

Writing throughout the Auburn University
Experience:
Report and Implementation Plan from the
Writing Initiative Task Force
January-August 2008

Co-Chairs

Sharon R. Roberts

Associate Professor and Undergraduate Program Officer, Department of Biological Sciences
Faculty Fellow, Biggio Center for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning

Marcia L. Boosinger

Associate Dean for Public Services and Head of Reference and Instruction Services
Ralph Brown Draughon Library

September 8, 2008

Many students from four year colleges lack the skills to perform complex literacy tasks such as understanding arguments, making financial decisions, or interpreting results of a survey. These tasks require three kinds of literacy: the ability to analyze prose, perform mathematical computations, and understand data. These skills are increasingly important for success after graduation. For this reason we need to prepare students to write in various genres necessary for success in their personal and professional lives. Auburn University undergraduate students report that they are not given as many writing assignments as their peers at the typical university in our Carnegie classification according to the 2007 NSSE data. In light of these data and the recognition that writing with revision and expert feedback is critical to improved writing, the Writing Initiative Task Force (WITF) proposes a writing program that *fosters a significant shift in Auburn's instructional culture*. In short, we see the Writing Initiative as the core and heart of Auburn's mission to impart the literacy skills so essential to educated and responsible citizens not only of Alabama but of the world.

The WITF consisting of faculty representatives from each college, the Head of the Department of English, a representative from the Faculty Senate and a Student Government Association representative (1), was charged in January of 2008 to develop recommendations for a comprehensive writing program for Auburn University. The timing of this charge was auspicious given other academic initiatives on campus including the development of Learning Communities and the adoption of the Auburn University Student Learning Outcomes (2) developed by the University Core Curriculum Oversight Committee and adopted by the Auburn University Faculty Senate on May 6, 2008. As the WITF considered its charge and developed the Writing Program we were cognizant of these other initiatives and believe that our program will enhance them.

Fully realized this program will impact the educational experience of *every undergraduate Auburn student*. Adequate new funding is critical to ensuring that this program is an investment in both their futures and that of Auburn University.

This report has recommendations for both the current Freshman Composition program and a new Writing in the Disciplines program that will build upon the strong writing experience in the freshman year and provide students with continued and increasingly discipline-specific writing experiences throughout their Auburn undergraduate experience. In brief, we make the following recommendations for a comprehensive Auburn writing program:

- 1. *Reduce the class size of all Freshman Composition courses to no more than 19 students***
 - A. Hire additional tenure-line English Department faculty with expertise in rhetoric and composition**
- 2. *Initiate a Writing in the Disciplines (WID) program for each undergraduate major***
 - A. Form a Campus Writing Board with policy-making responsibilities**

September 8, 2008

- B. Hire a Writing Program Administrator (WPA) to oversee the Writing Program, faculty development for writing in the disciplines and the Writing Center**

3. *Establish a Writing Center to provide tutoring support for all undergraduate students*

These three recommendations provide strategies for improving student writing throughout their undergraduate studies at Auburn University and preparing students for success in their careers. They also provide the necessary resources to support faculty throughout the University taking an active and direct role in teaching writing in the disciplines. These recommendations are described in more detail below. A timeline and budget as well as addenda are attached.

1. *Reduce the class size of all Freshman Composition courses to no more than 19 students*

Over the last few years the Freshman Composition program has been revised based in large part on guidelines for developing outcomes-based composition programs published by the Council of Writing Programs Administrators (3). The revised version of the second semester course, ENGL 1120, is already in use and the revised first semester course, ENGL 1100, will be piloted in Fall 2008.

Enrollments in sections of both ENGL 1100 and 1120 are presently limited to 25 students. However, nationally recommended standards for Freshman Composition courses published by the College Section of the National Council of Teachers of English set the course limit to 20 students and recommend that each instructor have no more than three sections (4). In addition, *U.S. News and World Report's* survey of colleges and universities includes as a positive criterion class size of 1-19 (5). Therefore, the WITF recommends that Auburn gradually reduce enrollment from 25 to 19 students beginning spring 2009 and that each instructor be assigned no more than three sections. This would be accomplished by reducing enrollment in each section of ENGL 1100 and 1120 by 1 student/semester.

