

Writing at Portland State University: A Campus-wide Responsibility

Submitted on behalf of the
Council of Writing Program Administrators

By

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Introduction

The field of rhetoric and composition has deepened and widened in the past thirty years as research and practice have revealed the centrality of writing to the learning process. Research shows ways in which writing promotes learning as well as represents learning in every discipline. The scholarship of teaching and learning practiced throughout the arts, sciences, professions, and civic life continues to establish the influence of writing on disciplinary knowledge, democratic life, and personal development. Pedagogies enabled by multiple technologies provide both scholars of rhetoric and composition and scholars in other disciplines the ability to help students develop habits of mind essential to their lives in the academy, the workplace, and the community.

The Framework for Postsecondary Writing, published in 2011 by the National Writing Project, the Council of Writing Program Administrators, and the National Council of Teachers of English, identifies essential habits of mind for learners: curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition. These habits of mind are fostered through writing, reading, and critical analysis that develop students' rhetorical knowledge, critical thinking, writing processes, knowledge of conventions, and abilities to compose in multiple environments <<http://wpacouncil.org/files/framework-for-success-postsecondary-writing.pdf>>. By renewing a commitment to teaching writing, Portland State will inculcate those habits of mind and learning goals that will reward programs, departments, faculty, and students.

Renewing an emphasis on writing, which includes not only teaching composition but the larger constellation of Writing Studies that constitutes such areas as creative and analytical thinking, rhetorical understanding, digital rhetoric, and professional and technical writing, represents a significant challenge. Composition cannot be taught effectively in isolation; it is not a one- or two-time inoculation that immunizes a student against feverish word choices and ague-ridden sentences. Rather, writing instruction must be embraced by multiple faculty in multiple disciplines, including but not exclusively English, over four years of undergraduate study. Portland State has already instantiated this model of education with University Studies, and so it is aware of the kinds of institutional changes necessary for such a model of education to flourish. Like General Education as conceived by UNST, writing flourishes in a spiral model of education. In the following recommendations, we offer steps and choices for PSU to consider in order to achieve the important outcomes of effective writing instruction and student learning.

Recommendation 1: Portland State University should include in its mission statement an explicit commitment to writing as a means of learning and representing learning.

Portland State University has a vision and organizational structure that could support the centrality of writing throughout the curriculum. An earlier version of the university's mission statement, for example, clearly pointed to writing as part of the university's mission and goals. Because omitting writing injures Portland State's unique focus on community interaction and responsibility and ignores the ways in which writing can distinguish Portland State, we

recommend that communication with an emphasis on purposeful and effective writing be reincorporated into the university's Mission Statement, with the exact wording to be agreed upon by the PSU President, administration, and Faculty Senate.

Portland State is known throughout higher education for its curricular innovations in relation to General Education and its commitment to interaction with the community as enacted in students' experiences throughout the curriculum. Although many curricular interactions with the community randomly include writing, the university has yet to intentionally highlight the various genres of writing in this work that PSU so values. Letters to the editor, infographics for political decision makers, blog entries for public discussions, and short reports for parent groups are examples of potential kinds of writing that employers could expect PSU graduates to have had experience composing. As PSU continues to establish and publicize reasons for students to come to PSU, it might promise not only writing experiences throughout the curriculum but also specific kinds of writing experiences that reinforce other parts of PSU's mission and goals.

University-wide Responsibilities

We urge Portland State to assume a university-wide commitment to improving the quality of writing instruction. This commitment should include fulfillment of the promise of University Studies in relation to writing, assessment of writing for formative purposes, expansion of the Writing Center, establishment of a Writing-across-the-Curriculum program that includes more faculty development in writing, and investing strategically in select writing courses that address the needs of both native and non-native speakers of English.

Recommendation 2: If University Studies continues to receive funding for and assume responsibility for writing instruction, it must be held responsible for effective faculty practices and student learning outcomes.

University Studies has practices and goals that portend well for student writing. The addition of a Writing Coordinator, a position currently ably held by Dr. Annie Knepler, has yielded a mentorship program for a core group of faculty who know effective pedagogies for writing. Interim University Studies director Dr. Yves Labissiere acknowledges the need to build further faculty capacity for teaching writing so that responsibility does not lie only with English faculty. He asserts that all faculty members need to take ownership of the goal of writing instruction and that UNST must be vigilant about fulfilling its responsibility in this area: intentions here are strong. In addition, the potential adoption of eportfolios across the campus offers opportunities for more coordinated teaching and learning of writing within University Studies and in all departments in the university. Labissiere hopes that the fall 2014 adoption of a technology platform and the establishment of the University Writing Committee will propel the campus to development of an eportfolio program that fosters the habits of mind in the Framework mentioned earlier in this report.

