

Writing at UC Davis

Report of the Undergraduate Council

June 2003

Section I: Introduction and summary of recommendations

The first of the UC Davis Educational Objectives for undergraduate students states “Develop effective communication skills: written, oral, interpersonal, and group.” This report focuses on the writing aspect of the objective.

In August 2002, then Davis Division Academic Senate Chair J. Gibeling charged the newly-formed Undergraduate Council with a broad look at writing instruction and requirements at UC Davis. During the course of the 2002-2003 academic year, the Council has discussed writing at most of its meetings. We have benefited greatly from previous reports about writing on our campus and from expert opinion available both on and off campus.

While there are notable exceptions, most the members of the Council came to the subject of our charge with the perspective of their own disciplines and experience and without formal training in writing instruction. After our study of the subject, we have converged to a consensus in which we can endorse the wisdom of two widely-accepted general principles:

- Students benefit from writing instruction throughout their undergraduate careers and within their majors.
- Students benefit from trained, experienced writing instructors and from instruction that includes practice, feedback, and revision.

It follows from these that:

- We affirm the importance of upper division writing requirements.
- We recommend an increased emphasis on writing in the disciplines.

And in a more specific area,

- We recommend that the implementation of the General Education (GE) writing requirement be improved.

While general recommendations have value, we believe that specific goals are also useful in focusing the application of limited resources. Thus we recommend as goals for writing instruction at UC Davis that:

- All students reach the level of writing described by Graduate Record Examination Analytical Writing score level 4.
- A majority of our students reach score level 5.

It is our judgment that we can best achieve these goals with a new organization of writing instruction. Thus

- We recommend that a University Writing Center be established with responsibility to
 - monitor progress in the overall quality of student writing
 - recommend changes in writing requirements or writing instruction
 - support improvements in writing instruction across the campus
 - offer writing courses, especially at the upper division level and in the disciplines
 - offer honors writing programs for highly motivated students

Even with the establishment of a writing center, we believe that success in meeting our goals will also depend upon a general recognition that

- Excellence in student writing is a responsibility of the whole campus and faculty.

In a similar spirit, we believe that benefits from this report are most likely to follow from a broad discussion, improvements to the recommendations, and eventual campuswide support.

Section II: Background

The UC Davis community has long grappled with issues related to student writing. In the past decade, persistent enrollment growth, uneven budgetary realities, and the increased numbers of students for whom English is a second language have made our task all the more daunting. To face these challenges, individual faculty, administrators, and committees have offered many significant initiatives. Faculty developed and offered adjunct writing courses. Workshops for faculty and teaching assistants to improve their writing instruction skills have been developed. We have trained our own best students to work at area high schools on writing. An excellent website on computer-aided instruction has been designed and mounted. We have recruited and hired our first Senate faculty member with writing instruction as a significant piece of his portfolio. We have maintained a respectable ratio of students to faculty in our linguistics courses for ESL students. The campus successfully competed for a Hewlett grant for General Education reform. The Chancellor appointed an ACE fellow to pen a report on writing. Shortly after that, the new dean of the HArCS division of L&S appointed a task force of experts to make recommendations for writing instruction.

Nevertheless, there remains a persistent belief that our graduates leave with writing skills that fall short of our aspirations for them. However, in the course of our research, we have come to understand that faculty have always bemoaned the state of undergraduate writing. Given our status as a research university and our goal to always offer the best possible opportunities for our students to excel, we should accept that persistent attention to writing is a normal part of the life of a good university. This report is not the first and will not be the last. In particular, we are aware of a very recent proposal from an independent study group in the Department of English. It has many strong points and is generally compatible with the recommendations that we are making.

The Council has spent the 2002-2003 academic year conducting an informal inventory of extant writing initiatives and practices on campus as well as exploring the more ostensibly intractable problems that face us. To better appreciate the meaning of writing standards, we have read examples of student papers. Our discussion has been informed by the numerous previous reviews of writing instruction at UC Davis. In addition to the expertise of our own members, we

benefited from discussions with K. Zender, G. Goodman, J. Haynes, A. Lunsford, K. Yancy, and S. McLeod, and we are grateful for their help. Visits to the campus by Lundsford, Yancy, and McLeod were supported by the Hewlett grant.

