

WPAs in Action: Vignettes from the Field

Composition Condition

Nate Kreuter

Western Carolina University, a coeducational public university located in Cullowhee, North Carolina and a member of the UNC system, has a two-semester writing sequence in its liberal studies curriculum, ENGL 101: Rhetoric and Writing and ENGL 202: Writing and Critical Inquiry, which all undergraduate students are required to fulfill. Both are taught through the Writing, Rhetoric, and Critical Studies (WRCS) program which is housed in the department of English. WRCS also had responsibility for teaching ENGL 300: Foundation Composition, a remedial writing class.

Until recently, the WCU curriculum held students accountable through a policy known as Composition Condition (CC). The policy read simply:

Composition-Condition Marks: A student whose written work in any course fails to meet acceptable standards will be assigned a composition-condition (CC) mark by the instructor on the final grade report. All undergraduates who receive two CC grades prior to the semester in which they complete 110 hours at Western Carolina University are required to pass English 300 or English 401 before they will be eligible for graduation. This course must be taken within two semesters of receiving the second CC and must be passed with a grade of C (2.0) or better. (*Catalog*)

However, at no point in the history of the policy did a specific rubric or criteria exist for assigning CC marks. Unlike course grades, no mechanism existed for students to challenge or appeal CC marks.

In 2013, the CC policy and its curricular entailments suddenly came under the scrutiny of the provost's office when it was realized that—due to a misconfiguration of WCU's academic reporting software—students who had received two CC marks were not being referred into the English 300 course, were not having their advisors alerted, and were in fact fall-

ing through the cracks of the policy (flawed as it was). The CC mark, due to the reporting glitch, had been rendered meaningless for a time, as an untold number of students with two CC marks had graduated without having taken ENGL 300 since the reporting glitch had been encoded in the software program in 2008, and more were slated to graduate in the very near future.

Because no students were being flagged for the course, nor was the course requested by students with two CC marks or their advisors, the English Department had not scheduled a section of ENGL 300 for several years. As far as the English Department was aware, there was no demand for ENGL 300, and thus, no need to offer it. As far as the English faculty knew, students were either not receiving the CC mark or, equally likely, faculty in other disciplines were largely unaware that they had the mark at their disposal. With grave concerns about the pedagogical basis for the CC policy, its lack of established criteria, and without a clear sense of what curriculum should be offered in ENGL 300, the English Department was content to allow the CC mark and its associated course to languish. But in the fall of 2013, the discovery of the software glitch forced the university to confront the CC mark, both in terms of its actual effects and in terms of its pedagogical implications.

Meetings ensued. It was discovered that the CC policy had been originally established in 1948, likely in response to GI Bill policy mandates and at a time when the school only enrolled 550 students. The CC policy had gone un stewarded for long periods of WCU's history. When the CC policy came under scrutiny in the 2013–2014 academic year, I, the untenured WPA, advocated eliminating the CC policy altogether under the rationale that it was pedagogically unsound and had not been updated to reflect the standards and research of the discipline of Composition and Rhetoric. In the Faculty Senate hearing over the CC policy's fate, the provost's office argued for maintenance of the CC policy, expressing strong sentiment that to eliminate the CC mark would be to concede to graduating unprepared writers.

Ultimately, my arguments carried the senate, and by a vote of 18 to 6 the following resolution was passed:

Resolution to Abolish Composition Condition

Whereas the Composition Condition (CC) grade was established at WCU in 1959 [sic];

Whereas there are no clear standards for who receives CC grades and for what specific writing issues;

Whereas all faculty, regardless of discipline, share responsibility for our students' writing;

Whereas due to a glitch in Banner, WCU did not enforce the CC rule between 2008 and 2014 and therefore has graduated dozens, if not hundreds of students with two or more CC grades;

Therefore be it resolved that WCU abolishes the CC grade and encourages faculty to work with students in all classes to improve writing skills. (WCU Faculty Senate)

This episode reinforced the importance of having tenured faculty in the position of WPA, for reasons that should be obvious. More importantly though, the show-down over an outdated, pedagogically unsound, and un-appealable graduation requirement reinvigorated campus discussions about writing, writing in the disciplines and across the curriculum, and the rhetorical nature of writing. The episode gave me multiple opportunities to educate faculty in other disciplines on the liabilities of defining "good" writing strictly as writing that is mechanically correct. More importantly, as a result of the discussion, the university has undertaken a host of new initiatives to support student writers, initiatives that are far more in step with disciplinary best practices than the outdated CC policy. The confrontation over the CC policy, too long avoided, has been a boon to students, faculty, and the university's curriculum.

Nate Kreuter is Assistant Professor at Western Carolina University. He earned his PhD at the University of Texas at Austin.

