

# Results of Internal Review of Writing Program

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## Overview

In February of 2004, the Committee on Instruction (COI) charged the faculty members of the Composition Council with the task of conducting a review of Bucknell's Writing Program and recommending procedural changes to the Program if deemed necessary. (See Appendix A for the text of the COI charge.) An electronic survey was sent to the Faculty in the Fall of 2004. This was followed in the Fall of 2005 with a series of departmental conversations about specific issues raised by the survey.

There were 92 faculty responses to the on-line survey of Fall 2004. Fifteen departments from all the divisions, along with the staff of the Writing Center, either had conversations with members of the committee or sent written reports between November of 2005 and January of 2006. Based on an analysis and discussion of this feedback, the following emerged:

- Overall, there is strong support among the faculty for the two main goals of the Writing Program; i.e., developing expository skills and teaching the use of writing as an instrument for thinking.
- Most faculty are comfortable with the basic approach being used now in the Writing Program (with some modifications), although some faculty and departments say that significant changes should be considered to the Writing Program.
- A large number of faculty feel very strongly that W2 courses must support a process-based approach to writing, with multiple drafts. Some other faculty members feel that the Writing Program should have space for W2 courses, designed for students within a major, that emphasize discipline-specific writing over a general writing process.
- A large number of faculty say that the most significant problem with the Writing Program is W courses with too many students for appropriate instruction.
- Although there is some reluctance to implement a program for assessing student writing, most of the faculty express a sense of resigned acceptance that some form of assessment is inevitable. (Assessment is discussed in a separate report.)
- There is widespread agreement that students need help with basic writing mechanics. Some faculty feel that it is a necessary role of an instructor of a W-course to teach these skills; others state that they do not think that class time should be used for such instruction or that they are personally unqualified to teach these skills.
- It is universally agreed that the current Writing Referral/Deficiency System is ineffective and that changes need to be made. There is wide-spread agreement with the idea of encouraging referrals early in a semester and within the context of a course, along with a recognition that improvements in the referral system will have to be combined with additional resources to the Writing Center.
- Opinions are divided about the desirability of an option to withhold W-credit for students in a course if content objectives have been met but the quality of writing remains

deficient.

- There is a range of opinions (both negative and positive) about the desirability/feasibility of offering “developmental” (or remedial) courses in writing.
- A range of opinions is expressed about the effectiveness of the Writing Center in its role supporting the Writing Program. Some faculty are very complimentary of the Writing Center and staff. Others express the view that tutoring sessions at the Center are ineffective.
- Writing Center staff express the view that there are misconceptions among a small number of faculty about how tutoring sessions work and say that some faculty expect the Writing Center to “fix” student papers rather than helping the students learn to write themselves.

Based on the feedback received from the faculty, we make recommendations for changes in the areas enumerated below and discussed in more detail in the following section:

1. Enrollment caps and teaching credit for W-courses.
2. Teaching of expository skills in W1 courses.
3. On-going communication/discussion about the Writing Program and the Writing Center.
4. Writing referrals.
5. Additional resources for the Writing Center.
6. Administration of the Writing Program and Writing Center.
7. Periodic review of W-courses.
8. Writing course evaluation forms.
9. Other wording changes in the Writing Program legislation.
10. Continuing review of the Writing Program.

We also include discussion about the following issues which were discussed extensively but for which we do not make concrete recommendations:

11. Developmental (“remedial”) writing courses.
12. Withholding of W-credit.
13. Approval process for W-courses.

## **Detail about recommendations**

1. **ENROLLMENT CAPS AND TEACHING CREDIT FOR W-COURSES.** We ask the administration to help us move toward caps of 15 students for enrollment in W1 classes and 20 for enrollment in W2 classes.

**Rationale (abbreviated):** Effective writing instruction requires time on the part of the instructor. In particular, the most important element is feedback for written work. Consequently, the amount of time that an instructor needs to spend on a writing-intensive course grows *strongly* with the enrollment; therefore, the quality of instruction and feedback in a writing course can be expected to drop with large enrollments.

