

# **Draft Proposal to Curriculum Committee to Establish a Writing Intensive Requirement**

**10/24/04**

## **Contents:**

1. Draft Resolution from the Faculty Senate establishing the Writing Committee
2. Catalogue Description of Writing Intensive Requirement
3. Criteria for Writing Intensive Courses
4. WI Course Approval and Oversight
5. Student Placement
6. Support for Instructors Teaching WI courses
7. Role of Director and Rationale for the Position
8. Why a Writing Intensive Requirement?
9. Important Considerations in Adopting the WI Requirement
10. Program Assessment

## 1) Senate Resolution

Draft Resolution  
Faculty Senate  
October 2, 2003

Whereas the Faculty Senate finds that there is among our colleagues a concern with the writing skills of undergraduate students, and

Whereas the ad hoc writing committee has successfully highlighted the issue and made recommendations as a result of the Fall 2002 Faculty Institute, and

Whereas the Faculty Senate wishes to promote the continued study and work on these issues,

Therefore, the Senate moves by resolution to create a temporary Writing Committee that will be charged with:

**Pursuing the development and approval for the establishment of writing intensive courses including but not limited to bringing a formal proposal to the Curriculum Committee, and if necessary, the Faculty Assembly**

Assisting departments in identifying potential writing intensive courses

Set draft standards for writing intensive courses

Supporting and assisting the work of the Writing Center and advocating additional administrative budget support for the Writing Center

Encouraging a university-wide culture of writing by organizing workshops and discussions for faculty engaged in teaching Writing Intensive courses

Exploring the feasibility of an entrance writing test as a diagnostic tool for assisting in the early advising of students

This Committee will be appointed by the Senate after soliciting self nominations. All members will serve a two year term. It is expected that by the end of two years either the need for a permanent committee will be obvious and created by the Senate through the Handbook process, or that it will be evident that such a committee is no longer needed. The Charter of this Committee will expire on November 1, 2005, unless the

committee is replaced by a permanent committee before that time.

The Senate will appoint seven individuals to the Committee. One shall be appointed from each College/School, one person will be appointed at large, and one person at large will be designated as the Chair of the Committee.

The Committee shall be established by November 6, 2003. The Committee will report at least annually to Senate each May during its existence, and keep the Senate informed of progress at regular intervals.

## **2. Catalogue Description**

Because writing improves student engagement and learning, cultivates critical-thinking skills, and serves as one of the most crucial tools for success in college, the world of work, and the public sphere, the Undergraduate Writing Committee proposes a hybrid program combining Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) with Writing in the Discipline (WID). Among other recommendations we propose that a Writing-Intensive (WI) requirement be adopted for all undergraduate students.

We suggest the following, to directly follow the undergraduate catalogue section on General Education Requirements:

### Writing Requirement

Webster University requires all baccalaureate students, including transfer students (with the exception described below), to complete at least two writing-intensive courses for a total of 6 hours of writing-intensive coursework. Students must receive a grade of C- or better in these courses in order to fulfill the requirement. Transfer students with associates' degrees or 64 credit hours upon entering Webster are required to take one writing intensive course for a total of 3 credits.

Courses fulfilling the writing requirement may also be used to satisfy requirements for general education, majors, minors, and certificates.

## **3. Criteria for Writing Intensive Courses**

- Written assignments should be integrated throughout the course rather than concentrated at the end, so students have an opportunity to assess their skills and improve their writing during the course of the semester. In addition to formal papers, short, un-graded "write to learn" exercises are ideal in helping students learn.

- Assignments should involve the revision of at least one paper by the student in response to comments by the instructor, other students, and/or Writing Center coaches.
- Students should complete a minimum of three short papers in the 16-week format and two in eight-week courses. In lower-division courses, a short paper might use a controlled source and be no more than two pages. Papers in upper-division courses could be four to five pages and might involve research from outside of class. Our committee is recommending (but not mandating) a minimum of 15 pages of graded writing for each lower-division course and 20 pages of graded writing for each upper-division course. More important than the final page count is the emphasis the course places on writing skills and the writing process. For example, a course that requires fewer pages than the committee recommends might be approved as a WI course if it is clearly designed to accomplish the appropriate objectives.
- The course should pay overt attention to writing, which could include classroom discussion of student drafts, individualized feedback from instructor to students about their writing, and/or classroom discussion of particular writing skills and strategies.
- Assessment of student skills should be a primary objective of writing intensive courses. Faculty should communicate directly with students' advisors, refer students to the Writing Center when necessary and submit a mid-term progress report to Student Affairs.
- The learning objectives for the course (as listed on the syllabus) should include the improvement of student writing, and a significant portion of each student's grade should reflect his or her performance on class writing assignments.

