

**COMMITTEE ON EDUCATIONAL POLICY**  
**Resolution on the Writing-Intensive (W) Requirement**

To the Academic Senate, Santa Cruz Division:

**Summary:** The campus must either provide more financial support for writing in the disciplines or abolish it as a requirement.

**Background: the W**

One of the requirements for graduation from UCSC is the completion of a writing-intensive course. According to Senate Regulations (10.2.2.1.e), students must take “one five-credit hour course or the equivalent that provides instruction and substantial practice in writing within the context of any academic subject”. Courses satisfying this requirement bear a ‘W’ designation in the catalogue.

The W is not a first-year writing requirement. Students must independently satisfy the university’s C1 and C2 composition requirements, ideally in their first year. Rather, the W is intended to provide an intensive writing experience sometime after the first year. The great majority of W courses are upper-division. Furthermore, a W course is usually offered by an academic program, and typically most of its substantive content is not writing related. Many majors include a writing-intensive course as part of their major requirements. In a W course, students learn how to write papers using the conventions – of style, formatting, argumentation, etc. – of a specific academic discipline. In these ways, the W is different from a first-year composition course.

The existence of W at UCSC reflects a 25-year nationwide trend in higher education in “Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC)”. Two essential tenets of WAC are these:<sup>1</sup>

- 1) Students can learn to write adequately only if we teach writing continually rather than solely in the first year; therefore the teaching of writing is the responsibility of the entire academic community.
- 2) Writing promotes learning; writing in a specific discipline promotes learning the substance of that discipline as well as the conventions of writing in that discipline.

CEP conducted a survey of nine other universities and colleges to see whether they also have a requirement like our W – that is, a requirement that students take one or more

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<sup>1</sup> An excellent resource on Writing Across the Curriculum is “The WAC Clearinghouse” at <http://wac.colostate.edu/index.cfm>.

courses, at a level beyond frosh writing, that teach and require writing in the context of a discipline. This is a fuzzy category, but most of them do have such a requirement.<sup>2</sup>

### **The problem**

In the last two years the supply of seats in W courses has fallen well below what is needed. Students in many majors are having an increasingly hard time satisfying the W requirement in time for graduation. One result of this is that CEP received over 160 petitions last year from students seeking to satisfy W by unconventional means. The trend continues this year.

The causes of this problem are well understood. For many years, students could satisfy the W requirement by virtue of taking the college core courses. Core courses were allowed to satisfy the W requirement, we believe, because of a fear when it was first established that there would not be a sufficient supply of W courses. However, given the objectives discussed above for a W requirement, letting core courses satisfy W was a bad idea, and this state of affairs was always meant to be temporary. In the late 1990s CEP voted to remove the W designation from Core Courses and in addition to make satisfaction of the C composition requirement (now C2) a prerequisite to W. This was a well-motivated decision, but the feared shortfall of W courses has now come to pass.

This is in good part a problem of resources. We might like all of our classes to be small. But it is widely recognized that the realities of teaching and evaluating writing impose a special need for class size limits in writing courses. This is why freshman composition sections are held to roughly 25 or fewer students across the UC system.<sup>3</sup> A W course faces the same realities. And yet there has never been a system of funding in place to secure realistic student-to-evaluator ratios for W courses. Faculty are not willing to teach writing-intensive courses without adequate resources.

This problem has been compounded by several other recent developments. First, funding for the Writing Program was drastically cut in 2002. Upper-division courses in the Writing Program which satisfied the W requirement were one casualty of these cuts. Others were a vibrant peer tutoring program that served W courses, and the funded involvement of Writing Program faculty in consulting with faculty designing and teaching W courses. Second, overall campus growth over the last five years, accompanied by particularly dramatic growth in some programs, has only worsened the gap between resources and needs for the W.

Departments have never been required to provide W courses for their majors. Yet in the past students often could satisfy the W through their major, or they could find a W course intended for non-majors. As W seats disappear, students are increasingly “crashing” W

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<sup>2</sup> The institutions surveyed were UC Berkeley, UC Davis, UC Irvine, UCLA, the University of Michigan, Duke University, the University of Maryland at College Park, George Mason University, and Dartmouth College.