Section III: Writing proficiency goals

Although it is a widely held belief that student writing at UC Davis falls short of the aspirations that we have for our students, we are not aware of any rigorous study that either supports or refutes that notion. It may be true, or it may be a popular myth. Such a study would certainly have great value, and we hope that our recommendations will lead to the collection of enough data on student writing to allow some meaningful conclusions to be drawn. In this report, we have chosen to focus upon goals and the best available means to them. Our recommendations are certainly beneficial to students and most likely would be included in any list following a more serious investigation of the effectiveness of present programs. We think that they are the minimum that is needed to allow all of our students to reach their full potential of writing development while they are with us. Rather than document the existence of a problem, our approach is to ask how we can do the best for our students in this area that is crucial for their future success. If our recommendations are accepted and implemented, there will be a University Writing Center, and a part of its mission will be to carry out an ongoing assessment of student writing that will be better informed and of higher quality than what we could do at this point.

We are making a number of recommendations for strengthening writing instruction at UC Davis. While the recommendations may be argued to have merit in themselves, they are inputs to the process, and it is important to keep in mind a desired outcome. In considering this aspect of the topic, we have looked at a number of rubrics that are used to grade student writing, and we have read examples of graded student writing that give real meaning to the descriptions of various levels of writing. Our conclusion is that the Graduate Record Examination Analytical Writing (GRE-AW) score levels are a useful set.

The Educational Testing Service has recently added an analytical writing task to the general part of the GRE and has published the standards that are used to grade the writing. The scores range from 6 at the top to 0 at the bottom. Descriptions of these levels and related information can be found in our appendix. This is a nationally known standard. As goals for writing instruction at UC Davis, we would like to have all students writing at or above score level 4 and a majority of students writing at or above score level 5 by the time they graduate. The levels 4 and 5 correspond to roughly B and A-/B+, respectively, in the standards used in upper division writing courses at UC Davis.

Although the GRE-AW scores are used to grade a timed exam, we do *not* suggest that the campus introduce any new exams. The goal is to have students achieve the indicated levels in the writing that they do in upper division composition courses, writing in the disciplines courses, papers for major courses, honors theses, or capstone experiences.

Further it is *not* our intention that these goals be a new graduation requirement for students. Rather, to determine how well students are writing, we charge the University Writing Center

with periodically sampling and analyzing student writing from the above sources. The resulting overall view will be the basis for recommending, as needed, adjustments in requirements or instructional approaches to move us closer to the goals. As student portfolios come to be used more widely on campus, they will provide convenient sources of writing that can be used to assess the effectiveness of writing instruction and guide improvements.

Section IV: Writing pedagogy

As students move through their time in college, they develop cognitively in a rather predictable pattern (Perry, 1981; Belenky *et al.*, 1986; Baxter-Magolda, 1992). Entering college with a dualistic view that opinions and positions on issues are either right or wrong, they also tend to believe that knowledge is simply a matter of the accumulation of facts. Because they are exposed to such a variety of opinions both inside and outside the classroom, students, usually in their first or second year, shift to the attitude that all opinions and positions are equally valid and that there is no method for deciding which ways of viewing an issue are more valid (Perry, 1981; Belenky *et al.*, 1986; Baxter-Magolda, 1992). Although many students remain in this stage of cognitive development for the rest of their college careers, with continued instruction, others begin to see that there are methods in each discipline for evaluating evidence and making reasoned decisions about an issue that help them judge the validity of various approaches (Perry, 1981; Belenky *et al.*, 1986; Baxter-Magolda, 1992).

