Writing Committee” composed of a faculty member from each college that would be charged with overseeing the implementation of the QEP and recommending enhancements to the university’s writing programs

General Impact and Potential Benefits

- expansion of writing instruction offered to upper division, graduate, and professional students
- development and clarification of goals for student writing at all levels of the curriculum
- involvement of students in the assessment of their development as writers through reflective statements included in the portfolios
- enhanced mechanisms for assessing learning in the CORE and within majors
- flexible program that allows individual colleges and departments to develop programs that suit their students’ unique needs
- creation of products that showcase student writing and learning for potential employers
- programs implemented through incentive mechanisms rather than administrative requirement

Required resources would include the purchase of electronic portfolio technology (possibly as an add-in to WebCT), support for faculty and staff positions related to implementation (including the Writing Scholars program), funding for the WID initiative grant program, and financial support for increased responsibilities given to the Writing Center. Support for the Writing Center in particular might be achievable through development initiatives, and the WID faculty member could be charged with soliciting research grant funding.