

## Writing Across the Curriculum: A Dean's Perspective

Milton D. Glick

The University of Missouri-Columbia is in the process of adopting an ambitious, comprehensive writing program which includes a significant writing-across-the-curriculum component. The development of this program is affecting the entire campus in ways that go far beyond the issue of student composition competencies. The Campus Writing Program has become symbolic of the potential for improved teaching and active learning on this campus, and it has become a rallying point for some concerned faculty. The far-reaching implications for the quality of education and improvement in faculty morale deserve serious exploration. This article provides the perspective of a dean whose background is in chemistry and who was initially open-minded to the issue, but not committed to any particular conclusions.

The Campus Writing Program will include a course required for all freshman which emphasizes writing about varied subject matters. This contrasts with the previous introductory course, from which 50% of our freshman were exempted by the use of an outmoded placement examination, and which emphasized rhetorical forms rather than subject matter. It will ideally include writing-intensive courses in each of the succeeding years, with a capstone course in the senior year. In the initial phase, a sophomore writing-intensive course will be required and a writing center, which includes tutorial services and computer capabilities, will be established. Even in this initial phase, over 4,000 students annually will be enrolled in Writing-Intensive courses. These courses require at least 5,000 words of writing, two papers that go through a complete revision process, and one that integrates several sources.

The Campus Writing Program has persuaded faculty from more than thirty departments to redesign their courses to fit these criteria because the program quickly established itself as something more than an effort to improve writing. It has become, for many, a beacon for a renaissance of responsible teaching and of the excitement of demanding high quality activities from students. Central to the program is revision, with the view that to revise a manuscript is to re-see an issue, so that, as a manuscript is revised, students see the subject matter in different ways. That is: writing becomes a way of learning. Benefits include formulating and expressing an opinion, giving and taking criticism, and listening to and comprehending alternative ideas and opinions.

Four years ago the faculty of the College of Arts and Science expressed great concern over the inadequate writing skills of our graduates and recommended a doubling of the composition requirement. Following an external review of this recommendation, the Dean of Arts and Science appointed a Task Force on Composition, which included faculty from seven of the key schools and colleges on the campus. The Task Force studied the issue of composition skills at UMC and other universities and eventually developed a proposal which was debated, evaluated and finally adopted by all of the undergraduate colleges at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

An essential element of the entire discussion has been faculty involvement and leadership. In particular, the faculty advocacy for the program has grown in ripple-like fashion. Initial advocates were members of the Task Force on Composition, later joined by members of subcommittees and by faculty named to the Campus Writing Board. These advocates were joined subsequently by faculty who volunteered to teach pilot writing-intensive sections, and, most recently, by the 150 faculty from more than 44 departments who have voluntarily participated in two ten-hour days of intensive workshops. There are now more than 200 faculty dedicated to making this program succeed.

Many faculty who attended the first intensive writing workshop fell into two groups. Members of both groups were initially somewhat skeptical of the need for the workshop, but most were highly supportive of the workshop by the end of the second day. The first group included those faculty who have always required writing and believe all courses they teach to be writing-intensive; many of these initially saw the program as another administrative distraction. By the end of the second day, this group found themselves enthusiastic about having a support group of colleagues and having access to experts who could share with them ways to improve their use of writing. Moreover, they found the intellectual exchange with colleagues from across the campus reminiscent of the reasons they chose to be faculty.

The second group included faculty who had never used writing as a major part of their classes. In particular, they had never considered revision as part of the limited writing which did occur in their classes. This group found themselves awakened to new opportunities and enlightened by writing-oriented colleagues.

Evaluations of the faculty workshops have been filled with superlatives. A dean interested in faculty development is naturally pleased when he hears a veteran professor say that "the workshop was the most positive experience I have had with colleagues at UMC during my 20 years here" or a new assistant professor report that "the program was more than worthwhile—it was exciting."

It is worthwhile discussing the relationship of the efforts to improve student writing and learning to the more general issue of faculty morale. Faculty burn-out and low self-esteem are important topics in the higher education community. These conditions relate, in part, to reduced support for higher education, to low faculty mobility, and to salary issues.

In their recent comprehensive monograph, "American Professors, A Vocational Resource Imperiled," H. R. Bowen and J. H. Schuster (Oxford University Press, 1986) discuss the issue of faculty morale and its decline. From 1984 interviews, they find weakened faculty morale and attribute it to "adverse trends in compensation and working conditions and a pervading sense of insecurity for the future and a sense of the declining status of the profession." Bowen and Schuster report unpublished surveys by A. L. Boberg and R. L. Blackburn (ca. 1983), who find "that a major factor in faculty satisfaction is their concern for quality in their students, in their colleagues, in their work environment." They further report "that faculty in many but not all institutions have perceived a diminution of quality and this has been a major source of discontent and poor morale."