Writing-intensive courses are an excellent locus for developing cognitive maturity and for easing and fostering the transition for students from one phase of development to another. For example, assignments that ask students to confront conflicting points of view can help move them from the dualistic stage to the next plateau where they at least can consider the validity of different approaches. As students move beyond the basic requirements of their majors, or perhaps finally settle on a major, specialized, advanced instruction in writing can help them tackle sophisticated analytical tasks that call for careful and fair weighing of evidence and for complex and reasoned judgments based on that evidence, possibly reaching a synthesis (Bazerman, 1989).

Therefore, a university writing program that asks students to fulfill their writing requirements in their first year, or even their first two years, will only start them out on the road toward good writing; it will not give them the boost they need as juniors and seniors to reinvigorate their writing skills and to look upon more complex writing tasks with increased maturity and confidence. When students are challenged too far beyond their abilities by the intellectual demands of a writing assignment, they tend to fall back on previously learned strategies (Perry, 1981; Belenky *et al.*, 1986; Baxter-Magolda 1992). If they are still armed only with strategies from the first two years of their college careers, they may find their cognitive skills inadequate to the task of their upper division course work. Further, studies overwhelmingly support the benefits of writing instruction that includes practice, feedback, and revision for not only developing students' writing abilities but also their understanding of the subject matter itself (*e.g.*, Walvoord & McCarthy, 1990; Herrington & Moran, 1992). Thus courses with staged writing tasks and individualized response, aimed at upper division students, can help students move towards more sophisticated cognitive levels as well as more effectively communicate what they are learning (Larson, 1981; Reiff & Middleton, 1983; Kiniry & Strenski, 1985).

In the last 30 years, writing instruction has moved from primarily teaching writing about literature into interdisciplinary approaches teaching writing across the disciplines and professions. Experts on writing instruction suggest that in addition to learning “disciplinary construction[s] of writing,” students should have an “advanced curriculum” that “orient[s] them toward public forms of writing” (Shamoon et. al, 2000, p. xviii) applicable in their careers and private lives. Advanced writing courses, such as these pre-professional and discipline-specific courses, overwhelmingly are taught by professional writing faculty (as is the case at UCLA, UCSB, UCSC, UCI, and USC, for example) rather than by graduate students or part-time employees (Shamoon et. al., 2000). Writing in the discipline programs similarly draw for instruction on professional writing faculty (Bazerman & Russell, 1994). In addition, as one of the main professional groups in the field, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), notes in its recent position statement, “The knowledgeable writing teacher can more persuasively lead colleagues in other academic areas to increased attention to writing in their classes” (2001).

Section V: Immediate incremental steps for improvement

To achieve the goals stated in Sec. III, our present writing requirements, including the college upper division writing requirements, are a solid foundation. During the discussion and possible implementation of the recommendations in this report, we hope that there be no reduction in the present writing requirements for students. However we do not, at this point, wish to engage in a detailed discussion of these requirements or recommend a campuswide upper division writing requirement. We believe that these will be most usefully discussed after a University Writing Center is in place and has carried out some initial assessment of the level of student writing relative to the goals that we have stated.

In addition to upper division composition as a requirement, we must especially emphasize writing in the disciplines as an excellent method to keep students engaged with the practice and improvement of their writing throughout their undergraduate careers. This approach has the effect of providing students with styles of writing that are more specific to their chosen major specialization and also reveals to them the important role of writing in the career they have chosen. It avoids the view that writing is a requirement that is disconnected from the rest of their scholarly development.

Even before the more ambitious of our recommendations are implemented (or not), much can be done to more fully integrate writing instruction into our majors. We encourage departments to consider how the availability of English 102 and 104 courses can be best coordinated with their upper division required courses. Further we believe that in many cases, with modest modification, existing courses could take advantage of the support offered by the writing in the disciplines workshop program to include more writing instruction along with well-crafted writing assignments. We hope that such efforts to help our students toward the campus educational objectives will be supported by college deans.

