

Writing Programs Outside the English Department: an Assessment of a Five-Year Program

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In 1982, the School of Forestry and Wildlife Resources at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University began a Writing Improvement Program (WIP) for all majors. A writing consultant was hired from the English Department and certain key courses were designated as WIP courses. As the program now stands, students write papers which are screened by the writing consultant for problems in organization, word choice, and mechanics. Papers which pass the screening are considered competent and can be submitted to the course instructor for grading. Personal conferences with the writing consultant are required for those students whose papers do not pass this initial screening. The students then get the chance to rewrite their papers before handing them in for a grade.

One of the initial beliefs about this program was that the writing consultant would eventually work her way out of a job. We stressed the importance of professors working toward "improving student writing in their own classes" (Wellman and McMullen 416). We wanted emphasis placed on writing as a tool for teaching. With this in mind, the writing consultant conducted faculty workshops on effective paper assignments and on grading for writing and content. The paper assignments are given by the course instructor, not the writing consultant, and the final grade is assigned by the instructor for a whole piece of communication.

Five years and hundreds of papers later, the WIP is still going strong. Although satisfied that we had reached some of the goals for this program, we felt it was time to answer the question we are often asked: Does a writing program outside the English Department work? In a broader sense, we were asking the same question that writing across the curriculum programs have been asking for years. Although our program is not part of a university-wide WAC program, it does incorporate two of the elements C. W. Griffin found in most such programs: faculty workshops on evaluating student writing and writing intensive courses (402). The WIP could be a step toward a larger, cross-curricular writing program since it emphasizes what Griffin, Toby Fulwiler, Janet Emig, William Irmscher and others see as a major premise of WAC: writing is a tool for learnings.

The Writing Program Survey

In 1988, we surveyed graduates of the School during the first five years the WIP had been in place. We asked them twenty-three questions which emphasized two broad areas: 1) How much and what kinds of writing did they do at work? and 2) Did the WIP make them more competent and effective writers? We also asked for suggestions on ways to improve the program, and, finally, for written general comments about the program.

We identified 386 graduates since initiation of the writing program. Of the 386 surveys we sent out, 55 were returned because of bad addresses, leaving 331 potential respondents in our survey. With several follow-up mailings, we received 217 completed questionnaires, for a final response rate of 66%. A telephone non-response check indicated that most of those who failed to respond did not live at the address listed.

The first section of the survey focused on the kinds and amount of writing done on the job. The choices for kinds of writing were memos, letters, short reports, long reports, press releases, and other (respondents could check all kinds that applied). Most indicated that they wrote memos (72%), letters (69%), and short reports (68%). Fewer indicated that they wrote long reports (32%) and press releases (12%). These results reinforce the change in emphasis we have already made from long research reports to short critical reports for writing improvement program papers.

One way to "sell" the WIP to students in natural resources is to impress on them the amount of writing they will be required to do on the job in the "real" world, no matter what their major concentration: Wildlife, Fisheries, Forest Products, Forest Management, or Outdoor Recreation. We hoped that the responses to Question #8, "How much of your time on the job do you spend writing?" would support this emphasis on the value of good writing skills. The respondents selected one of the following categories—0%, 10%, 20%, 30%, 40%, 50%, and 51-100%. Results indicate that program graduates are expected to do considerable writing in their work. Over half of the respondents reported spending 20% or more of their work time writing. The breakdown for the time spent writing on the job is as follows:

| Percent of Work Time in Writing | Percent of Respondents |
|---------------------------------|------------------------|
| 0% | 4.6 |
| 10% | 36.4 |
| 20% | 17.5 |
| 30% | 17.5 |

| Percent of Work Time in Writing | Percent of Respondents |
|---------------------------------|------------------------|
| 40% | 8.3 |
| 50% | 9.2 |
| 51-100% | 3.7 |
| no answer | 2.8 |
| | <hr/> 100% |

Additionally, half of the respondents reported reviewing others' writing as part of their work.

The next section of the survey focused on the program itself. We began by asking how many WIP papers the graduates had written while in school. When the program began, we tried to have all students write six WIP papers, primarily in their junior and senior years, and professors whose courses were not in the mandatory program were invited to participate on a voluntary basis. With the university's switch from the quarter system to the semester system in 1988, students write only four papers in their junior and senior years as part of the WIP. However, we are now including a freshman and additional sophomore courses in the program. The model response for number of WIP papers written was 5 papers (17.5%), and 64% of the respondents indicated that they had written 5 or more WIP papers. Given that they put forth substantial effort in the writing program, how do they feel about it? We included a number of questions to measure satisfaction with the program. We first were interested in whether the program helped them during their student days. We found that 62% felt the writing program helped them improve their performance in courses that were not part of the formal program. Next, and more significantly, we wanted to know if they felt the program helped them in their careers after graduation. Fully 88% felt their writing skills were adequate when they started their current job, although only 48% felt the writing program helped them acquire skills necessary to do the writing they do in their job. Our interpretation of these findings is that our graduates generally support the added attention given to writing as a result of the program, but that students who enter the program with adequate skills are not helped much and that class assignments have not adequately reflected job demands.

