

THE DISCIPLINARY COMMUNICATION PROPOSAL

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

CEP - February, 2009

Doesn't this new proposal just amount to a watering down of the old W requirement?

No.

Faculty should be clear in their minds that the current W requirement is broken and is not working. First, students are having trouble finding seats in W courses, and approximately 300 a year have to ask CEP for substitutions and scramble to find ways to fulfill this requirement just so that they can graduate. Since all transfer students who have completed IGETC (roughly half) are exempted from the UCSC W requirement, this 300 represents a significant percentage of the graduating class.

Secondly, students often find themselves in W courses that do little to enhance the kind of particular writing skills that they need in their majors and will need in their future careers.

The new DC requirement will ensure four things.

1). First, since it is an upper-division requirement, it will apply to all transfer students – including IGETC students – as well as to “native” UCSC students.

2). Secondly, it will expand the array of courses available to students to complete their advanced writing requirement and will ensure that the courses they take aim to develop the kinds of communication skills that they are likely to need in their academic work and in their future professions.

3) Thirdly, major-sponsoring units will also be responsible for monitoring these courses to ensure their quality and their appropriateness to the needs of their students. CEP will also take an active role in periodically reviewing these courses.

4). Finally, the new requirement will allow room for these courses to develop communication skills beyond writing that are valuable to their chosen field, such as public speaking or poster presentations. The core of the requirement, however, will remain writing.

But doesn't the fact that work to fulfill the new DC requirement can be spread over two or three courses represent a weakening of the old requirement, which required one full course?

The fact that CEP proposes allowing the W requirement to be fulfilled by a sequence of up to three courses, constituting a minimum total of 5 units, is in part a response to resource constraints in some fields. But it does not necessarily represent a weakening of a requirement, since available research shows that writing is best taught in an iterative way that involves frequent practice with meaningful feedback and opportunities for rewriting. In some fields, this can be accomplished more successfully in a sequence of courses rather than in a single five-unit course.

Does this new requirement mean that my home department is going to have to start offering Writing or DC courses?

No.

First, CEP hopes and anticipates that the DC requirement will often be satisfied through a revision or enhancement of courses that already count toward the overall major requirements. In fact, many majors already require a course that satisfies the current W requirement.

Secondly, while major-sponsoring units are responsible for determining the goals and objectives of courses that meet the DC requirement for their majors, they do not necessarily have to offer the courses themselves. They can enter into a collaborative arrangement with some other unit to put on these courses.

But I am a scientist (or social scientist, or philosopher, etc.). I don't know how to teach writing! I don't know about gerunds, dangling participles, or the proper placement of the colon.

First, the focus in these high-level courses should be on teaching students how to write about significant problems or issues in their fields making appropriate use of evidence and of the citation form and accepted style for that discipline. With DC courses, as with the current W courses, the primarily focus is not on teaching the mechanics of writing or sentence structure.

All faculty at research universities are familiar with the norms for writing, using evidence, and presenting results in their fields. It is these norms that the DC requirement asks them to share with their students. Faculty in each department must clearly articulate these norms and their expectations of students. CEP is asking the campus administration to help provide the support services -- in the form of available peer tutoring, TA resources, TA training, Writing staff available for faculty consultation, etc. -- to make this requirement workable, and to enable both faculty and students to achieve their goals.

How can the DC course or courses achieve their stated objectives if students come into them already way behind in their writing skills and unable even to formulate complete sentences?

First of all, CEP does not expect its revamping of the current W requirement to solve all the problems with student writing evident on this as well as on many other campuses. We have started with the W requirement because it is currently in crisis -- something has to be done. But we do plan in the future to look closely at the effectiveness of the current ways of handling the C1/C2 requirements and to study questions such as the coordination between the Writing Program and the Core Courses, and the functionality of subsequent courses such as Writing 20, 21, 22a, and 23.

Still, writing is a high-level skill that requires extensive practice to master completely. There are no quick fixes at any level. But writing and, more broadly, communication skills are too important to students' future academic and career success for us to give up in our steady, ongoing efforts to improve the campus's performance in this area. We have to start somewhere.

Will this proposal require new resources if it is enacted?

Yes.

As CEP communicated to the Senate, and as the Senate acknowledged in a resolution passed in Winter quarter 2007, the current problems with the Writing requirement on this campus cannot be fixed without the commitment of additional resources to this area.

Though we are now in a budget crisis, the funding required to support the DC initiative is small relative to many campus commitments. The faculty have made it clear that writing is a priority. Now is the time to recommit ourselves to the importance of teaching students how to write.