<sup>3</sup> For discussion of this point see “Bringing Writing Class Size in the UC System in Line with National Standards”, a report of the University Committee on Preparatory Education, May 2005.

courses that were never meant for large numbers of non-majors. For example, in the current quarter (winter 2007) about 80 non-majors enrolled in Literature 101, a W course. As a result, about 60 majors who needed the course to satisfy major requirements were prevented from enrolling. Faculty experiencing events like this note the detrimental effect on the class caused by the presence of students who are fundamentally uninterested in the subject matter and resentful at having to be there. Departments are understandably reacting. Over the past year, we have seen programs restrict enrollment in their W courses, or eliminate their W courses (or at least the W designation) altogether. The problem is snowballing.

In short, UCSC requires the W without providing an adequate number of courses to allow students to satisfy it. The shortfall of W offerings is placing an unacceptable burden on our students. It has also become a burden to the campus advising staff, to the Senate, and to the faculty who teach W courses.

**In a sense the solution to this problem is simple: our faculty must decide either that they want to increase funding to writing in the disciplines – necessarily at the expense of something else – or that they are ready to abolish the W requirement. CEP sincerely hopes for the former.**

### **A proposal**

The details of any proposal to increase funding for W must depend on how precisely the W will be taught and supported. Currently the majority of W courses are taught by regular faculty, and many are courses that have an independent reason to exist because they also serve to satisfy major requirements. This reflects the underlying philosophy of the W: in such courses, students should learn to write at an advanced level, with substantive content, and according to the conventions of an academic discipline. We assume for discussion that all of this will continue to be true.

As noted above, courses having a significant writing component can be meaningful and effective only if the ratio of student-to-evaluator remains reasonable. Reading and evaluating papers takes time. Note that we speak of the “student-to-evaluator” ratio here, and not of the student-to-instructor ratio. At many other institutions, a W-like course has an enrollment that is typically limited to 12-20 students. Given the realities at UCSC of enrollments, course loads, and workload ratios, we assume that such a model here is a non-starter. However, though we have never had any class-size limit for W courses, those with larger enrollments have generally counted on TA support. By “student-to-evaluator ratio” we mean the ratio of students to faculty-plus-TAs. (This is equivalent to student-to-instructor ratio at institutions with small class size limits.) There is variation across institutions in what is considered an acceptable ratio; in our survey it ranges from 1/12 at well-funded institutions like Duke University that significantly invest in writing to 1/23 at the University of Maryland, College Park. Yet this variation is obviously modest, reflecting a strong consensus that for writing courses the ratio should not get much worse than 1/20. This is precisely the ratio used at UCLA and UC Irvine for their W-like courses. At these UC campuses, this ratio reflects the number of students to the

instructor-plus-TAs, just as we assume must be done here. For the purposes of this proposal, we assume a ratio of 1/20 as well.

Many programs already succeed in providing a significant number of W courses for their own majors or others. In this sense, the campus does already fund writing in the disciplines. The campus should not interpret this proposal to imply that *all* units mounting W courses should be allocated *new* resources according to what they provide. The resources required to do this would be far greater than what we contemplate here; funding at such a level is unrealistic and unnecessary. Rather, the campus needs to allocate resources in such a way as to redress specific shortfalls where they are occurring.

We note that the cost of funding a TA and a lecturer can be roughly comparable. The means chosen to address any unmet W need should depend on the department and its circumstances. That said, there is an obvious advantage to supporting W by means of teaching assistantships at a time when the campus is striving to expand its graduate programs. Enhancing resources dedicated to W offerings could enable UCSC to meet its long-stated goal of combining graduate growth with improvements to undergraduate education.

The bulk of any new funding for the W must go to increasing the number of available W seats as outlined above. But a vibrant W requires two other forms of support as well.

First, faculty often need someone to consult with when they design and teach W courses. Equally important, graduate teaching assistants can benefit from consultations and from workshops or training in the teaching or evaluation of writing. One of our Writing Program faculty in fact bears the title of W (or Writing in the Disciplines) Coordinator. However, due to budget cuts to that program mentioned earlier, the W Coordinator's role is now reduced mainly to reviewing proposed W courses on paper. UCSC is fortunate to have a cadre of outstanding Writing faculty who have the experience and vision to support an excellent Writing in the Disciplines program. In order to have a strong W requirement, we must again fund Writing in the Disciplines.