Since we are always interested in ways of improving the program, the last section of the survey asked for suggestions from those who had been through it. First, we asked about the amount of writing they did in the program. Most were satisfied, but any change should be in the direction of more writing, not less:

| | |
|--------------------|--------------|
| Too Much | 8.8% |
| About Right | 62.7% |
| Too Little | 20.7% |
| No Answer | 7.8% |
| | 100% |

When asked whether the types of writing they did for the program helped prepare them for writing on the job, 52.5% said "yes" and 33.6% said "no." One of the strong themes in the many written comments was that we should pay more attention to brief, business-style writing since that constitutes the bulk of their on-the-job writing.

We also asked the respondents to indicate which aspects of the WIP were most helpful. They could check as many as they wished from among four alternatives:

| | |
|---|------------|
| More attention to writing skills in all your classes | 56% |
| Opportunity for more writing practice | 47% |
| Rewriting papers | 30% |
| Conferences with the writing consultant | 13% |

We wanted to know whether we should emphasize different aspects of the writing process in our program. Respondents were presented the following list and asked to check all that applied:

| | |
|--|------------|
| Mechanics | 40% |
| Organization | 52% |
| Writing for Different Audiences | 51% |
| Effective Word Choice | 48% |
| Research | 22% |
| Rewrites | 14% |

For an overall assessment of the program, we asked: "How helpful do you think the Writing Improvement Program is?" Students responded on a five-point scale ranging from "not at all helpful" to "extremely helpful." Almost 50% of the students felt the WIP was helpful (responses 4 and 5), while only 14% felt it was not helpful (responses 1 and 2). The responses were as follows:

| Not at all Helpful | | | Extremely Helpful | | |
|---------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------------------|--------------|------------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | No Answer |
| 3.2% | 10.6% | 30.0% | 35.0% | 14.3% | 6.9% |

The final question of the survey gave the respondents a chance to write additional general comments about the writing program. A majority (55%) of those who responded to the survey took the time to write personal comments, an indication that the program was highly beneficial to them. Their comments were often lengthy and specific, and the majority were supportive of the program. We learned a great deal about the practical applications of a writing program such as ours from the comments of these graduates. One respondent expressed the feelings of many: "There is more writing in my job than I thought there would be." This point was stressed by another respondent: "In every job I have had since graduation there has been some type of writing involved, either weekly or monthly reports, letters, employee suggestions, memos, or newspaper articles. Any experience forestry students can get in writing will be helpful later on in their careers." Another student praised the idea of "practicing writing skills and writing about forestry rather than just 'English class' writing."

Several noted how much better the program seemed from the perspective of a graduate rather than from that of a student: "It [the WIP program] is well worth the time spent by all; even though the students complain, they all benefit." Another put it a different way: "I hated the program while I was in it, but, like spinach, it was good for me!" Still another respondent stressed how hindsight has made the effort required in the WIP seem worthwhile: "No one enjoys the WIP when involved in it because it does require additional effort; however, any additional effort put into writing will help down the road in one's career."

Many respondents pointed out a direct correlation between the skills they acquired in the WIP and their success on the job. For instance, one respondent wrote: "I appreciate the training received through the WIP. That training helped me obtain my present position. My supervisor has repeatedly told me that one of the deciding factors in choosing me as his assistant was my writing ability." Other respondents had also received praise for their writing skills, as the following response shows: "Keep up the good work. My supervisor has complimented my writing ability many times!" In even stronger words, another respondent said, "Please do not stop this valuable program. The program helped me. The two other supervisors at my job do not write well, so I am one step ahead."

Many of the respondents summed up the overall value of the writing program in words similar to the following: "The WIP's most significant impact was projecting the attitude to students that good writing skills are vital to success and giving them practice and help when it is needed." In a similar vein, one respondent wrote: "Many of my professional counterparts are poor writers and this puts them at a tremendous disadvantage in the professional arena. I don't think you can impress students enough about how important writing skills are." Another respondent gave the program

much credit for his writing skills in graduate school: "As a grad student at the University of Idaho, I was incredibly prepared for the endless research and writing. I have also had many opportunities since graduating from Tech to help others write effectively, including quite a few grad students from other undergrad programs. Most of them were upset that they graduated without being prepared to complete the writing assignments required in graduate school."

Not all the comments were positive, of course. One respondent commented on the early program's emphasis on junior and senior classes: "I thought that the start of the program was less than effective. It was too little too late when I started it in my junior year; it should begin in the freshman or at least sophomore year." As noted above, we have now extended the writing program to all classes.

There were some negative feelings at the beginning of the program about an "outsider" trying to teach forestry students to write. One respondent put it rather strongly: "Let the English department handle writing and composition. I resented the insinuation that I was just another illiterate forester. Basically, I had to take part in writing therapy without a writing problem being diagnosed." Another respondent resented the strain on his grade point average (at Tech, QCA): "After 21 quarter hours in English department classes, I had a QCA of 3.86—One quarter and one paper with Ms. McMullen=2.5. The WIP dilutes an individual's in-major QCA." Echoing this idea, another respondent said, "If you want your foresters to burn/cruise/buy timber/supervise seed planting/communicate with landowners, etc., then you are over-emphasizing the English paper junk."