Timeline for reducing ENGL 1100 and 1120 class size

| | |
|----------------|---------------------------------|
| By spring 2009 | reduce class size from 25 to 24 |
| By fall 2010 | reduce class size from 24 to 22 |
| By fall 2011 | reduce class size from 22 to 20 |
| By fall 2012 | reduce class size from 20 to 19 |

A. Hire additional tenure-line English Department faculty with expertise in the field of rhetoric and composition

At the present time, two Department of English faculty, Drs. Michelle Sidler and Kevin Roozen, have administrative and training responsibilities for the Freshman Composition program. Given these responsibilities, neither of these faculty members is able to contribute in a meaningful way to teaching in the program nor do they have time for research on the program's effectiveness and the use of evaluation data to develop the program. The additional professorial faculty will meet an immediate

September 8, 2008

need for faculty with specializations in rhetoric and composition to teach Honors sections of freshman composition. These teachers will also fill important leadership roles in faculty development activities and in the training of instructors, GTAs, and tutors. Moreover, these writing specialists will serve as resources for faculty across campus who will be teaching and assessing writing in the disciplines. We recommend that five additional tenure-line faculty positions be given to the Department of English over the next three years for this purpose.

The WITF reviewed institutional research on the last five cohorts of entering freshmen at Auburn University (through 2007), in particular data on the ACT scores (6). In 2007 93.7% of incoming freshman had an ACT score of 20 or better. Data on the grade distribution for ENGL 1100 and 1120 in 2007 indicate that 94.7% of students in these courses earned a C or better (7). Finally, CLA data for Auburn University freshmen for the past three years indicate that these students are performing on this test of critical thinking, analytical reasoning and written communication skills at or above the expected level. The WITF feels the current assessment data indicate that incoming students are adequately prepared for our writing courses. The resources needed to develop remedial courses would be substantial and would benefit a very small number of students. These resources can be better allocated to program enhancements such as smaller class sizes, a greatly expanded tutoring operation and additional faculty involved in the Freshman Composition program in order to improve the writing experience for all freshmen.

The WITF also examined research regarding small section faculty led freshmen experiences. While in many cases such experiences do ease the transition to college and increase retention rates, other Auburn initiatives already address this issue, including Honors courses, the Human Odyssey program and the Learning Communities. We strongly endorse these efforts and believe that as a culture of writing takes hold at Auburn, these courses will also provide opportunities for the development of critical thinking and writing skills.

2. Initiate a Writing in the Disciplines (WID) Program-for each undergraduate major

Our review of writing at Auburn University and the institutional research provided by Dr. Drew Clark and the OIRA suggests that the current Freshman Composition program provides a strong foundation in writing, but that continued development of writing skills, particularly disciplinary writing, has no center or focus but rather relies heavily on individual faculty interest across disciplines. Many majors, particularly those with accrediting professional societies, have embraced writing skills as a critical outcome of their programs, but this has not been embraced as a fundamental tenet of undergraduate education at Auburn. Some examples of disciplinary undergraduate writing at Auburn are included in addendum 8.

The WITF spent a great deal of time reviewing the wide variety of WID programs at various universities and colleges, including those with writing-intensive courses. From that research we are recommending that Auburn develop an outcomes-based writing program focused at the individual academic department and major level, the levels at which undergraduate student writing is being strengthened at

September 8, 2008

North Carolina State University through the leadership of Drs. Michael Carter and Chris Anson. Other universities including the University of Minnesota have developed outcomes-based WID programs. We recommend an outcomes-based approach for the following reasons:

- **Auburn University's accrediting body, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, has endorsed an outcomes-based approach to accreditation and self-study.**
- **Outcomes-based approaches are already in use by many professional accrediting societies such as the American Board of Engineering and Technology (ABET) and National Council of Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE).**
- **Outcomes-based approaches provide the flexibility to develop discipline-specific writing skills and to integrate writing throughout the curriculum.**
- **Applying an outcomes-based approach to disciplinary writing engages faculty as disciplinary experts in the development and assessment of student writing skills.**

An outcomes-based model for writing in the disciplines starts with the question, "What writing competencies must students in a particular discipline master to be successful in the field"? The question is applicable to every field, but the answers will be very different i.e., discipline-specific. This approach not only engages faculty in the consideration of this question, but also engages them in the development of the learning processes and activities that foster the development of essential proficiencies and in assessing whether those processes and activities are successful.

Given Auburn University's land-grant mission and the wide range of disciplines offered it is essential that faculty have the flexibility to tailor the undergraduate writing experience to develop skills in discipline-specific forms of writing and discourse. It is our strong conviction that this is best accomplished by faculty familiar with the curricula (majors). Based on the discussions among the WITF members and their discussions with colleagues, the WITF has concluded that integral and continuing faculty development opportunities are critical to the success of this program. These opportunities may include workshops on the pedagogy of the teaching of writing; technical support for teams of departmental faculty engaged in outcomes development, implementation, and assessment; grants for course and curriculum development and support for cross-disciplinary research on the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL). These opportunities will be provided by the WPA, staff from the Writing Center, the Biggio Center for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning and the Auburn University National Writing Project (NWP) site who are experts in pedagogy and writing skill development.