University Studies, however, is currently not putting the emphasis on writing that it was expected to provide. Under its "Communication" goal, UNST states that: "Students will enhance their capacity to communicate in various ways—writing, graphics, numeracy, and other visual and oral means—to collaborate effectively with others in group work, and to be competent in

appropriate communication technologies.” For those faculty members whose history dates back to the founding of UNST, this modest emphasis on teaching writing represents an unfulfilled promise. When funding shifted from composition courses to UNST, a university-wide writing requirement was eliminated with the promise that UNST would fulfill that same learning outcome. However, a series of events, including changes in leadership, establishment of other important goals and outcomes, and a lack of funding, derailed UNST’s emphasis on teaching writing. FRINQ and SINQ, for example, have multiple purposes and for the most part insufficiently attend to the teaching of writing. Moreover, faculty members report that junior clusters and capstones have particular challenges. Faculty members outside UNST who teach in junior clusters are sometimes not prepared to teach the disciplinary conventions of writing in their disciplines. Students come into capstones with wildly varied writing experience and ability. Some capstone instructors use rubrics so that students understand expectations; others just use checkmarks to respond to writing. Commitment to providing initial instruction and helpful feedback is strong with some faculty and weak with others. UNST needs to have clear expectations of faculty, provide faculty development, and rehire only faculty members who meet these expectations.

Recommendation 3: Portland State should assess writing of incoming freshmen, writing of transfer students, and writing in departmental clusters and capstones.

We are convinced that a vital first step for Portland State is to make a budgetary investment in assessing student writing across campus. By “writing assessment” we are not calling for a focus on accountability but rather on a formative indication of readiness and ability. Faculty members and administrators across the campus indicated the inadequacy of the current web-based initial writing placement system. In its place, they supported a new system that would more accurately place all students into writing courses that would be most suitable for their further development as writers, wherever those courses would be situated. In addition, transfer students need a way to indicate their readiness to enter into their majors and the UNST stream of courses, including the first two years of classes, the junior clusters, and the capstones. Given the diversity of students who enroll in PSU (first-year, transfers, ESL), writing placement would need to be supple and almost certainly reconfigured for different populations: first-semester freshmen might be evaluated holistically or with a much-improved self-directed placement system; ESL students might need TOEFL/IELTS plus a one-on-one analysis; transfer students might need to produce course syllabi (or PSU-accepted articulation) and/or portfolios.

Whatever method(s) chosen, the institution needs a meaningful, accurate formative assessment of writing ability. Seniors in UNST (since this curriculum is common to all seniors) need a robust exit indicator, adding to the current group of written products from classes student-selected pieces and a reflective piece of writing so that the communication goal can be better represented. UNST has teams of faculty members who develop rubrics within curricular themes, and some schools have assessment directors to lead practices in their schools; but the addition of eportfolios for all students with a range of writing chosen by students and responded to by faculty would signal students’ self-efficacy regarding writing ability. Those are some among many potential ways that assessing student writing could add to the fullness and quality of writing instruction at PSU.

Although these assessments are not primarily for accountability, they will contribute to PSU's recognition as a campus that understands the value of assessment. For example, Kathi Ketchison noted that University Studies is "a bright spot on campus, setting the gold standard for learning goals and assessment," its practices having been recognized during regional accreditation. Positions like Rowanna Carpenter's in UNST (as the director of assessment and upper division clusters) make effective assessments more easily developed because the expertise and coordination necessary for this effort already reside on campus.

Recommendation 4: The University Writing Committee and the Academic Leadership Team can provide significant leadership in improving writing instruction at Portland State by structuring interaction on a regular basis.

Fortuitously we thought, the Faculty Senate approved on our first day on campus an amendment to the Constitution of the Portland State University Faculty." This Amendment created a new Constitutional Committee, the University Writing Committee, which has seven responsibilities:

1. Make recommendations to the Dean, Provost, and Faculty Senate on such matters as writing placement, guidelines, and staffing for teaching writing in UNST, WIC, and composition courses.
2. Offer recommendations for improving writing instruction across the university.
3. Initiate assessment of the teaching and learning of writing at PSU.
4. Support training of faculty, mentors, and WIC Assistants teaching writing.
5. Advise on budgeting writing instruction.
6. Act in liaison with appropriate committees.
7. Report at least once a year to the Senate, outlining committee activities.

This very positive step offers wonderful opportunities to Portland State for campus-wide activity to improve writing instruction. During our visit, faculty members and administrators alike found renewed hope for collaboration and innovation through this important university committee. Although budget realities present daunting challenges, improving writing instruction will be worth the efforts of faculty and administrators.

Just as faculty members have a university-wide committee looking not at their individual units but the welfare of the entire campus, Provost Sona Andres described an Academic Leadership Team whose members represent not their own schools but the university at large. Coordinated efforts of the University Writing Committee and the Academic Leadership Team could make a real difference in PSU's commitment to writing excellence among its students.