Second, students taking W courses need additional support outside of class as they work to improve their writing skills. Most W courses are – and should be – taught by regular faculty. We can expect our faculty to impart what they know about the conventions of writing in their own disciplines and to evaluate writing at the level of argumentation, presentation of evidence, and so on. But faculty will not flock to teach W courses if they must devote attention to more basic grammar and composition, or if their students turn in papers that are miserably short in these areas. We therefore also advocate restoring the Peer Writing Assistant program formerly run by the Writing Program. When that program existed, students in a W course had free access to tutors who were upper-division undergraduates with some training. The program was highly valued by both students and W instructors.

**We estimate that meeting the needs laid out above will require an increase in funding on the order of \$250,000 per year.** (The actual cost of shoring up the W requirement will depend on various factors. The figure may be less or more in the end, but it is very likely to be well into the six figures.) Of that amount, we estimate that about 60 percent would go to TAS funds to support either graduate students or lecturers offering W sections or courses; another 20 percent would fund the Writing Assistant Program; and the remaining 20 percent would fund approximately one Writing Program FTE equivalent. We provide a rationale for each of these amounts in turn.

The projected sum of about \$50,000 for a Writing Assistant program is based on what that same program cost when it existed, loosely adjusted for inflation. As an alternative or supplemental source of funding for such tutoring, the campus might also consider student fees.

As mentioned, there is currently no funding that would allow any Writing Program faculty to actively support the W requirement. Writing Program faculty can support the W by consulting closely with instructors a W course, for example, or by offering training courses for TAs and writing assistants. Increased funding (on the order of \$50,000) could be used to hire new faculty or to buy time for existing faculty (or both). One important consideration is whether the campus could benefit from hiring someone who specializes in the teaching of writing specifically in the sciences or engineering, areas where there is currently a shortfall in W courses.

The TAS figure is the most difficult to project. For present purposes, we note that UCLA allocates \$250,000 for a very similar purpose. The money goes as matching funds to departments for TA support in W-like courses. Crudely adjusting for the difference in undergraduate enrollment (roughly 25,000/15,000), this corresponds to a figure of \$150,000 for UCSC.

In order to sustain the W, any commitment of the sort proposed here would obviously have to be ongoing. And since the point of funding the W is to sustain a pedagogically realistic student-to-evaluator ratio, funding should be indexed to both enrollment and inflation.

For the campus to make a decision to fund the W along these lines, it will require the strong and synergistic backing of both the administration and the Senate faculty. Given budget realities, a choice to fund the W will be a choice to sacrifice something else.

CEP will sponsor a resolution at the March 9 Senate Meeting that will call on the administration to provide increased funding to redress the W shortfall and to work with departments and the Senate to solve the W crisis. If the faculty are clear on the choice they are making, and if the resolution passes, it will represent a faculty mandate to the administration. In this event, we will call on the administration to come through with the necessary funding. We will also call on the administration to acknowledge that writing in the disciplines is a responsibility of the entire campus and not of any particular division. Whether all departments can or should provide Ws for their majors, a student should be

able to satisfy the requirement with a course tailored to the needs of his or her discipline. (See the discussion below.) When students are forced to satisfy the W requirement through courses far outside their field of interest, neither the students nor the faculty are well served.

Should such a resolution fail to pass, then the Senate will have to seriously consider eliminating the W requirement. We do not think there is a viable middle road. Watering down the W requirement, as some have proposed, would leave the campus with the burden of administering a requirement that has limited substance or effectiveness. And continuing to impose a requirement on students without providing enough class seats for everyone is not an option.

We strongly favor retaining and revitalizing the W requirement. If our campus declines to fund it, then UCSC will find itself out of step with a nationwide trend in good practices in undergraduate writing and learning.

### **Epilogue: whose responsibility is writing in the disciplines?**

The question of who should offer W courses has sometimes engendered controversy on campus. Some faculty feel that not all departments should be expected to teach W courses. Our main goal here has been to propose increased funding for the W requirement, and to a large extent the case is the same regardless of who teaches the courses. But our discussion obviously reflects the view intrinsic to the Writing Across the Curriculum movement that W-like requirements are best satisfied within a student's major. Here we address this issue in a bit more detail.

