

Writing in the Concentration at William and Mary:  
A Second Chance?

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To write effectively is a crucial skill for college graduates; its development is an equally crucial responsibility for the colleges that graduate them. William and Mary has long accepted this proposition and, like so many colleges, has embodied its commitment in a basic writing course.

In 1981, however, the College got truly serious about the proposition, because our undergraduates too often graduated without effective writing in their quiver of skills. Part of the problem was that we did not emphasize the "writing experience" throughout a student's entire college career, at least not in any systematic way. After a year's study of writing programs and alternatives, a special ad hoc writing committee made a series of recommendations to the Faculty of Arts and Sciences which provoked not a little controversy--to no one's great surprise.

The upshot was the following action taken by the Faculty in December 1982 to implement 1) a core course, Writing 101, in sections of no more than 15 to accommodate all incoming students who cannot demonstrate effective writing, 2) an intensive writing course required of all students in their concentration or in both for double concentrators and 3) an auxiliary writing program comprised of two four-week sessions a semester for writing-troubled students at whatever point in their college career the trouble appears. In addition, the Faculty removed the basic writing course from the English Department's jurisdiction in order, together with concentration writing requirement, to underscore its conviction that writing is a faculty-wide responsibility.

The first effect of the policy has been to refocus attention on writing across the undergraduate curriculum with some success to date, although hardly complete. The next effect was twofold: 1) mandate a Writing 101 Committee to supervise Writing 101 and its instructors (27-33 in any given semester), and 2) establish course guidelines, including the requirement of a paper cross-graded by another 101 instructor. The third effect was to establish a non-credit auxiliary writing program of four mini-courses spaced across the academic year taught by specially selected instructors aided by tutors drawn primarily from advanced writing students.

The final effect has been to initiate the concentration writing requirement for all those declaring a concentration after August 1985. The purpose of the CWR, as the Faculty envisions it, is to ensure that students continue to develop the ability to write in clear, effective prose which contains sustained and well-developed thought within their chosen disciplines. Each department was called on to specify its own requirement, submit it to the Education Policy Committee (EPC) for approval and then

both publish and implement it. To expedite the process, a special ad hoc committee was appointed for 1983-84 to help each department formulate its requirement prior to submission to EPC which then occupied itself with results for a good deal of the following year (1984-85).

The final result comprises a fairly rich diversity of requirements. Stated minimally, the regulation requires that a concentration writing course must provide the student with "multiple" writing opportunities. As it turned out, however, "multiple" meant different things to different departments. Some CWR courses require up to ten papers; some, as few as one. The EPC found it necessary to provide a definition of "multiple," namely, that if there is only one paper, it must be done in one or more drafts upon which the instructor comments; the student then redrafts.

Most departments offer several CWR courses. Religion, for instance, offers a range of ten courses, History gives its concentrators the chance to fulfill the requirement by any 400-level seminar (currently 6). Physics, which mandates independent research for its concentrators, requires a preliminary research paper draft. Economics lists the courses available for fulfillment of CWR at the beginning of the semester; the students, then, make individual arrangements for their papers with the instructor in an approved course. Modern Languages requires work in upper-level courses but permits the papers to be done either in English or in the subject language. Given the diversity of requirements, responsibility lies with the departments to certify to the registrar's office that a concentrator has fulfilled the writing requirement. The passing grade is "C" or better.

The CWR is only in its second year--too early to project in any detail the impact on the writing skills of the students. At this point the key is the departmental faculty. To be sure, the requirement was passed by a large majority at the decisive 1982 meeting, but considerably less than a majority of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences attend its meetings regularly. To assume a broad consensus and sustained enthusiasm is hazardous to one's health. Further, the negotiations between the ad hoc committee and the academic departments and later with the EPC revealed unanticipated complexities. In some disciplines, for instance, mathematics proves to be more the medium of communication than writing (for example, math and physics); in others, it is the fine and performing arts; and in some disciplines, like computer science, there is no tradition of writing; in still others, it is not English. Finally, the CWR clearly places an added burden on already burdened faculty; and to faculty who know little or nothing about the teaching of writing, the burden looks doubly unbearable.

What to do? The College is embodying its commitment to student writing in a Writing Resources Center, which will be in full swing in September 1987. Headed by a director trained and experienced in teaching writing, it will emphasize consultation and tutoring both one-on-one and in groups. For the problems most immediately at hand, however, the director is vital. If the

CWR is to be effective in our academic disciplines for the long run, those departmental faculty who teach the CWR courses urgently need basic workshops and refreshers to help them manage the burden. The basic workshops are scheduled to begin this summer. In view of a recent workshop experiment in the Economics Department, there is every reason to believe that increased faculty knowledge and skill will at once reduce anxiety and increase effectiveness.

Clearly, the will to effective writing is there; one needs now to work steadily at clearing the way. The center promises invaluable aid. But it promises more. Writing is a cross-disciplinary venture. In colleges like William and Mary, where the curriculum is tightly organized by discipline and department, the cross-, inter-, and multidisciplinary are at great risk. If I may be allowed to put it over-simply: the academic departments command the resources. As a result, nondepartmental ventures, if they are to survive to maturity, require lodging with a senior administrator--a cardinal protector so to speak. There comes a time, however, when they must leave home, that is, if maturity is to be preserved and enhanced. From 1982-1986, the College's writing program resided in the dean's office; now it is establishing its own academic home--the center. Precisely as an organized academic unit, albeit not a department, it can regularly command the College's resources, including space, personnel, and funds.

The "more" that the center provides goes beyond resources to the heart of the matter: academic visibility and permanence. The history of this and, indeed, any living college is littered with promising programs which never achieved permanence. To be sure, our basic writing course and even a muted auxiliary writing program would survive and flourish as an English Department preserve. But two parts of the program would not: CWR and an aspect as yet unmentioned, namely the center as a writing resource for the entire campus--writing-troubled undergraduates, graduate students in all the schools (Business, Education, Law, and Marine Science) and the faculty. One can realistically anticipate that faculty can look to the center for training and updating in the teaching of writing and for help with students whom the CWR or any other course turns up with hard-core writing problems. The occasional business of the center will be workshops, seminars, and training sessions. But the daily business will be consultation and tutoring on a drop-in, one-on-one, and group basis.

At this stage, however, we are betwixt and between.