A whole series of questions could be asked by the University Writing Committee in tandem with the Academic Leadership Team with the goal of generating a vision of improvement of writing instruction. This vision must be based on structural, budgetary, and curricular realities, not on wishful thinking or a desire to turn the clock back twenty years. Some key questions could include: What is the institutional commitment to improving student writing? How can PSU best achieve these results given issues of retention, non-native speakers of English, and transfer students? How can a productive synergy be established between the teaching of writing in other departments and UNST? To what extent is the English Department willing and able to reshape its faculty and curriculum, develop writing portfolios for students, and/or develop and staff one

or two required composition courses for all undergraduates? How can PSU gain a realistic understanding of its current needs and practices in relation to writing?

We recommend three immediate steps to begin to answer these and other questions about writing at PSU.

Recommendation 5: Portland State should develop a Writing Inventory to determine current expectations, practices, and outcomes on campus. This Inventory is descriptive, not evaluative.

We think Portland State needs to allocate resources so that an appropriate faculty committee (not the director of composition) can complete a Writing Inventory. The Inventory, administered in the upcoming winter or spring quarter after items are formulated and the Inventory is beta-tested, could ask faculty members about student writing and their own pedagogical practices. Items might include:

- For each course that you teach regularly, list the regular kinds and numbers of assigned writing, such as papers, lab reports, correspondence, e-mail, grant proposals, journal articles, fiction, poetry, etc.
- List beside each type of writing the teaching techniques you find most productive for students, for example analysis of writing in my discipline for modeling of conventions, in-class time to draft, referral to the Writing Center, analysis of audiences for their writing, help with sentence structure and punctuation, sharing of my own writing, grading and commenting on final drafts only, etc.
- List beside each type of writing the way(s) that you respond to drafts and/or the final written product, such as comments on drafts, references to a rubric shared with students, peer reviewing in class, on-line responses to questions from students, sending students to the Writing Center, etc.

If constructed well, the Inventory can provide a rich description of the current state of writing instruction on campus. With technology that offers ease of responding, such as possible lists of items from which to choose with open-ended offerings as well, faculty can take a reasonable amount of time to do their descriptions. The provost, deans, and department chairs need to strongly support such involvement, and a description of the means for sharing the results campus-wide should be given before the Inventory is administered. Faculty members do not need to be identified by name in the subsequent report if that possibility insures full faculty participation. This description, used in campus-wide discussion, offers a reasonable starting place for pedagogical reform.

Recommendation 6: Because faculty members need to understand and use the Writing Center in more ways, the Writing Center needs more space and staffing and better ways to share goals and expertise.

If writing is to succeed in the ways we are describing, PSU needs a strong and vital Writing Center that supports students and faculty across the campus. The Writing Center can be a campus resource for strong and weak writers alike and a facility that supports researchers writing grants and proposals and faculty working on books and articles. Such a campus resource offers workshops that help faculty members craft better assignments, build better web pages, and respond more effectively to student writing. It offers workshops that help students develop ways to overcome fears of the blank page, engage in productive research, and integrate sources effectively into their writing. It supports students and teachers in composition classes and faculty and students across campus who are learning to write effectively in their own disciplines by providing expert and peer review. This vision of Writing Centers is supported by universities across the country, published research, and the International Writing Center Association <<http://writingcenters.org/>>.

Unfortunately Writing Centers are often regarded by faculty unfamiliar with them as places for remediation. PSU is no exception: asked about sending students to the Writing Center, many faculty members indicated that they sent students with major problems. The Writing Center's new website will broadcast more widely the variety of questions that it addresses, from analysis of audience to building an argument in a particular discipline; but the Writing Center needs other means of alerting faculty members to its capacities. The Center could issue a regular newsletter about the kinds of assignments it is seeing, the questions students bring, literature about writing in different disciplines, and/or particularly strong writing that it sees. The Center could send online after each visit a very short description of the work that a student did there, of course with student permission. More faculty members could be invited to GA meetings, getting them physically into the Center and interacting with the Center staff members who will be helping their students.

Physical capacity is essential for an effective Writing Center. PSU's Center is crowded and swamped much of the time as students fill the room. An auxiliary site consisting of one desk in the library offers marginal help but does not alleviate the waiting lines and the need to turn students away. Students with whom we met complained that they have often been unable to get the help they desire. Furthermore, giving the Writing Center a windowless room in an over-crowded space hardly signals that it is a vital campus resource

Writing Center administration is a professional field, with scholarship in philosophy, learning theory, research methodologies, and instructional practices. An energetic professional director whose publishing research field is Writing Center scholarship and who has an attachment to his or her greater professional community can invigorate the Center in multiple ways. Without a robust Center, writing improvement across the disciplines will wither since faculty across campus will not have access to one-on-one tutorial support their students will need, especially if a campus-wide Writing Across the Curriculum program is initiated.