First, it should be borne in mind that the relevant Senate Regulation (10.2.2.1.e) specifies a course that "provides instruction and substantial practice in writing within the context of *any* academic subject" (emphasis added). That is, the Regulations do not require a student to satisfy the W within his or her major, and do not require departments to provide W courses. CEP is not proposing any change to this Regulation. We do not believe that the W can be saved or improved by attempting to force unwilling faculty or departments to take it on.

But, perhaps over time, we would like to persuade faculty and departments that this is the best thing to do. Where faculty seem unpersuaded, we hear two concerns. The first is the lack of resources to help teach an effective W, the problem of the "unfunded mandate". The proposal here is meant to help address this impediment. The second concern is pedagogical: perhaps W courses can or should be taught only by certain faculty (for example, writing instructors), or perhaps writing is not relevant to all disciplines. Our response to this second concern involves several points.

1. Scholarship is by nature public and interactive. Every discipline has its conventions for communicating, and all call on writing sometimes. It can and should be the goal of every discipline that its majors learn to communicate accordingly.

2. That said, the conventions of communication vary widely from discipline to discipline. We believe that departments should have a good deal of leeway to decide what a W-like requirement ought to mean to them and their students. This should entail breadth or flexibility on CEP's part in determining W policy. Going further, we note that 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. A more broadly conceived requirement than our W might be called a *DC* requirement – a requirement in *disciplinary communication*. A move in this direction might require a change in Senate Regulations.
3. The object of writing in the disciplines is as much about *writing to learn* as it is about learning to write. In other words, writing (or other forms of scholarly expression) should occur within the discipline because it is an excellent tool for *learning the content of that discipline*. As scholars ourselves, we understand that few things reveal gaps in our understanding of material, or a weakness in our reasoning, as putting our thoughts into words does. The use of writing to foster a deep understanding of a student's major is arguably the most important aspect of a W-like requirement. No discussion of advanced writing requirements should lose sight of this point.
4. Among those who argue for writing within a student's own discipline, it is well understood that regular faculty may not want to spend time teaching and evaluating general matters of composition, grammar, usage, and so on. Indeed, though all faculty teaching W-like courses can (and probably should) consider basic quality of writing in *evaluating* papers, they should *not* feel compelled to teach it or provide detailed feedback about it. To view the matter otherwise is not only unrealistic, it misses an essential point of writing in the disciplines (see 3 above). In a W-like course, faculty should focus on matters such as structure and quality of argumentation (as well as the substance of the writing). In addition, faculty *can* teach some of the conventions of writing in their own discipline, including conventions of paper organization, data presentation, citation, and argumentation.
5. It is nevertheless true that deficiencies in basic writing skills will persist even for more advanced students and that such deficiencies can hinder achievement in a W-like class. 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. In addition, we must do everything we can to ensure that students are having their needs met in first-year composition courses.
6. Finally, 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, structures that nevertheless come closer to the ideals expressed here than our current system does. For example, many universities have advanced writing courses sponsored within a particular *division*. UCSC is fortunate to have several types of units in which

disciplinary-based writing courses might be housed, such as departments, divisions, colleges, and the Writing Program. Wherever such courses are located, however, we believe strongly that regular departmental faculty must have a hand in determining their content and quality, for all of the reasons given above. But – at least to some extent – this is a separate matter from who pays for them or teaches them.

## **Resolution**

### WHEREAS

- The ability to write effectively is fundamental to a university education;
- Writing is a complex skill that must be nurtured beyond the first year of college;
- Writing in a discipline promotes a deeper understanding of the substance of that discipline;
- Effective evaluation of and feedback about writing puts a special demand on evaluator-to-student ratios and therefore on resources;
- The current capacity shortfall in W offerings at UCSC places an unacceptable burden on students, advisors, and faculty;
- This problem of capacity cannot be addressed without an increase in resources devoted to W, unless the quality or meaning of W is to be compromised;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Senate calls on the Central and Divisional administration to work with departments and with Senate committees to find a solution to the W crisis and to allocate the resources needed for it.

Respectfully submitted,

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