

Mary-Lou Hinman  
Chairperson, Writing Task Force

The concept of a college-wide commitment to the teaching of writing is not new at Plymouth State College. Ten years ago, the English Department proposed replacing required Freshman Composition with a content-based writing course (called a W-Course) offered by each department for its own majors. The English Department had hoped to involve faculty in all disciplines in the teaching of writing; however, the W-Course concept never got beyond the discussion stage even though faculty frustration with student writing remained high. Departments were willing to require more English courses but not to involve significant writing components in their own classes.

Two years ago, the W-Course concept surfaced again during the deliberations of a committee formed to study the General Education requirements at Plymouth. The committee devised a program which would expose students to "the breadth of knowledge that has shaped human culture." In addition, they worked to guarantee proper skills levels in several areas, including communication. Although all General Education courses were to involve communication skills, the committee sought added emphasis on writing proficiency and therefore proposed a new W-Course plan at Plymouth State College.

Academic requirements for all students already included a freshman-level, skills-oriented composition course taught exclusively by members of the English Department. That program was supported by a writing laboratory, a resource housed in the English Department and restricted to use by Freshman Composition students who needed additional instruction to master basic writing skills. The new General Education requirements continued that program.

In addition, the General Education Committee recommended that the faculty work to enhance student writing proficiency by requiring every student to take a General Education course designated "W." A W-Course was defined as "any subject-matter, content-based course that uses writing assignments to help students learn course content." Eventually from the discussion and revision of the W-course concept evolved a program which required every academic department to offer a W-Course for its majors (ideally at the junior and senior level) which fulfilled General Education requirements.

Before a course could be designated "W," the instructor had to submit a plan indicating how and at what points in the course writing would be used. The General Education Committee clearly indicated that a W-Course as they defined it was not a course in writing skills. Rather, it was meant to be a course in which students used writing to come to an understanding of subject matter. Thus a variety of writing activities could fulfill this requirement: journal writing, multiple draft essays, imaginative



as well as expository writing, and non-graded as well as graded work. Freshman Composition was still the skills course, but all faculty would have access to an expanded writing laboratory where students who continued to have skills-related problems could seek help. The point was to release faculty from skills concerns to concentrate on writing as it related to the content of their courses.

The W-Course concept was accepted by vote of the faculty as part of the new General Education package. Problems surfaced, however, when it came time to implement the recommendations of the committee. Faculty believed that W-Courses had to be in place immediately, and some submitted course proposals without fully understanding what constituted a serious writing component. It was one thing for departments to submit course plans to fit the proper General Education perspective; it was an entirely different matter for them to devise comprehensive W-Courses.

To help solve this problem and to address faculty concerns about teaching writing in general, the General Education Committee appointed a task force to implement a writing across the curriculum program at Plymouth State College. Only one member of the original task force was from the English Department, and not all members had the same perceptions of student writing at Plymouth. The diverse composition of the group helped reinforce the idea that writing would be the concern of all disciplines.

The Writing Task Force began its work by surveying the faculty to determine the role that writing already played in classes across the curriculum. Faculty were asked to list both problems and successes and to discuss the relationship of writing to course content and class size. As might be expected, the responses revealed deep-seated frustrations, but interest in improving writing at the college was high. Very few faculty despaired of improving the situation.

The Writing Task Force also read and discussed recent pedagogy on writing across the curriculum, concentrating on works published since 1980 to take advantage of the experiences of colleges and universities who had already struggled to adapt new writing programs. From this reading, the group organized and distributed a two-page bibliography to the faculty before their summer break. All items on the bibliography were placed on permanent reserve in the library.

That much accomplished, the most pressing concern of the Writing Task Force in its initial year was to begin training faculty from all disciplines who would be teaching W-Courses. The group sensed, both from the responses on the faculty questionnaire and from private discussion with their colleagues, a widespread apprehension about teaching writing. Faculty seemed reluctant for a number of reasons. First, and perhaps most important, faculty believed the content of their courses would suffer from their increased emphasis on writing. They viewed writing assignments as time-consuming and laborious, not only for students but for themselves. Second, they could not shake the notion that "serious" writing takes place only in term papers and essay examinations, where writing is viewed as a product rather than a process. For



many, therefore, teaching writing was a matter of circling spelling and punctuation errors. Clearly, the Writing Task Force needed to address those concerns and fears and show faculty how they could teach writing in their fields without jeopardizing course content or taking on an oppressive work load.

The Writing Task Force began by offering workshops for faculty who would be teaching W-courses for their departments and hired Toby Fulwiler, Writing Coordinator at the University of Vermont, to run the first workshop. The group rightly felt that an expert from outside their own institution would lend credibility to their program and also show them through example how to conduct subsequent workshops. The three-day workshop covered many traditional topics such as revising, editing, and evaluating writing but primarily focused on writing as a tool for learning through journal writing, short freewrites, and multiple draft essays.

The first workshop was highly successful, not only because faculty found new ways of incorporating writing into their classes but because they had time to discuss teaching techniques in general. The relaxed, non-combative nature of the experience allowed faculty from all disciplines to voice and get rid of their apprehensions about teaching writing. During the final session of the workshop, over half of the participants volunteered to be actively involved with the Writing Task Force during the next academic year.

During the following term, the Writing Task Force sponsored two support sessions for workshop participants. Faculty shared new techniques and assignments and offered suggestions to help colleagues solve problems. On the whole, faculty were excited about the results of their experiments and could better address the whole W-course concept.

Plymouth State College has just begun to institute the new W-Course requirement, but we can make some observations about our experience that might be helpful to other colleges contemplating such a requirement.

First, instituting such a requirement is primarily a political problem. The community must not only agree to the program in principle as we did at Plymouth ten years ago, but must also commit the staff and resources to assure its implementation. It takes many hours and a significant investment of money to convince faculty, set up guidelines, run workshops, and provide support both in terms of designing course assignments and teaching skills in a writing laboratory.

Second, the English Department can not become defensive when their colleagues tell them writing courses "aren't getting the job done." Instead the Department must help those colleagues recognize that one composition course can not possibly by itself have a significant impact if writing does not play a crucial role in courses across the curriculum.

Third, once the W-Course concept is accepted, the group in charge must avoid prescriptive requirements. Any attempt to determine the number of pages or types of writing assignments needed to make a W-Course will be counterproductive. Flexibility



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is the key to a successful program. Once faculty have attended workshops, they will have the training to devise appropriate assignments.

In fact, our experience thus far has taught us that once faculty have adopted successful writing techniques to their own purposes, they devise imaginative and effective writing components in their courses. And since faculty become excited about writing assignments that work, they become more willing to include further writing in their courses.