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# MELLON WRITING PROGRAM REVIEW INITIATIVE

## FINAL REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### MAY 2015

#### **Introduction**

With the generous support of a Mellon Foundation grant, Hendrix College conducted a two-year (2013-2014 and 2014-2015) process of reviewing its writing program, and implementing a pilot of a new foundational writing course (“The Essay”). In support of these activities, a Writing Program Review Committee was established to conduct an overall assessment and evaluation of the Writing Program and to evaluate the Pilot.

The “Essay” Pilot was led by Dr. Pat Hoy, Mellon Visiting Professor of English, who designed the overall pedagogy of the course. Over the two years, we offered 18 sections of “The Essay” taught by instructors from 5 different departments. An external consultant, Dr. Van Hillard (Writing Program Director, Davidson College), provided an evaluation of the pilot.

The Writing Program Review Committee (hereafter, “the Committee”) consisted of faculty members from all three areas of the college (Humanities, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences), including members of the English Department, the current Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Program Committee, and Dr. Hoy as consultant. The Committee’s charge was to “submit a progress report with recommendations for going forward” based on an examination of (1) the current Writing Program; (2) programs at other schools investigated by our current director, Dr. Alice Hines; (3) the Writing Course Pilot; and (4) other models or possibilities as needed.

In its work, the Committee considered data gathered from a number of sources:

- Previous writing program reviews
- Surveys of Hendrix students and faculty
- An external review of the current program conducted by Dr. Hillard
- National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data pertaining to writing
- An external review of “The Essay” Pilot by Dr. Hillard

The Writing Program Review Committee hereby submits this document in completion of its charge.

## Recommendation

While the Committee identified several areas for specific recommendations, and has reached general agreement about some of them, we have not yet generated a plan with sufficient details to present to the College. *The major recommendation, therefore, is that the College reconstitute a new Writing Program Review Committee during the 2015-2016 academic year, whose charge it will be to develop and present a concrete plan for a revised writing program at Hendrix College by the end of the year.*

The following sections should guide the work of this Committee.

### Writing Level 1

It was the consensus of the Committee that the current Writing Level 1 requirement (W1) at Hendrix – a Capacity that can be fulfilled through a number of different courses as well as an exam (initially designed for transfer students) – is not adequately or broadly providing the foundation we believe is necessary for students to meet the writing demands of Hendrix courses above the freshman level. The evidence we have points to a variety of explanations for these inadequacies, but one thing that seems to predominate is that the quality and content of W1 courses is inconsistent for meeting our foundational writing goals.

We conclude that all incoming Hendrix first-year students should be required to enroll in a *Writing Foundations* course, which would ideally be completed during the first year. Possible curricular structures for this course are discussed below—these are the details that must be worked through and turned into a plan next year. In addition, we need to properly identify students who are significantly underprepared to take such a course, so they may receive remedial instruction beforehand, to enable them to succeed (even modestly) in a foundational writing course afterwards. Currently this occurs in ENGL 110, Introduction to Academic Writing.

For the purpose of this document, and as the curricular structure for this Foundations course has multiple possibilities, we will refer to the current requirement as “W1” and the proposals for a revised requirement as “Writing Foundations.”

The Committee reached a fairly strong consensus on the following principles regarding a new Writing Foundations requirement:

1. Foundations courses must be about writing first, no matter what other elements are used around which to structure the delivery of that instruction. Writing assignments as tests of course content, with little instruction about the writing process, do not suffice.
2. For Foundations courses, the College should adopt the W1 pedagogy recently approved by the English Department and validated by the Pilot. This pedagogy will provide the core for all courses/sections.
3. Although W1 courses at Hendrix have typically had enrollments of 15-25 students, all Foundations courses should strive to reduce these enrollments to meet the national standard of 14-16 students (27 sections based on a 15-student average and an entering class of 400).

4. For a college writing program to really succeed, it must penetrate widely across the disciplines and deeply throughout the curriculum. The more faculty members who are invested in the program and familiar with its vocabulary, structures, and standards, the more these elements will inform student writing and instruction beyond writing-specific courses. Therefore, the College needs to create structural means for non-English Department faculty to teach Foundations courses.
5. Ongoing professional development is vital for those who will teach Foundations courses.
6. ENGL 110 should be reconstituted as a remedial course for students who are unprepared to take a Foundations course during their first semester at Hendrix. As such, ENGL 110 cannot fulfill the W1/Writing Foundations “Capacity” requirement.
7. Whatever the eventual curricular structure of the Foundations courses, we should separate the (W1) Writing Capacity credit from the overall course grade (now a “C” or higher awards W1 credit). This is to ensure writing competency is demonstrated separate from the other graded dimensions of the course. As such, the W1 credit would then conform to the Writing Level 2 (W2) process.
8. The College must enforce the original intent for the W1 exam: only junior/senior transfer students who bring writing credit with them should be eligible to take the W1 exam.