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has written a policy statement (see Appendix C) recommending that writing courses not have enrollments above 20 students; ideally, class sizes should be limited to 15. Many of our peer institutions (including large state universities) have caps of between 15 and 20 students for their writing courses.

A change to course sizes and teaching credit for W-courses would also send a message that the university values the teaching of these courses and would help encourage more faculty to participate in the Writing Program.

Clearly, there are challenges that are involved in any reduction of caps for Writing courses. There are W-courses which must have larger enrollments due to curricular (major-specific) issues. Any plan to move to a lower cap would have to allow for these exceptions. A possible solution is to make the caps non-binding – departments could opt out and exceed the caps for curricular reasons. In these cases, we recommend that a formula be developed to grant additional teaching credit to faculty teaching over-enrolled W courses. If additional teaching credit is granted for teaching overenrolled W-courses, the additional time needed for instructor feedback can still be available even if other circumstances make a larger enrollment necessary.

We also recognize that there are other pragmatic (mainly financial) reasons why reduction of caps and allocation of additional teaching credit for writing courses will be difficult. We do not expect that it will possible to implement this recommendation immediately. However, this goal should be included as part of the discussions during the next couple of years about development of tactical plans to support the strategic goal of enhancing the academic core of Bucknell.

A more detailed and expansive rationale for a lower cap on W-course enrollments can be found in Appendix C.

2. **TEACHING OF EXPOSITORY SKILLS IN W COURSES.** We recommend the following changes to the Writing Program legislation:

(a) The first line in criterion #3 for W1 courses should be modified as follows (underlined print represents suggested additions):

3. Teach and emphasize the importance of the following expository skills:

...

- (b) The following paragraphs should be added to the end of criterion #3 for W1 courses:

Instructors of W1 courses will stress the importance of these expository skills and students will be held accountable for demonstrating mastery of these skills in their writing. When providing feedback to students on late-stage drafts or final submissions of written work, instructors will point out recurring errors and require students to address these problems.

A standard on-line (electronic) composition handbook will be available to all students and faculty at Bucknell. As a first resource for addressing writing problems, instructors may refer students to the handbook. For more serious problems, the instructor may work with the students individually. Writing Center tutors will similarly be available to help students remedy flaws in their writing mechanics. (See Section VIII.) For wide-spread problems, the instructor may wish to use class time to point out and correct patterns of error.

- (c) The following paragraph should be added to the end of criterion #1 for W2 courses:

Instructors of W2 courses will hold students to a high standard in regard to expository skills (see Criterion #3 for W1 courses). Instructors will identify rhetorical problems and/or patterns of error and will work with students either individually or in conjunction with the Writing Center. (See Section VIII.) Instructors may also refer students to the on-line composition handbook where appropriate.

**Rationale:** The assumption typically is that students who are accepted into Bucknell have already mastered basic expository skills; however, faculty frequently comment that poor mechanics are still apparent, due either to (a) a lack of appropriate care or sufficient time invested on the part of students; (b) more fundamental writing deficiencies due to a lack of preparation or knowledge on the part of the student; (c) learning or language differences; or (d) difficulties in comprehension of the subject matter that are manifested in poor writing. Faculty have expressed frustration with this issue. On the one hand, it is universally agreed that expository skills in general and basic writing mechanics in particular are essential. On the other hand, many faculty do not want (or feel unqualified) to spend class time teaching writing when many or most of the students do not need this instruction. As a result, many faculty fail to address difficulties in basic expository skills.

The intention of the recommended changes is to modify the language to stress that the burden of good writing mechanics must be on the students. But there is a recognition that faculty teaching W courses still have an important role to play in teaching writing, even if little class time is used in this instruction. And there is also recognition that some students will need more help than can be provided solely by the faculty member.

As part of these changes, the University will arrange for an on-line composition “handbook” that all students and faculty will be able to access; consequently, any faculty member (in any class) can refer a student to the on-line resources for additional writing help.

### **3. ON-GOING COMMUNICATION/DISCUSSION ABOUT THE WRITING PROGRAM AND THE WRITING CENTER.**

We recommend that steps be taken to enhance regular conversation between members of the faculty and the Writing Center staff. We recommend also that departments have regular conversations about their writing courses and how these courses fit into their curriculum.