Recommendation 7: Portland State needs to create a new Writing-across-the-Curriculum program with a Director of Writing-across-the-Curriculum who provides the leadership and coordination needed for high quality and thorough writing instruction at Portland State.

A report about PSU published in a national journal in Fall, 2013 (“When the Writing Requirements Went Away: An Institutional Case Study of Twenty Years of Decentralization/Abolition” (*WPA Journal*, 37.1, Fall, 2013, 54-800) includes startling statistics.

Faculty surveys revealed a pervasive dissatisfaction with student writing abilities. While faculty are notoriously disgruntled about student writing at almost every institution, a startling 94.3% of respondents said they were moderately, somewhat, or not at all satisfied with their students’ writing abilities, and 95.3% said that their students’ educations had given them only moderately, somewhat, or not at all adequate writing preparation. In the eyes of faculty, the problem resided largely with the curriculum: 30.6% of respondents said they were “not at all” satisfied with writing instruction at the university, and not a single faculty respondent indicated that she was “extremely” satisfied with the writing instruction her students were receiving. (67)

Hildy Miller, chairperson of the English Department, expressed the views of many when she commented: “overly decentralized writing became an exercise in abolition.” The WIC program was an attempt to alleviate this decentralization of writing instruction, at least within CLAS, by establishing Writing Intensive classes supported by faculty development workshops and trained Graduate Assistants. By all accounts this program was both modest and successful (see http://www.writingprogram.pdx.edu/wic/wic_tips.html). During our visit faculty members and administrators alike lamented the diminution (some said the demise) of the WIC program, as a result of defunding the Graduate Assistant component (a component, we would add, that partly compensated for inadequacies of the Writing Center). The innovative mentoring included in that program promoted faculty development and drew attention to effective pedagogies. Students did more writing and integrated more easily the lessons about writing in one class to those in another.

The WIC program, established by Duncan Carter in the 1990s, was part of a national effort known variously as Writing Intensive, Writing Enrichment, Writing in the Disciplines, or Writing Across the Curriculum. Writing-Across-the-Curriculum is a field in itself, with an extensive faculty network that includes research and published scholarship about goals, practices, and outcomes. A WAC specialist could be hired with a faculty appointment, usually but not necessarily in the English Department. The faculty hire can best report to someone in the Provost’s office since WAC is a campus-wide responsibility. This faculty line would be added to the department in which the person resides, not taking a current or promised line. Although an immediate concern will be funding, the campus needs to reallocate if necessary to fund such a position. One possible source of funding could be the Provost’s Initiative.

A WAC director who works closely with the Office for Academic Innovation and integrates WAC work within UNST and the majors would accelerate PSU’s advances in writing instruction and learning. For example, faculty members across disciplines who wish to do research about writing in their disciplines would have help in research methodologies and publication outlets. Faculty members untrained in graduate school in identifying writing conventions in their disciplines that need teaching would get help in developing instructional strategies. And, faculty members could work across disciplines, examining student writing in order to help students transfer knowledge from one discipline to another.

WAC thrives when departmental faculty members take on a mentorship role, helping their undergraduate majors master disciplinary constraints, teaching them how to write as part of a scholarly conversation. For this to occur successfully, faculty members who have little or no experience teaching writing must learn basic principles and practices in funded faculty workshops. Courses must be supported with low enrollment caps and either graduate assistant or Writing Center support. New courses must be developed; older courses must be continuously refreshed and assessed. Strongly as we support a major WAC effort, especially at a school like PSU with its urban setting and transfer student population, it should be initiated with eyes open concerning the commitment necessary to make it work long-term. WAC requires consistent budgeting, successive faculty development, a supple infrastructure, and a leadership team with strong credibility at every level of the institution.

Recommendation 8: Placement into required writing courses and credit for prior learning must be done accurately.

The following writing requirement was put into place in 2012:

<http://www.pdx.edu/advising/writing-requirement>. Its description follows:

Beginning Fall 2012, students must complete 2 college-level composition courses or their approved equivalents for their baccalaureate degree requirements. This requirement may be satisfied in one of the following ways:

- Students admitted to PSU as freshmen (0-29 credits) meet the requirement by completing the first two years of University Studies or University Honors (both approved equivalents of composition courses);
- Students admitted to PSU having earned 30-89 credits meet the requirement with WR 121 (required for transfer admission) and the requisite number of Sophomore Inquiry courses determined by [placement](#) into University Studies or University Honors. (The WR 121 requirement may also be satisfied by passing the [WR 121 Challenge exam](#) which exempts students from the course);
- Students admitted having earned 90 or more credits have four options for meeting the requirement:
 - Transfer into PSU with an approved equivalent of WR 121 plus one approved composition course for which WR 121 (or it's approved equivalent) is a pre-requisite;
 - Transfer into PSU with two approved composition courses for which WR 121 (or its approved equivalent) is a pre-requisite;
 - Complete WR 121 plus an additional course from the following PSU course list: WR 200, 211, 222, 227, 300, 323, 324, 327, 333, 394, 400, 420 or a 4-credit [Writing Intensive Course \(WIC\)](#) course. Composition writing courses transferred into PSU may also be considered.
 - Complete any two courses from the above PSU list. (The [Challenge exams](#) for WR 121 and WR 323 may also be used to satisfy the requirement)

This requirement places a significant burden on and makes assumptions about UNST (and Honors) at both freshman and sophomore levels. It assumes that WIC is alive and well, which it

is not. It assumes that placement is effective and that WR 115 and 121 are taught in structured and consistent ways across all sections. It assumes that all students will benefit from a range of WR courses across multiple levels regardless of student ability and preparation. It assumes that the Challenge exams can be administered effectively and produce fair and consistent results. These assumptions are only that: in fact, many faculty members, including those within University Studies, openly assert that few or none of these assumptions is accurate.

If effective writing is to become a significant learning outcome for PSU students, placement procedures must be improved. By all accounts, the current placement system is placement in name only. According to PSU's own web information:

Entering freshmen are expected to complete a web-based writing placement questionnaire prior to attending their Orientation: Advising & Registration session. This module includes a short self-paced writing task and a questionnaire. Students are encouraged to take as much time as needed to complete the writing task, and are welcome to do it in more than one sitting. The questionnaire should take students approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. < <http://www.pdx.edu/advising/placement>>

Although self-directed placement (SDP) can be very effective, it cannot be accomplished without significant resources especially including the development of explicit writing criteria and of well-trained advisers who can assess writing and consult with students to be sure they place themselves in appropriate classes (see, for example, "Local Assessment: Using Genre Analysis to Validate Directed Self-Placement" by Anne Ruggles Gere et al., CCC, June, 2013). As this article makes clear,

Establishing the validity of a given assessment, then, requires what Michael T. Kane calls interpretive and validity arguments. The interpretive argument explains "the network of inferences and assumptions leading from the observed performances to the conclusions and decisions based on the performances" (23), and the validity argument evaluates the interpretive argument. In the case of writing placement, interpretive and validity arguments lead, via complex analysis, to an articulation of the positive and negative consequences of placement decisions. (606)

PSU's current web-based placement system lacks interpretive and validity efficacy, and from what faculty told us students basically place themselves according to their own interests and desires.

Appropriate placement into writing courses is no easy matter, whether a university adopts standardized test scores, essay exams, TOEFEL or IELTS scores, writing portfolios, norm-referenced multiple choice tests, holistic assessment, or a combination thereof. Allowing entering students to choose their own placement can only be done effectively when students are fully aware of their own strengths, weaknesses, and likelihood to succeed.

PSU has a significant opportunity to strengthen its placement procedures given that it is the pilot site for a statewide initiative for Credit for Prior and Concurrent Learning, with seed money from the Provost and (let's hope) state funding to follow. Associate Dean Shelley Chabon posits that evaluating learning could be through writing and would like more people from writing to help with development of the Credit process. With Annie Knepler, Susan Kirtley, and Kendall Leon as active members, the total of 64 faculty, staff, and students would have expert help. This work can help in what Dean Chabon calls "the centrality of writing" for students.

English Department Responsibilities

Recommendation 9: The English Department needs to hire more faculty members with expertise in Rhetoric and Composition.

That there is no faculty member with expertise in writing available to be a Primary Collaborator on the Credit for Prior and Concurrent Learning Taskforce led by Dean Chabon underscores the need to hire more Rhet/Comp faculty within English. Susan Kirtley is already overwhelmed with teaching and administrative responsibilities, Hildy Miller is chairing English, and Kendall Leon is new and just starting toward tenure and promotion. Given the interest of the PSU faculty and the associate dean (and possibly the new dean within CLAS) to move forward writing initiatives, more Rhet/Comp personnel are needed. In addition, rhetoric and composition is a scholarly field that warrants a significant place in the research base of an English Department.

