

# Writing in the Disciplines at UCSC



Committee on Educational Policy - 2007

Background

# Our writing-intensive (W) requirement

From UCSC Senate regulation 10.2.2.1:

**Writing-intensive course.** One five-credit hour course or the equivalent that provides instruction and substantial practice in writing within the context of any academic subject.

## The W is not a first-year writing requirement

- The first-year writing requirement is C1 & C2
- The great majority of W courses are upper-division
- Largely taught within academic departments and by regular faculty
- Many majors include a W course among their major requirements
- Most of a W course's substance is not related to writing

Students learn to write using the conventions of a *specific academic discipline* – conventions of argumentation, data citation, presentation and style, etc.

CEP has embarked on a reexamination of our general education program.

Why start with W?

The W is in crisis due to a shortfall of capacity

This is one example of a larger problem: the campus's increasing difficulties supplying to undergraduate students the courses it requires and the experiences it promises.

We need a W requirement, but our W is not what  
it should be

Namely, a guarantee that students will learn to write  
according to the conventions of their chosen field.

If GE reform is dinner, then W is the broccoli

Controversy about W derailed GE reform several years ago. We'll have to have this conversation sooner or later.



# CEP Recommendations

1. Reformulate *W* as a requirement that students learn to write according to the conventions of their own academic field

2. Broaden *W* to a “Disciplinary Communications” requirement encompassing not only writing but other forms of communication

3. Restore the Peer Writing Assistant Program

4. Provide FTE for professional writing instructors to support writing in the disciplines

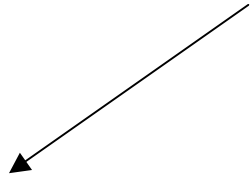
5. Provide TAS funds to targeted departments or divisions where the need for W support is greatest

A case for writing in the major

The question who should offer W courses has sometimes engendered controversy on campus.

Current regulation allows the W to be satisfied WITHIN a student's major or OUTSIDE of it.

Please note



CEP is NOT revisiting the regulation today.

Let's separate the question of who teaches W from whether W should exist and be funded.

But we would like all departments to *consider* providing writing for their own majors.

# Every discipline has its own conventions for communicating

Conventions of argumentation, presentation, rhetoric, and style vary widely from discipline to discipline.

Students deserve to learn the conventions appropriate to the major they choose.

It can and should be the goal of every discipline that its majors learn to communicate appropriately.

Departments should have considerable leeway to decide what a W-like requirement ought to mean to them and their students.

This should entail flexibility on CEP's part in determining W policy.



Going further: scholarly communication occurs in important forms besides writing. We give talks, design and present posters, and so on.

Though writing must be a component of a requirement on scholarly communication, it need not be the only one.

CEP's goals:

To recast the W as a more broadly conceived requirement  
in *disciplinary communication*

To encourage departments to develop their *own*  
educational objectives for communication within the  
disciplines

*and* to take responsibility for assuring they are met

## Objection I: “I can’t teach writing”

Fact: regular faculty may not want to spend time teaching and evaluating general matters of composition, grammar, usage, and so on.

We faculty *can* consider basic quality of the writing in *evaluating* papers.

But we should *not* feel compelled to teach basic writing skills or provide detailed feedback about it.

Instead, the idea is to focus on structure and quality of argumentation – and the substance!

*We can* teach some conventions of writing in our own discipline:

argumentation, paper organization, data presentation, citation, ...

Objection II: “Students don’t have the *basic* writing skills. Why are we talking about the W?”

For writing in the disciplines to succeed, students need strong support for basic skills *outside of class*, for example in the form of peer writing tutors.

We must do everything we can to ensure that students are having their needs met in 1<sup>st</sup> year composition courses.

Let’s not respond to the challenge of underprepared students by lowering our academic standards.

Objection III: "W is an unfunded mandate."

See below.

Some departments may continue to feel that they cannot or should not provide writing in the disciplines training within their own departments.

Should this be true, there are alternative structures to consider for providing for their students.

These structures come closer to the ideals expressed here than our current system does.

Many universities have advanced writing courses sponsored within a particular *division*.

Also possible: within colleges or the Writing Program

But departments must have a hand in determining the content and quality of W courses for their majors, for all the reasons give above.



The  $W$  capacity problem

The supply of available seats in W courses has tightened considerably.

Students in many majors are having an increasingly hard time satisfying the W requirement in time for graduation.

CEP received > 160 W-related petitions from students last year.

Students are increasingly “crashing” W courses that were never meant for large numbers of non-majors.

Students are unhappy about having to do this.

Faculty are unhappy too.

Departments are reacting by restricting enrollment in their W courses, eliminating their W courses, etc.

## The resource issue

The realities of evaluating writing impose a special need for class size limits in writing courses.

Our survey of other institutions revealed a modest range in evaluator-to-student ratio, from about 1/12 to 1/25.

“Evaluator-to-student” = (Instructor + TAs)/student

Departments are not willing to teach writing-intensive courses without adequate resources.

From a recent letter from a department chair to CEP:

“We consider the W requirement to be an unfunded mandate and have decided – much to our regret – that it is not in our interest to sponsor such courses until the university administration produces the resources necessary to do so.”

# Summary and Recommendations

As an underfunded requirement, W is becoming an unacceptable burden to students, advisors, and faculty

We must increase funding for it or consider abolishing it

Let's keep it

An ability to write well, and appropriately to one's field, is not an academic luxury.



Recommendation 1:

## Restore the Peer Writing Assistant Program

Students need support – outside of a W class – for their basic writing skills.

Estimated cost: \$50,000

## Recommendation 2:

Provide FTE for professional writing instructors to support writing in the disciplines

Writing instructors are needed to consult with faculty teaching W courses, and to offer training courses for TAs and writing assistants.

Consider especially instructors dedicated to writing in the sciences and/or engineering.

Estimated cost: \$50,000.

### Recommendation 3:

Provide TAS funds to targeted departments or divisions where the need for W support is greatest

For graduate students or lecturers.

Support for W in the form of TA or TF funds could enable UCSC to meet its goal of combining graduate growth with improvements to undergraduate education.

Cost at UCLA of providing matching TA funds to departments for W-like requirement: \$250,000.

Recommendation 4:

Reformulate W as a requirement that students learn to write according to the conventions of their own academic field

Departments must be involved, even if they do not sponsor W courses themselves.

Recommendation 5:

Broaden W to a “Disciplinary Communications” requirement encompassing not only writing but other forms of communication