An important contributor to low faculty morale is the devaluation of teaching within the profession. The four decades of growth in higher education (a six-fold increase in student numbers) yielded, in many large state universities, a depersonalization of teaching and left many faculty believing they were not personally responsible for the quality of the undergraduate degree. Faculty continue to take seriously their responsibilities for delivery of lecture material and for working with majors as individuals. However, the responsibility for insuring that graduates can think critically and communicate effectively was, to some extent, abandoned with these changes. To a substantial extent, there was a loss of belief that faculty were engaged in a noble quest, a moral profession. Many faculty lost the "dream."

The misconception that there is a dichotomy between teaching and research contributes to this problem. Given the falsely perceived need to choose between teaching and research, and the internal and external forces which affect faculty, the obvious course is to choose research. This decision fosters an attitude toward teaching for many faculty which includes little of the intense, self-critical analysis which characterizes faculty research and scholarship. Another manifestation of this misconception is the 60% decrease in top students planning to enter the professoriate, documented in studies of Rhodes Scholars and Phi Beta Kappa members (see Bowen and Schuster). It is further revealed in relatively low demands upon students, as well as inappropriately high grades for students.

Many faculty who are committed to the Campus Writing Program have regained some of the lost spirit and are anxious to share their

new-found vision with colleagues. Of course, this will be short-lived if the University does not identify resources adequate to implement the program properly.

In closing, let us note some important elements which have allowed this program to gain momentum:

1. The Task Force, although appointed by the Dean of Arts and Science, included faculty from many colleges and from the student body. This Task Force rapidly moved from a view that composition was an English Department issue to a view that writing was a university-wide concern, related to learning in general, not just to writing skills. This effort "empowered" the faculty, an important element in faculty morale.
2. Although the Task Force was sponsored by the Dean's Office, the Task Force was faculty-driven and developed its own charge and commitment. The Dean's Office provided budget to bring in consultants and to visit other campuses as well as clerical support for the project. But the leadership and direction were clearly from the faculty.
3. The process was allowed to proceed at a deliberate pace, so as to slowly increase the cadre of supporters and expand the circle of understanding. It is remarkable that the momentum was maintained throughout the three-year developmental period, especially in view of times of severe budgetary constraints. What was seen by many as a six-month study has taken three years, yet the enthusiasm is greater today than at the beginning.
4. The English Department, always understaffed for the responsibilities placed upon it (30 faculty for 16,000 undergraduates), was prepared to relinquish some of its territorial claims to composition.
5. The administration of the College recognized the critical importance of the program and placed a very high priority on seeking funding to allow it to be implemented in a highly professional manner, including funds to offset the increased workload by either reducing class size or increasing teaching assistant support.
6. Several of the campus deans stated that success in their fields was driven more directly by the ability to communicate effectively than any other single skill. For example, a survey of 250 engineering employers by the Dean of Engineering revealed that written communication skills were the most important competency for success in engineering, and the competency which is least present in the typical new hire in an engineering firm. All of the deans enthusiastically endorsed and supported the effort.

Three rather counter-intuitive truths that have emerged from our experience are these:

1. It may be unwise and unnecessary to promote writing across the curriculum as in innovation based on recent composition research. Faculty members are trained in healthy intellectual skepticism and resist the "methods" disciplines they are not familiar with. The most positive response on our campus has come from faculty (young and old) who feel that the university needs to return to its traditional function of teaching students *how* to think as well as *what* to think. In a community of scholar/writers the relation of thought to revision can be made clear with a minimum of theoretical clutter.
2. It is best to admit from the outset that writing-intensive classes *will* require more work of professors than non-writing intensive classes. While our workshops emphasize ways to diminish the burden of grading and marking, they do not claim that a serious writing program can be based primarily on student journals that faculty members never read or on two-minute impromptu writings in class. Faculty members who participate in the program work harder out of an ethical commitment to the value of teaching critical thinking, and the administration misses no opportunity to thank them for their commitment.
3. It is important to establish a system of certification that makes the writing-intensive label meaningful. On our campus, a writing-intensive course in biology, for example, must be approved by a committee of scientists and engineers who are involved in the Campus Writing Program. Some courses must be redesigned and resubmitted, and some never pass muster, but the price in lost courses is more than made up in the faculty's faith that the program is meaningful, legitimate, and worth participating in.

We have taken only a small step in what may prove to be a long journey. It will not and should not involve all faculty; yet already 20% of the faculty in our undergraduate programs are actively involved in this program. We have found that the discussions about—and, we hope, the implementation of—a new ambitious writing program take on a significance far beyond the issue of writing; it may become the cornerstone of a movement toward a more meaningful undergraduate education at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

## Note

I wish to acknowledge the very helpful comments of my colleagues, especially Douglas Hunt, Director of the Campus Writing Program.