According to the English Department's own 2013-14 "Review of the English Department," ambitious plans are in place to strengthen and develop initiatives in many areas including film, social justice, visual narrative, and new media. The Department also needs to hire someone to support Per Henningsgaard's publishing work and to teach creative writing. If, however, English is to have a scholarly base in the range of research in rhetoric and composition and to serve students and faculty across the campus, more hiring in Rhetoric and Composition is necessary. Some of these hires could be fixed-term M.A. or ABD lecturers with both practical and graduate course work in Rhet/Comp. Some, such as the WAC director and disciplinary experts, must be tenure-track faculty members, although not all have to be hired within English (some schools can offer a tenured-position outside the normal departmental structure). Even under current conditions, we emphasize, the department is understaffed: As Director of Rhetoric and Composition, Susan Kirtley is overwhelmed with responsibilities and cannot be expected to do her scholarly work and to fulfill all the obligations that come with her office, let alone the ones we are recommending with this report. Aside from building and maintaining UG and MA concentrations or majors in writing and rhetoric, more faculty are needed to engage in faculty development across campus, to serve on essential writing-related committees, to strengthen and oversee the current array of writing courses, to ensure the ongoing quality of the WR writing sequence, to partner across campus and across the community to strengthen writing. The needs are great and the faculty, currently, are few.

Recommendation 10: The English Department needs to hire or appoint additional administrative support for the Director of Rhetoric and Composition/Writing Intensive Courses Coordinator.

Regardless of the fate of the WI courses, the Rhetoric and Composition Director needs support to manage effectively the current array of courses, train the GAs, and ensure that quality is maintained among all the writing courses. An Assistant or Associate Director, even at 50%, (this individual could be fixed-term) could handle many day-to-day operational duties. New

instructors need trained and experienced mentors, especially since few of them will work for more than two years; the director needs more secretarial support to assist with syllabi, the writing of reports, webpage development, and phone and email correspondence. Given the array of writing courses, the two-year terms of the GAs, the continuous necessity to hire and train, coordination with UNST, and increasing responsibilities campus-wide, additional support for the director is urgently needed. This is especially crucial in the case of Susan Kirtley who is an active scholar and developing a comic art/graphic narrative curricular strand.

Recommendation 11: The English Department should develop shared learning outcomes and means of assessing them in WR 121, 222, 323.

We applaud the efforts of the composition faculty in developing writing courses that fill in some of the gaps left with the elimination of first-year composition and the inability of UNST to fulfill the pledge made on its behalf to teach writing to entering students. Although we were able to visit only one class, the students were positive about their experience in that section with that instructor, but many had less positive comments about their other WR courses, which they felt did not help them improve their writing.

WR 121, 222, and 323 offer a variety of approaches to teaching writing, with their varied emphases on rhetorical strategies, writing processes, research, and critical thinking. However, if PSU is committed to a structured writing program, especially a WAC/WIC/WID program, the writing courses that support this effort must be more organized and coherent in terms of curriculum and outcomes. Granted, no single course, especially on the quarter system, can do more than begin to address writing issues, but all students in all sections of the same course should receive work toward common writing outcomes with appropriate pedagogies in order to lay a foundation for future work. During our visit, faculty repeatedly stated that students who entered PSU as transfers had better writing training than those students who matriculated as freshmen at PSU. This perception indicates that community college writing courses are more effective than FRINQ, SINQ, and presumably the WR sequence. If accurate, this perception is not surprising: FRINQ and SINQ pay insufficient attention to writing, and the WR sequence is taught primarily by first- and second-year graduate students who create their own methodologies in an attempt to achieve shared curricular goals. As indicated in the self-study, “since we [PSU] do not have a centralized writing program, it is difficult to talk about typical activities or materials” in the writing sequence. Although GAs receive teacher training in two two-credit practicums typically taught by the director, instructors report considerable freedom to teach what they want in ways they choose.

WR courses could benefit from the kind of attention that can only come from more faculty/staff support than the current director, in spite of her very best efforts, can offer. As the self-study indicated:

There are approximately thirty three sections of WR 115, WR 121, WR 222, & WR 323 per term, with approximately fifteen sections of additional composition and rhetoric classes. We thus work with around 3600 students per year through our composition courses. Twelve GTAs teach and three GTAs work in the Writing Center Each term.

There are approximately twenty adjuncts each term, around sixty classes per year are taught by adjuncts.

This is a significant burden for any director. As programmatic support for composition is increased, it makes sense for new instructors to teach more consistently across sections during their first semester. Much as graduate student instructors love the freedom to create their own reading and assignments, more consistency is needed if UG students are to proceed in a coherent way through a sequence of courses that build on each other, which presumably is what the WR sequence deems to offer. Moreover, students enrolled in different sections of the same course are entitled to receive similar grades for similar work.

Instructors could collaboratively develop shared syllabi that map out a set of assignments and reading/writing experiences that move students toward increasing competency. Other initiatives that support both consistency and innovation could be put into place. We can imagine a vigorous classroom observation program with GAs receiving feedback from faculty trained in composition. We can imagine a dedicated mentor system to consult with new instructors on how best to respond to student writing. We can imagine a portfolio review system: Instructors evaluating essays or portfolios from sections other than their own can be highly useful in creating and implementing shared standards. We can imagine a Humanities-oriented writing course required of entering freshmen and transfer students taken in conjunction with FRINQ or SINQ. Whatever paths are adopted, the WR courses need to be strengthened across sections and assessed so that the institution has confidence that they are performing as needed.