We note that the Writing Center is already discussing ideas to implement a “liaison” system to discuss support of writing, similar to the liaison system that the Writing Center Tutoring Program uses with the mathematics and science departments. The Writing Center staff has also discussed the possibility of follow-up sessions to their successful August workshops to further discussion about writing courses. We strongly support these ideas.

**Rationale:** Regular conversation about writing and the teaching of writing is needed to keep the Writing Program vital and up-to-date. The program is now over 20 years old, and there is a danger of the program becoming stale if there are not continuing discussions.

In our conversations with faculty, a few things were apparent. First, many faculty simply are not aware of how the Writing Center handles writing tutoring. Writing Center staff comment that a small minority of faculty expect them to edit their students’ papers, rather than working with the students and helping them to discover for themselves the things that they need to do to improve their work.

Significantly more communication is needed for faculty and Writing Center staff to be able to work together in complementary ways to assist students with their writing. Most significantly, students need to be encouraged to take the responsibility to start their papers early enough and receive meaningful feedback in a timely manner. As discussed by the Writing Center staff, only so much can be achieved in a one-hour appointment, especially if a student comes only one hour before the paper is due.

Second, some faculty comment that Writing Center tutors (especially student tutors) are not trained to assist with discipline-specific writing. Tutors might make comments or suggestions that lead the student to make changes that run counter to the approach typically used in that discipline. A few faculty members commented that they never recommend appointments with the Writing Center specifically because of this issue.

The liaison system proposed by the Writing Center could *significantly* enhance the value of the Writing Center as it supports the Writing Program. Conversations between Writing Center staff and the faculty would help make clear to the faculty how the Writing Center operates and would provide to the Writing Center feedback that would help them better tailor their services to the needs of the faculty, particularly in regard to discipline-specific writing.

**4. WRITING REFERRALS.** We recommend that Section VIII (“Writing Referral System”) be replaced with the following:

#### **VIII. Writing Referral System**

In order to build on the working relationship between faculty members and student as a course progresses, a referral system is available. Faculty should seek to identify **as**

**early as possible in the semester** any student who would benefit from additional one-on-one writing tutoring. The faculty should meet with the student to explain the referral and to identify the areas of writing with which the student needs the most assistance. For a referral to be successful, the student must understand the need for the additional help and must be motivated to follow through with the writing tutor.

The instructor and student will jointly complete a referral form, and copies of the form will be available for the faculty member, the student, and the Writing Center. The referral form will include check boxes that identify the student's problems, some blank space in which the faculty can provide more detailed information, and a description of upcoming writing assignments in the course for which the student will need help.

The Writing Center will arrange tutoring for the student, either with Writing Center staff or with trained student writing tutors. In some circumstances, it may be beneficial for the student to work with the same one or two tutors throughout the semester to develop a relationship. The faculty member should monitor the situation during the remainder of the semester, consulting with the student and providing feedback to the Writing Center. If deemed useful, the relationship between the student and the Writing Center may continue past the end of the semester.

**Rationale:** Faculty members and Writing Center staff agree that the current referral/deficiency system is ineffective. The deficiency/referral check-boxes on the mid-term and end-of-semester grade reports are often considered to be punitive by both faculty and students and are therefore frequently not used in cases where students would benefit from additional help. Furthermore, in the absence of context (i.e., specific writing assignments), students are unmotivated to seek additional help.

Above all else, successful tutoring depends on the motivation of the student. A student who perceives a need for tutoring and is involved in the referral process is much more likely to benefit from tutoring. The proposed referral system is intended to empower and motivate the student to seek the help s/he needs and to keep the faculty member involved in the process. Students are much more motivated when they receive help during the semester and in the context of particular assignments. The goal is to arrange for additional tutoring as early as possible and for that tutoring to continue (as needed) throughout the semester.