#### Writing Foundations Course Curricular Structure

The chief issue of this recommendation is whether the Foundations courses should be used to meet other learning goals and/or Collegiate Center (general education) requirements.

We estimate that roughly 85% of Hendrix students receive both W1 “capacity” credit and Literary Studies (LS) “learning domain” credit from a set of 200-level ENG\* courses categorized as Introduction to Literary Studies (ILS). This combined approach follows a decades-old presumption that entering Hendrix students would not need a first-year writing intensive course—a presumption that the Committee concludes no longer holds true.

Some members of the English faculty find that they cannot effectively teach both W1 and LS in a single course. The notion here is that unlike the other learning domains, such as Social and Behavioral Analyses (SB) or Values, Beliefs, and Ethics (VA), which inform the course methodology but do not constitute the content, LS is content instruction. These English faculty members find that teaching a content-driven literature course is incompatible with a course that is “about writing first.”

One solution might be, then, to insist that Writing Foundations courses must not also be used to meet other learning goals, such as disciplinary (major or minor) or other Collegiate Center requirements (learning domains). Therefore, we should remove W1 from ILS courses. For some students, the effective outcome would appear to add an additional General Education requirement. However, the W1 and LS have always been separate requirements, and while most students have been able to benefit from the “two-for-one” W1/LS courses, many students (around 20%) already take two courses (e.g., ENGL 110, followed by an LS course).

With this solution, we would clearly need to create a new set of W1 courses: Writing Foundations. As previously recommended, these courses would not solely be staffed by permanent English faculty. Another consideration, then, is whether W1 can be taught with learning domain and other requirements other than LS. Obviously a course that accomplishes more than one requirement eases the staffing and graduation challenges. Should this solution, in other words, preclude W1 from joining any other requirement, or just LS?

The related and quite significant pedagogical issue is the degree to which W1 instruction can be tied to disciplinary writing practices. Can a lower-level Philosophy course fulfill a Writing Foundations function? Can it maintain its focus, first and foremost, on writing for a general, educated audience? Or should we instead think about topically-focused Writing Foundations courses, with topics determined by instructors in consultation with the writing program leadership?

Another solution would be to recalibrate ILS courses. The consequence here is that students would graduate from Hendrix without a single course primarily focused on the study of literature and the narrative arts. With this solution we either (a) maintain the status quo in which the English Department bears the responsibility for W1 instruction (with LS occurring in other departments' courses, as secondary to the professor's primary disciplinary concerns and training, as well as in upper-level English courses); or (b) follow the recommendation above "to create structural means for non-English Department faculty to teach Foundations courses."

#### Other Areas for Further Consideration

1. Regardless of any structural changes, writing instruction at Hendrix College needs strong and dedicated leadership to provide training, support, active campus-wide attention, and quality control for the writing program. Thus, the majority of the Committee recommends that the College hire a full-time Writing Program Director. Research and trends in the field indicate that this person ideally would not belong to a particular department (such as English), but would report to the Provost or an Associate Provost for a campus-wide program. There was some discussion as to whether a small leadership team from current faculty could better manage this task.
2. Refocus W2 on public writing. This assumes disciplines are already committed to teaching disciplinary writing. By *public writing* we mean the "content" emerges from the disciplines but is targeted to a general, educated audience.
3. Refocus the entire program from Writing-Across-the-Curriculum (WAC) to public writing, or what Dr. Hillard thinks of as *intellectual writing* (not bound to an academic discourse community). This (1) allows the programs principles and vocabulary to be shared by all disciplines; (2) ensures that "reflective writing" becomes accountable to a general readership; (3) moves the writing program toward professional and vocational communication beyond an exclusive academic community; (4) promotes writing for the digital age.
4. Ensure that the writing instruction occurring in the first-year common course ("The Engaged Citizen") is coordinated with the larger writing program (supervised by the Writing Director).
5. Provide longitudinal student writing assessment mechanisms.

6. Create a structure for student peer-writing mentors who can receive class and/or Odyssey credit.
7. Refocus the Writing Center according to whatever path we take.
8. Produce a version of *Mercer Street*, NYU's annual of student writing. It could be entirely online. Have it included essays from across campus, not just from our writing sequence. This publication will reinforce the idea of public writing; provide models of student writing from across campus; facilitate conversations about writing across campus; and validate individual students.
9. Create a cohort of writing coordinators or ambassadors, one from each academic department.
10. Consider having W1/Foundations instructors trade grading, to reinforce the public nature of writing and to further conversations about writing. Such a portfolio system has failed in the past to receive faculty support, though the generational shift may have created a more amenable climate.
11. Systematize training and ongoing support throughout the College.