Although the English Department is not exclusively responsible for two other challenges in writing instruction, it can contribute to addressing the challenges. One major challenge of the writing curriculum is ESL/Generation 1.5/transfer students. Our impression of the IEP staff persons with whom we met was that the IEP group is hard working and dedicated to working with all ESL admits. For example, someone from IEP meets with new GAs regularly during Writing Center staff meetings. Unfortunately, the consensus from the IEP group itself was that “ESL students are not receiving the instruction they need.” Learning to speak fluently in another language is challenging; learning to write in another language is much more difficult, given that it demands a second level of abstraction. One possible answer is to develop ESL faculty workshops attended by both disciplinary faculty members, including English, and IEP instructors so that all PSU faculty members can become better equipped to respond productively to ESL student writing. For example, faculty members might be encouraged to spend less time on preposition, grammar, usage, and idiom problems and more time on global concerns such as coherence, fluency, organization, argument, and the use of sources. Needless to say, a strengthened Writing Center with more staff specifically trained in ESL work would also be a major improvement.

The transfer student issue is another major challenge. As we were told repeatedly, most graduates of PSU are transfers, and many arrive at the 300/400 level. Although a composition course at the junior/senior level (like WR 323, which usefully focuses on critical thinking and writing) can be useful as an elective, a better way to address this challenge is through a campus-wide WAC/WIC/WID initiative, because junior and senior students—and their faculty—are most dedicated to working within the major, which is where WAC optimally performs. The English Department itself can be more systematic in writing expectations across its curricula. One PSU faculty member said: “A really strong WAC program would be a great help to UNST.” We would add “and to the English Department.” Given the curricular innovation and

academic culture that has developed at PSU over the last twenty years, instituting a strong WAC program is a logical next step.

Recommendation 12: The English Department should develop more online or hybrid writing courses including courses that incorporate media and digital components.

We were surprised during our visit by the scant use of hybrid or online instruction and the lack of online, digital instruction and media in writing classes. Given national and international trends, it is not surprising that online and digital instruction is now widely employed in composition classes. Students are highly conversant with digital media, from smart phones to web-based instructional resources to MOOCs, Pinterest, Tweets, and Ted Talks. CCCC is developing “Guidelines for Online Writing Instruction” (co-chaired by Beth Hewett and Scott Warnock), and hybrid and online writing instruction are increasingly an important component in writing programs, especially at urban universities like PSU, where access and parking are often critical problems.

Although only one faculty member directs the writing program and some GAs find D2L cumbersome and ineffective, the addition of a rhetoric and composition faculty conversant in hybrid and online instruction and even doing research on the topic, and concentrated adaption of D2L into an effective online delivery system for composition would bring PSU more into 21st century pedagogies. This kind of teaching is not an add-on to a conventional classroom; it requires a holistic rethinking of what it means to teach writing.

Both the Writing Program and the Writing Center should move as speedily as possible to adopt more hybrid and online pedagogies and include more new media into course readings and writings. This move forward will help students more readily accept writing courses and make productive use of writing instruction. Certainly many students on and off campus will benefit from hybrid and online course/instructor/Writing Center tutor availability. On the Masters level, for the sake of educating GAs who plan to attend Ph.D. programs where digital web-based platforms and media are standard features of writing curricula, PSU should move in this direction. Although the Writing Center did pilot online instruction briefly with little success, expertise in this instruction is readily available in the literature about pedagogy in Writing Centers and in many disciplines. CCCC, the Council of Writing Program Administrators, and the International Writing Centers Association are pertinent sources. If developed thoughtfully and implemented carefully, online tutoring will be of great benefit to both students and instructors. If the composition courses at PSU are to engage students and prepare them for future work and productivity in whatever fields/pursuits they choose, online instruction and media inclusion in the curricula are important next steps.

Conclusion:

Portland State University has a national reputation as an innovative, pioneering, respected university. Much of that reputation comes from UNST and from the Civic Engagement initiative. Even a cursory sampling of websites points to significant resources that have gone into developing these two programs. With UNST and Civic Engagement highlighted by the university, writing instruction must develop its own momentum within those settings and beyond

in departments across the campus, including English, in order to shape the Portland State of the future. To that end, we have offered in this report recommendations that require altering current practice; initiating new concentrations of time, budget, and faculty; and expanding the commitment of faculty and the institution to the writing experiences necessary for students to succeed as citizens, workers, and persons. We are convinced that these investments will benefit students, faculty members, and the institution.

Summary of Recommendations

University-wide Responsibilities

Recommendation 1: Portland State University should include in its mission statement an explicit commitment to writing as a means of learning and representing learning.