The English department drew additional criticism from the following respondent: "The existence of such a program [the WIP] exposes two major flaws—the first is that the English department is not doing its job, and the second is that forestry professors and other forestry instructors should be able to grade papers according to English content themselves. I resented having to take time out of my forestry classes to complete 'English assignments.' The Forestry department should not have to play nursemaid and coax the poor writers along. Make the English department recognize their weakness and supply the education necessary." Strong language, but this respondent wasn't alone in his feelings. Any time writing programs move outside of the English department—where many think it belongs—there will be some bad feelings. The following statement from a respondent shows this kind of resentment of the perceived "outsider" stepping in: "If English courses aren't adequate, then pressure should be brought on the English department to upgrade their courses. I did not like having time taken from my forestry classes to rehash English 101."

We received many suggestions for improving the program. Some of these we have already incorporated, such as moving from longer research

papers to short, critical analyses and beginning the program with freshmen forestry students rather than waiting until the junior year. We have also gotten the English department representative out of the grading business. Whereas in the beginning of the WIP, the consultant's "writing style" grade counted for 50% of the final grade, the writing consultant now screens the papers but does not assign a grade. Students generally see this process as one which can lead to a better grade on a paper rather than as a punitive procedure. Respondents suggested the following changes: "increased office hours for writing consultant," "writing more technical reports," "more emphasis on memos and letters," "building on the basics (grammar and punctuation)," impressing new foresters "not to be so wordy in reports and to get to the point quickly," and "forcing students to do as much writing as possible."

Finally, one respondent who graduated the year we began the program and did not take part in it, summed up the feelings of many: "I did not know that forestry students were having a problem with their writing skills. I'm disappointed to know we need this program, but am glad we've got it if it's helping the students."

The Future for the Writing Improvement Program

We feel our survey has provided quantitative and qualitative evidence that the WIP works: almost half of the program graduates indicated that the writing they did for the program prepared them for writing on the job; half felt that the overall WIP was "very" or "extremely" helpful; and the majority of their written comments were supportive. We also have less tangible but just as encouraging indications of the program's effectiveness from student evaluations, from comments by faculty members who have noticed improvements in student writing, and from those in the forest industry who hire our students and appreciate their writing skills.

Looking to the future, are there major changes in our writing program that we should consider? One possible change would be to make it a true Writing Across the Curriculum program. This would mean turning the program over to the professors in the School of Forestry and Wildlife Resources. Catherine Blair (1988) believes that Writing Across the Curriculum programs should not be "housed" in English Departments and that English faculty must give up "ownership of writing" and let "faculty in all disciplines feel free to volunteer to teach writing courses" and to "take a professional interest in writing instruction."

If the writing consultant gives up "ownership" of our writing improvement program, will the forestry faculty be willing and able to assume

responsibility for writing instruction in their courses? Such action might please those who still feel uncomfortable with the idea of an outsider assessing student writing. However, will the focus on good writing skills remain? Will the professors be willing to continue assigning papers as tools for learning if they are the only ones evaluating them? Perhaps the biggest question is whether the professors believe that the time required for teaching through writing will be recognized and rewarded. Some reports are not encouraging. David R. Russell sees the "convenient institutionalized arrangement which places research and specialized professional training above undergraduate teaching" as the greatest obstacle to the success of WAC programs (191). In an assessment of one WAC program, Smithson and Sorrentino found this "obstacle" an almost insurmountable one. They concluded that teachers employing WAC methods "are taking on more than the 'normal' workload," and "pay a high price for the success of writing across the curriculum" (337).

Another option is to keep the program going—as a writing program outside the English department but not a Writing Across the Curriculum program. If we do so, should we make any changes? We received many helpful suggestions for changes from those who took part in the program. They seem to be asking for more, not less: more writing practice, emphasis on different types of writing, and recognition of excellent writing skills rather than merely competent ones. It would be easy to rest on our laurels and keep the program going exactly as it is at the present. The students accept the writing improvement program because they are introduced to it as freshmen. They know which courses are included in the program, and by the time they are seniors, most of them know how to write a paper that will pass the writing consultant's screening. However, we began this program with higher aims: we wanted to graduate students from the School of Forestry who would be recognized as excellent writers.

Our survey demonstrates that students do see the value of good writing skills and the need for practicing these skills in their major courses. We have answered the question of whether emphasis on writing in courses outside of the English department works, at least in the eyes of the "customers." Now it is time to ask the harder questions: 1) Who should teach these skills, English professors or Forestry professors? 2) Why should a Forestry professor spend the time required to evaluate student writing? 3) How do we "reward" good writing and make it an important part of a student's entire college experience—not just something that the English department is responsible for? and 4) How can we encourage good writers to become excellent writers? The changes we have already initiated in the writing improvement program and those we make in the future will work toward answering some of these important questions about writing programs outside the English department.

Notes

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