#### **4. WI Course Approval and Oversight**

In order for a course to be labeled WI, the instructor will submit a proposal and syllabus to the Writing Committee and the Director of Undergraduate Writing. (The Curriculum Committee would not bear the responsibility for reviewing proposals). If the instructor makes substantial changes to the syllabus or if a new instructor teaches the course, the proposal and syllabus must be submitted again. The Writing Committee will conduct periodic reviews of all WI courses. In order to teach WI courses, instructors would also have to undergo some form of training, similar to the training received by freshman seminar instructors. This training could also be offered on-line.

While the Writing Committee believes in a minimum, cross-disciplinary standard for "good writing," individual departments should be able to articulate what good writing looks like within its discipline or profession. Acceptance of minimum standards should be the result of a campus-wide discussion led by the Director of Undergraduate Writing. The Director will also work with each department to build upon accepted minimum standards and adapt them to the needs of various disciplines. It seems quite likely that many departments will be able to incorporate this assessment into senior overviews or capstone courses.

#### **5. Student Placement**

We are not recommending any direct assessment of students' writing skills before they take their writing intensive classes. Experts in writing assessment feel that one-time assessments of

student writing such as those based on proctored essays are inaccurate, and we feel that Webster currently lacks the resources to conduct more complex assessment such as portfolio reviews. Therefore, we suggest creating a simple system by which all faculty will watch for students struggling with writing and intervene by communicating with the students' advisors and/or referring the students to the Writing Center. (It could be integrated into the At-Risk student program which Student Affairs uses; currently, this program includes attention to writing skills, but we suggest dramatically increasing faculty awareness of such a system and how and when to use it.) The Director of Undergraduate Writing will be available for consultation to help advisors and other concerned faculty recommend appropriate remedial action (including composition classes) to students.

## **6. Support for Instructors Teaching WI Courses**

We believe that no Writing Across the Curriculum initiative will be successful without appropriate support for faculty and students. The best way to provide such support for faculty is through the Director of Undergraduate Writing position, which we proposed in our report in Fall 2003. The director would be available for individual consultation and would also oversee (possibly with the cooperation of the Faculty Development Center and/or Writing Center) a regular program of faculty development workshops focused on writing instruction. The director would also be responsible for meeting with departments and individual faculty members to help them develop writing intensive courses and assessment measures. Should the Writing Intensive requirement be approved by the faculty, we strongly recommend that it not be implemented until such a director's position is created and filled. The program will require a great deal of faculty development and administrative oversight, something we believe only a full-time director with the program as his or her first priority can adequately provide. This recommendation is based on our research on this topic, including a consultation with Dr. Martha Townsend, who directs the Campus Writing Program at the University of Missouri and is an expert in writing across the curriculum programs.

## **7. Role of Director and Rationale for the Position**

The duties of this director would include the following:

- Teaching a minimum of 4 writing courses per year.
- Serving as a resource for faculty to improve their own writing and teaching skills by offering workshops and providing individual consultations.
- Working with the Writing Committee to approve and maintain standards for writing-intensive courses.
- Working with individual departments to plan and implement assessment of student writing.

- Coordinating efforts for Writing Across the Curriculum.

We recommend this be a faculty line. While a significant aspect of this position could be seen as administrative, it includes a significant teaching load and, perhaps more importantly, includes the responsibility of faculty development. As Dr.

Townsend put it in her consultation with our committee, faculty development is really a form of teaching: teaching teachers how to teach. A director who is a faculty member, regularly teaching Webster students, will be in a much better position to advise and consult effectively with Webster instructors about how best to incorporate writing into their courses and assist their students in becoming better writers.

We further recommend the position requirements include a Ph.D. in rhetoric and composition with a focus on Writing Across the Curriculum or the equivalent. Writing Across the Curriculum is a vibrant academic field of study, and implies an understanding of the needs of various disciplines, (WID). We will give our program the greatest chance of success if we hire someone with full knowledge of this field as well as practical experience in working in a Writing Across the Curriculum program. This leads to a more practical argument for making this position a faculty line: we are aware that university-level writing specialists are in demand, and we stand the best chance of attracting the most qualified person possible if this is a faculty position.

## **8. Why a Writing-Intensive Requirement?**

We have examined several models for writing programs, including those based on required freshman composition courses and those emphasizing writing in the disciplines. Current thinking in the field of composition studies is moving away from the freshman composition requirement because there is little evidence that such programs improve student writing (this trend is borne out by the articles in the Fall 2003 issue of *Peer Review*, the publication of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, which examined “Writing and the New Academy”). As Jonathon Monroe writes in “Writing in the Disciplines,” “Students who have learned a one-size-fits-all approach [such as that taught in freshman composition courses] will soon discover it does not fit the varied demands and diverse writing practices they need to be able to negotiate, not only across but within particular fields, to write effectively throughout their undergraduate careers and beyond” (7).