Recommendation 2: If University Studies continues to receive funding for and assume responsibility for writing instruction, it must be held responsible for effective faculty practices and student learning outcomes.

Recommendation 3: Portland State University should assess writing of incoming freshmen, writing of transfer students, and writing in departmental clusters and capstones.

Recommendation 4: The University Writing Committee and the Academic Leadership Team can provide significant leadership in improving writing instruction at Portland State University by structuring interaction on a regular basis.

Recommendation 5: Portland State University should develop a Writing Inventory to determine current expectations, practices, and outcomes on campus. This Inventory is descriptive, not evaluative.

Recommendation 6: Because faculty members need to understand and use the Writing Center in more ways, the Writing Center needs more space and staffing and better ways to share goals and expertise.

Recommendation 7: Portland State University needs to create a new Writing-across-the-Curriculum program with a Director of Writing-across-the-Curriculum who provides the leadership and coordination needed for high quality and thorough writing instruction.

Recommendation 8: Placement into required writing courses and credit for prior learning must be done accurately.

English Department Responsibilities

Recommendation 9: The English Department needs to hire more faculty members with expertise in Rhetoric and Composition in the English department.

Recommendation 10: The English Department should hire or appoint additional administrative support for the Director of Rhetoric and Composition/Writing Intensive Courses Coordinator.

Recommendation 11: The English Department needs to develop shared learning outcomes and means of assessing them in WR 121, 222, 323.

Recommendation 12: By developing more online or hybrid writing courses including courses that incorporate media and digital components, the English Department will vitalize and extends its offerings for students.

ATTACHMENTS

A number of PSU faculty and departmental documents and proposals to the Faculty Senate reveal some of the history that we have drawn upon to make our recommendations. Three of the relevant documents serve as attachments to this report and are included with this email.

ATTACHMENT A: A Comprehensive Plan to Improve Student Performance in Writing at Portland State University (1999)

ATTACHMENT B: Memo to Faculty Senate (2009)

ATTACHMENT C: Review of the English Department (2013-14)

Itinerary for Portland State University Writing Curriculum External Review

External Reviewers:

Dr. Charles Schuster, Professor of English and Director of Honor College, UW-Milwaukee

Dr. Barbara Cambridge, Professor of English Emerita, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, and Director, Washington Office, National Council of Teachers of English

WPA Consultant Service Visit

Sunday, June 1st

6pm Dinner at Higgins restaurant with Bob Liebman, Susan Kirtley, Kendall Leon, and Dan DeWeese
1239 SW Broadway, Portland, OR 97205 (reservation under Susan Kirtley)

Monday, June 2nd

8-8:45am Breakfast at Nel Centro with Susan Kirtley and IELP faculty
1408 SW 6th Ave, Portland, OR 97201 (reservation under Susan Kirtley)

9-10 am Meet Anne Knepler, Ph.D., UNST Writing Coordinator, Interim Co-Director UNST Mentor Program, 117C Cramer Hall

10-10:15 am Short Break

10:15-11 am Tour Writing Center with Dan DeWeese, 188 Cramer Hall

11-11:45 am Meet with Dean Beatty, 341 Cramer Hall

11:45-12:45 Lunch with Rhet/Comp committee, location TBA

1-1:45 pm Meet with Provost Sona Andrews, Market Center Building, Suite 650

1:45-2 pm Short Break

2-3 pm Meet with Professor Hildy Miller, Chair of English, Neuberger Hall, Neuberger 405C

3-4 pm Meet with Duncan Carter and Greg Jacob, Professors Emeritus, and George Karnezis, NH 407

4pm Walking tour with Jarrod Dunham, Graduate Teaching Associate

4:40- Visit Zeke Fry's WR 323 class, Science & Education Center 163

Dinner on our own

Tuesday, June 3rd

- 9-10 am Visit GA Seminar in NH 407
- 10-10:45 am Meet with Prof. Yves Labissiere, Director of UNST, Cramer Hall 117
- 11-11:30 am Meet with interested faculty/break, NH 407
- 11:30-12 pm Meet Kathi Ketcheson in NH 407
- 12-1pm Lunch with University Writing Committee, location TBA
- 1:15-2 pm Meet with UNST faculty and mentors, 117C Cramer Hall
- 2-2:30 pm Meet with Associate Dean Shelly Chabon, 341 Cramer Hall
- 2:30-3pm Coffee with interested faculty, including WIC faculty, NH 407
- 3-4pm Meet with Ann Marie Fallon, Director of Honors Program, NH 407
- 4-5 Exit interview with Susan, Hildy, and others, NH 407
- 5:00-9:00 Dinner on our own and planning/writing time

Wednesday, June 4th

Departure from Portland State University

Updated 5/28/14