The referral system is not intended to replace or curtail in any way the current practice of having writing tutors available on a regular basis for any writer (whether student, faculty or staff member) who would like feedback at any time during the semester. The expectation is that this new referral system – if successful – will increase the number of students who take advantage of the tutorial assistance that is available to them. In addition, this system may increase the logistical workload needed to match students with tutors. Consequently, a successful referral system may not be possible without additional resources for the Writing Center (see recommendation 5 below) and the ability to identify, train and supervise a larger pool of potential writing tutors.

This approach will replace the current “Writing deficiency” reports that are submitted with grade reports. However, the mid-term grade reports will still have “Poor Written Work” as an optional reason for submitting mid-term grades of D or F.



5. **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR THE WRITING CENTER.** We recommend that the administration make a long-term plan to enhance the resources provided to the Writing Center.

Specific recommendations include:

- (a) Hiring additional professional staff to allow more time for writing instruction and faculty development.

The responsibilities of the Writing Center staff have expanded greatly since the inception of the Writing Program in 1983. Additional duties include increased faculty development efforts; increased workshops both in and out of the classroom; support for oral communications; and recruiting, training and supervising tutors in mathematics and sciences. This limits the amount of time that they can spend setting up additional workshops and working with faculty members or students one-on-one. Furthermore, if the writing referral system improves, then the work-load at the Writing Center will increase, possibly significantly.

- (b) Providing resources to make the Writing consultant positions more attractive for recruiting and retaining writing professionals.

A study needs to be undertaken to determine what salaries are appropriate for Writing Center staff. This is not trivial, considering the range of responsibilities for Writing Center staff at Bucknell. Bucknell needs to commit to providing salaries that are at an appropriate level to attract and retain qualified writing and faculty development professionals.

Writing Center staff provide instruction at Bucknell. They should be treated in a professional manner and should be given a real voice in discussions about the academic mission of the university, since their work relates so directly to this mission.

- (c) Additional staff are urgently needed specifically with expertise in ESL (English as a second language) and LD (learning disabled) instruction.

- (d) Improving facilities.

We encourage the university to consider different paradigms about how the Writing Center could be configured, potentially alongside a *Teaching and Learning Center* if built. At the very least, the Writing Center needs to be renovated to be compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA); currently, the Center is not handicap-accessible.

- (e) An increase in the Writing Center and Writing Program budget.

Additional funds could be used for incentives for faculty to attend workshops on the teaching of writing across the curriculum. W-course summer grants should also be considered for faculty developing new W-courses or modifying existing ones. This could inject some new energy into the Writing Program. (Note: “Curricular and

Instructional Development Grants” are currently available, but no mention is made of development or modification of writing courses in the guidelines for these grants.)

6. **ADMINISTRATION OF THE WRITING PROGRAM AND WRITING CENTER.** We recommend that Section X (“Administration of the Writing Program”) be modified as follows (underlined sections are changes or additions):

**X. Administration of the Writing Program and Writing Center**

The Composition Council will determine policy for the Writing Program and will coordinate its activities. The Council will have ~~seven~~six members who will be appointed by the Committee on Instruction. One ~~Two~~ of these members will come from the Department of English\*, one from the College of Engineering, and one from the Library. The other three will be chosen from three different divisions in order to gain the widest University participation. In addition to these ~~seven~~ six members, the Council will have as permanent voting members the Director of the Writing Program and the Director of the Writing Center, who will be appointed by the Vice President for Academic Affairs in consultation with the Academic Deans, the Department of English, and the Composition Council. The Director will be attached to the Vice President’s office. The Council of Deans will appoint non-voting consultants to the Composition Council from the College of Arts and Sciences and from the Engineering College. The Composition Council will be a sub-committee of the Committee on Instruction. Terms of the six non-permanent members will be for three years. By default, the chair of the Composition Council will be the Writing Program Director; if the Writing Program Director is unable to serve as chair, then the Council will elect a chair.

The Writing Program Director and Writing Center Director will both be appointed by the Provost in consultation with the Academic Deans, the Department of English, and the Composition Council. The Writing Program Director will be a member of the faculty and the Writing Center Director will be a member of the Writing Center staff. Both the Writing Program Director and the Writing Center Director will report directly to the Provost.