Section VI: General Education writing courses

The present campus GE requirement calls for each student to take three courses with writing experience, which has the following description:

Writing Experience

Courses in writing experience improve student writing through instruction and practice. Instruction is provided through workshops or evaluation of content, logical coherence and use of language and grammar, and require student revision during the quarter. Courses require one extended assignment (5 pages or more) or multiple short assignments.

Recent evidence suggests that even this basic requirement is somewhat unevenly implemented, *i.e.* not all courses designated as writing experience actually include the described elements. We believe that a modest effort in the education of faculty and departments about the nature of the writing requirement is required and that support from a University Writing Center is essential to bring courses up to standard.

Instructors of courses certified as meeting the GE writing experience requirement are committed to making effective written expression an integral, graded part of courses that are nearly always focused on topics other than composition. Since these instructors are usually not professionally trained to teach writing unless their specialty is English or a closely related field, support from trained professionals staffing a university writing center is essential to implement a meaningful GE requirement for writing experience. In the past, composition staff have been available, to a limited degree, to help instructors plan writing assignments and to present grading workshops for TAs and readers. Although many instructors are unaware of this source of help, the time allotted to this mission has not been sufficient to meet demand. To be able to provide critical feedback about content, organization, style, use of language, and logical coherence as is mandated by the GE writing requirement, instructors, TAs, and readers for courses involving GE writing experience must receive training in the most effective methods of writing instruction. Composition staff can also collaborate with course instructors to devise scoring rubrics and clear criteria for the evaluation of writing. These types of support are essential for instructors to help students learn to think critically and communicate effectively in writing.

The University Writing Center would provide experts in writing instruction across the disciplines and within disciplines to assist faculty in making the writing experience part of GE more effective. Writing experts could consult about how to integrate writing more effectively to accomplish pedagogical goals within the course, using writing as a tool for learning. Such assignments might include both informal, ungraded tasks that cultivate students' thinking skills and more formal, graded writing assignments that progress through staged tasks to a more polished, professional product in the field. The Center could also provide the needed training of GE instructors, TAs, and readers emphasized above. Training in more effective and efficient commenting techniques would also reduce the perceived burden of individual feedback on writing assignments, making them more attractive as teaching methods. The TA training would also help develop the university faculty of the future. In creating workshops specifically for GE

faculty and TAs, the writing center would publicize the nature of the writing experience, explain its rationale, and bolster confidence in teaching writing among faculty across the disciplines. The program could offer workshops for graduate and undergraduate students in individual classes, helping them understand and use the writing process to complete their assignments.

Section VII: University Writing Center

As the previous sections of this report already indicate, we think that a reorganization of writing instruction that includes a University Writing Center will put us in a strong position to achieve our goals for student writing. Based on the history of writing instruction at UC Davis and on the present realities, we think that the following proposal will provide excellence in writing instruction, improved student accomplishment, and long-term stability for the writing program.

We recommend a centrally funded and administered University Writing Center. In support of that, we note that the present model which houses the program in one college, division, and department has evolved into a state that does not have the enthusiastic support of any of the groups that are most closely involved with it. Further we have been advised by external consultants K. Yancy and S. McLeod that across the country, the most successful model has been a central writing center. We know of the examples at UCSB, Stanford, Duke, and Michigan.

We are aware that UC Davis once had a central writing center. To avoid a repeat of a cycle that would return us to the present situation, we believe that it is vitally important that the Center have the visibility, resources, and enthusiasm to develop a campuswide supporting constituency. The Center must provide an instructional service to other academic programs that they appreciate for its important benefit to their majors. We believe that this can best be accomplished if the Center offers a broad spectrum of upper division writing courses and works with departments to offer specialized writing courses in the disciplines. In addition, the Center should provide very strong support for the improvement of writing assignments and instruction in both GE and major courses.

Given that the Center would offer all the upper division composition courses, it is natural for it to play a role in supervising the lower division courses. To assure a strong lower division writing curriculum and to maintain a beneficial relationship between lower and upper division courses, the Center would provide support to departments offering lower division writing courses (*e.g.* English, Native American Studies, and Comparative Literature) in the training and mentoring of lower division instructors and in the coordination of a coherent pedagogy between the levels. This role could be played without the Center necessarily having the administrative responsibility for the logistics of a large number of lower division courses.