Writing In the Disciplines is the model more and more thought to be most effective: in “Writing and Students’ Engagement, Richard J. Light reports that, in a study involving in-depth interviews with 60 graduating seniors, students argued that “the best time to emphasize writing is during junior and senior years” (30). This is because “they believe[d] they learn most effectively *when writing instruction is organized around a substantial discipline*” (31, emphasis in original).

Our proposal is a compromise. Freshman seminars, oriented more towards writing than in the past, will provide some basis for students to begin improving writing skills. Transfer seminars, while optional, will remain available for transfer students who want or need the same experience.

Instructors and advisors will still be able to recommend composition and other writing courses to students whom they feel will benefit from them.

While Writing in the Disciplines seems to be the most effective method of teaching writing, we decided to recommend that our students be allowed to take their two writing intensive courses in any discipline. One of our primary reasons for allowing this flexibility was to avoid placing undue pressure on any particular department or program to create WI courses. Our Writing Committee and the Director of Undergraduate Writing will work with departments to develop WI courses within their discipline, which Dr. Martha Townsend has emphasized as something that all successful college-level writing programs share. However, as long as the members of any department are satisfied with WI courses elsewhere on campus, students should have the flexibility to fulfill their WI requirements anywhere in the curriculum.

## 9. Important Considerations in Adopting the WI Requirement

According to Ed White, a writing program assessment expert, “no one should minimize either the difficulty or the expense involved over the long term” in establishing a WI requirement. White elaborates on this point in *Teaching and Assessing Writing*:

Among the arguments against WI designations are these: Budget-wary administrators often view them as a cheap, easy fix to students’ writing “problems.” Promised support doesn’t materialize, or, as budget cuts become necessary, WI courses are easy targets. . . . In some cases, students progress through the curriculum, taking the requisite number of WI courses, without even understanding what “WI” refers to. In others, the requirement is regularly waived so as not to prevent students from graduating, thereby turning the “requirement” into a campus joke. In the worst scenarios, the non-WI faculty quit using writing in their courses because “the WI classes are doing this now and we don’t have to.” Students complain when writing is assigned in non-WI courses. The net effect can be less writing in the curriculum than before the WI requirement took effect.

Nevertheless, White agrees that “Universities that take writing seriously . . . can make a writing-intensive program work successfully. The undergraduate writing committee unanimously views the writing intensive course requirement as the best approach to improving student writing for Webster. Our meetings and discussions with faculty have consistently reinforced our colleagues’ commitment to make a positive difference in student writing, and we want our writing program, should one be approved, to have the best chance of success possible. According to Dr. Townsend, we greater ensure success of the WI requirement by:

- **Creating strong faculty ownership of the WI system.** We believe we have an excellent chance of achieving this goal because we have worked to shape our proposal in response to the faculty’s needs and concerns. However, a full-time faculty Director of Undergraduate Writing will help maintain a sense of faculty ownership by consulting with faculty as the program develops.

- **Receiving support from institutional administrators**, coupled with their willingness to avoid micromanagement. The Webster administration has always supported academic freedom and autonomy for academic programs and faculty and has indicated philosophical support for the idea of improving student writing, so we are optimistic on this score as well. Funding a full-time director position would show an even greater commitment to the specific program we propose.
- **Building symbiosis with other institutional programs/missions.** We have already worked in cooperation with the freshman seminar program and anticipate that a Director of Undergraduate Writing would be able to coordinate with other programs and missions, such as the general education requirement.
- **Creating a reward structure that values teaching.** We are fortunate in already having such a structure at Webster, though specific rewards for designing and teaching WI courses would certainly help the program's success.
- **Cultivating knowledgeable, diplomatic WAC program personnel.** Since we currently have no personnel devoted to WAC, hiring a full-time director would be an excellent start in this direction.
- **Implementing regular internal assessment procedures combined with periodic external program review.** A director with assessment experience and knowledge, combined with adequate resources, will ensure that appropriate assessment occurs.
- **Maintaining a low student-to-WI-instructor ratio.** Fortunately, Webster's small classes already ensure that this will be the case.
- **Integrating WI assignments with course goals and instructor's pedagogical methods.** A Director of Undergraduate Writing will be able to work with faculty to help them achieve this integration.
- **Encouraging flexible but sound WI criteria.** The criteria we propose are quite similar to those used in many other writing across the curriculum programs but more flexible than most.
- **Maintaining patience and vigilance.** Dr. Townsend suggests that a program will have to be in effect at least five years before we can fully assess its effectiveness. Even if we have achieved all of our objectives at that time, we are certain that new challenges will arise, and our program will have to be adjusted to meet them. A full-time director will help us maintain our standards and keep our long-term objectives in mind.

## 10. Program Assessment

As stated above, a true assessment of our proposals cannot be made for at least five years or until one cycle of entering Freshmen have graduated. Our committee takes seriously the importance of assessing the writing program, but believes that the means of assessment should be developed in collaboration with the Director of Undergraduate Writing and mindful of accreditation requirements.