Assessment is an integral component of an outcomes-based model, providing the opportunity for the use of multiple strategies to measure student proficiencies. Assessment strategies that may be employed include direct observation of student behavior, external reviews of student projects, longitudinal portfolios, internship reports, performance on tests that measure writing proficiency and student self-assessments or reflections on learning.

A. Form a Campus Writing Board with policy-making responsibilities in the first year.

September 8, 2008

The WITF anticipates that program assessment will occur at both the department level by faculty involved in the curricula and at the University level through a Campus Writing Board. The Campus Writing Board will establish policies and guidelines for the development of three or four models for writing in the majors, review documentation of faculty engagement in outcomes development and assessment, and synthesize results in the departmental and program area data to make annual policy recommendations to the Writing Program Administrator for continuing curricular change and greater student proficiency in writing. The Board will also serve as an advisory board to work with the WPA, the Biggio Center and the Auburn NWP site on faculty development.

The Campus Writing Board should consist of one faculty member from each college, school and the library, a representative from the Faculty Senate, the WPA, the Coordinator of the Freshman Composition Program or another representative of the Department of English (non-voting), and representatives from the following offices (all non-voting): the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, the Office for Diversity and Multicultural Affairs and the Biggio Center. The chairperson of the Board should be a faculty member and in the first year this individual should receive ½ time release from other assignments. The Chair of the Board will report to the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Studies.

The Board will be established in Fall 2008 and one of its first responsibilities will be to initiate the search for the Writing Program Administrator.

B. Hire a Writing Program Administrator (WPA) to oversee the Writing Program, faculty development for writing in the disciplines and the Writing Center

It is essential to the successful initiation of the Writing in the Disciplines Program that the University hire a nationally recognized individual with experience in three areas: writing program administration, faculty development in disciplinary writing, and research on effective undergraduate writing programs. This position must be a tenure-track faculty position with a part-time faculty appointment in a department relevant to the individual's disciplinary expertise. To attract someone with national recognition, this individual should be hired at the Associate or Full Professor level. The Writing Program Administrator will be responsible for working with the Campus Writing Board and departments on outcomes-based writing programs in the majors, for designing and initiating a faculty WID development program and for Writing Center supervision, including hiring and supervision of the Director and staff who will provide tutoring services. The WPA position will report to the Office of the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Studies.

3. *Establish a Writing Center to provide tutoring support for all undergraduate students*

It is the goal of the WITF to foster a collaborative, interdisciplinary culture of writing at Auburn supported by a community of practice of undergraduate writers from all disciplines and including students, faculty and administration. Such a community requires work space where individuals can

September 8, 2008

share ideas and support one another's intellectual development. The WITF strongly recommends that a Writing Center have a physical space convenient to the Auburn campus community to house collaborative, interdisciplinary faculty and student activities that advance undergraduate students' writing skills. The creation of a physical center for the Writing Program has many advantages including:

- **The opportunity for face to face consultation in support of student writing in order to facilitate in-depth interactions that move beyond simple editing to support for critical thinking skill development**
- **The development of a culture of cross-disciplinary writing and academic discourse on the campus**
- **A venue for students and faculty from different disciplines to meet, discuss, share and inquire into disciplinary writing skills and ideas.**
- **Training opportunities for Auburn graduate and undergraduate students in tutoring. While few of our students will make a profession of tutoring, the skills involved are readily transferable to any workplace. Learning to teach someone else is an excellent route to deeper understanding of the material.**
- **As the central academic site and service conducting research on the impact of the writing initiative, the writing center will serve as a locus for research opportunities for faculty and graduate students across disciplines.**

Space for the Writing Center should be identified in the first year of the program and planning and renovation or construction should begin as soon as possible. The Writing Center will serve as the home of the office of the Writing Program Administrator, Director of the Undergraduate Student Writing (tutoring) Center, and Writing Program staff. The Writing Center will provide the facilities for tutoring, faculty development for WID, and research on the impact of the Writing Initiative. Once the Writing Center space is completed, the services of the Core Curriculum Writing Center will be moved into the Writing Center to provide a single center for the support of undergraduate writing at Auburn.

Resources for the Writing Initiative

The task force recommends that expenditures for implementing the writing initiative flow *entirely from new monies or additional monies*. If exigencies arise and the Writing Initiative needs to be phased in differently than on this proposed timeline, the Campus Writing Board should consult with the Writing Program-Administrator and a representative of the Freshman Composition program (i.e., the Director of Freshman Composition, the English Department Head, or the Dean of Liberal Arts). Following that consultation the Campus Writing Board should be the policy-making entity that determines how to employ the monies that are allocated in order to phase in the initiative differently than proposed here.