The Center will have the role of coordinating and supporting writing instruction across the campus. It will take a leading role in increasing the emphasis on writing in the disciplines. It will work with the General Education Committee and the Courses Committee for continuing excellence in the GE writing experience courses. See Secs. V and VI for more discussion on these points.

The Center will also have the responsibility of monitoring the success of campus writing instruction by collecting a sufficient sample of student writing for a meaningful comparison with the proficiency goals. Based on that data, the Center may make recommendations to the Undergraduate Council, the colleges, and the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Studies for changes in writing instruction to improve the outcomes.

The administrative and budgetary reporting of the Center will be to the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Studies. Academic program review will be done by the Special Programs Committee of the Undergraduate Council.

A successful writing center must have an adequate level of stable, central, financial support. As part of an implementation plan, we recommend that CAPBR and ORMP study resource needs and funding sources for the center. A University Writing Center would benefit greatly from being a priority of the planned comprehensive campaign.

A successful implementation plan must also address the transition from the current administration of the composition program to the proposed University Writing Center. During the transition, a period of joint administration in which some functions are housed in the office of the VPUS and others such as the logistics of course scheduling and administration are handled in the L&S deans office may reduce transition costs and increase efficiencies.

Appendix

Score Level Descriptions

For information on the GRE general test and its analytical writing part, see <http://www.gre.org/gentest.html>. Included there (<http://www.gre.org/descriptor.html>) is the following description of the GRE Analytical Writing Measure:

The statements below describe, for each score level, the overall quality of analytical writing demonstrated across both the Issue and the Argument tasks. Because the test assesses “analytical writing,” critical thinking skills (the ability to reason, assemble evidence to develop a position, and communicate complex ideas) weigh more heavily than the writer’s control of fine points of grammar or the mechanics of writing (*e.g.*, spelling).

SCORE LEVELS 6 and 5.5

Sustains insightful, in-depth analysis of complex ideas; develops and supports main points with logically compelling reasons and/or highly persuasive examples; is well focused and well organized; skillfully uses sentence variety and precise vocabulary to convey meaning effectively; demonstrates superior facility with sentence structure and language usage but may have minor errors that do not interfere with meaning.

SCORE LEVELS 5 and 4.5

Provides generally thoughtful analysis of complex ideas; develops and supports main points with logically sound reasons and/or well-chosen examples; is generally focused and well organized; uses sentence variety and vocabulary to convey meaning clearly; demonstrates good control of sentence structure and language usage but may have minor errors that do not interfere with meaning.

SCORE LEVELS 4 and 3.5

Provides competent analysis of complex ideas; develops and supports main points with relevant reasons and/or examples; is adequately organized; conveys meaning with reasonable clarity; demonstrates satisfactory control of sentence structure and language usage but may have some errors that affect clarity.

SCORE LEVELS 3 and 2.5

Displays some competence in analytical writing skills, although the writing is flawed in at least one of the following ways: limited analysis or development, weak organization; weak control of sentence structure or language usage, with errors that often result in vagueness or lack of clarity.

SCORE LEVELS 2 and 1.5

Displays serious weaknesses in analytical writing. The writing is seriously flawed in at least one of the following ways: serious lack of analysis or development; lack of organization; serious and frequent problems in sentence structure or language usage, with errors that obscure meaning.

SCORE LEVELS 1 and .5

Displays fundamental deficiencies in analytical writing. The writing is fundamentally flawed in at least one of the following ways: content that is extremely confusing or mostly irrelevant to the assigned tasks, little or no development; severe and pervasive errors that result in incoherence.

SCORE LEVEL 0

The examinee's analytical writing skills cannot be evaluated because the responses do not address any part of the assigned tasks, are merely attempts to copy the assignments, are in a foreign language, or display only indecipherable text.

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