(~~\* The number of representatives from English was changed from two to one by former VPAA Dan Little.~~)

The functions and duties of the Composition Council will include:

1. approving plans for assessing student writing ~~the writing of entering students;~~
2. ~~approving plans for evaluating the writing of graduating students;~~
2. reviewing the assessment data and evaluating the effectiveness of the Writing Program;
3. maintaining criteria for designating courses as W1 or W2;
4. assisting the various departments and faculty members with the design of their writing courses;
5. reporting annually to the Committee on Instruction on the operation of the Writing Program and proposing, for faculty action, any changes in the Writing Program that it wishes to recommend.

The Director of the Writing Program, as a member of the Composition Council, will share in the duties enumerated above, and in addition will:

1. implement the policies determined by the Composition Council;
2. serve as a liaison between the faculty and the Writing Center;
3. consult with and advise faculty members on the design of writing courses;
4. ~~administer the Writing Program budget.~~
4. report regularly to the Provost (and annually to COI and to the faculty) about the status of the Writing Program.
5. work with the Writing Center Director to provide support to faculty teaching writing courses.

The Director of the Writing Center, in addition to his/her normal Writing Center duties, will:

1. administer the day-to-day operations of the Writing Center and supervise Writing Center staff;
2. administer the Writing Center budget;
3. report regularly to the Provost about activities of the Writing Center;
4. work with the Writing Program Director to provide support to faculty teaching writing courses.

The Composition Council charges the Writing Center with the following:

1. ~~from time to time, to assess the writing abilities of entering classes;~~
1. to provide individual assistance, remedial tutorials, and workshops for students;
2. ~~on request, to hold seminars and workshops for faculty and teaching assistants in the teaching of expository prose;~~
2. to conduct faculty development workshops to assist faculty in the teaching of writing courses.
3. to consult with and advise faculty members on the design of writing courses.
4. ~~from time to time, to evaluate the writing of graduating students as a check on the effectiveness of the entire program;~~

**Rationale:** Many of the changes listed here codify changes that have been made in the past 20 years by the VPAA and by COI. The most significant of these changes occurred in the Spring of 2003 when the Provost – in conjunction with the Composition Council – decided to split what had been a single position of Writing Program/Center Director into two Co-Directors, one for the Writing Program and one for the Writing Center. This approach has been followed for the past three years on a trial basis. We recommend that this change be made permanent. Before the change, it was difficult for the Provost to convince a member of the faculty to accept the position of Writing Program Director, due (to a great extent) to the previous responsibilities of that director for managing the day-to-day affairs of the Writing Center. In fact, neither of the previous two Writing Program directors were faculty members.

We consider it important that the Writing Program Director be a member of the faculty. Faculty status gives the director the ability to talk with other members of the faculty in a frank and open way about the Writing Program. Furthermore, it reinforces the statement that the Writing Program is a faculty program.

Removal of the day-to-day administration of the Writing Center from the Writing Program Director also gives that person time to concentrate more on programmatic issues related to the

Writing Program. As an example, the review conducted here was possible only because of this change in the director's position.

We also consider it important that the Writing Center be administered by a member of that staff. To run the Writing Center effectively, the Director needs to be there regularly and needs to be intimately familiar with the duties of the staff. The Writing Center Director needs to be experienced in Writing Center administration, the teaching of writing, and best practices in tutoring.

**7. PERIODIC REVIEW OF W-COURSES.** Section XI of the legislation says:

Regularly offered 'W' courses will be re-announced each year, and reviewed by the Council every three years to assure the integrity of the Writing Program.

We recommend no change in this language at this point, but recommend that review of W courses be suspended for three years until we have some writing assessment results.

**Rationale:** Currently, W courses are *not* reviewed by the Composition Council every three years. Consequently, a recommendation of suspension of periodic review does not change the current approach of the Council. Historically, once a course is designated as a W-course, it remains that way indefinitely as long as the same professor continues to teach the course. Concern has been expressed that courses may “drift” over time, diminishing their effectiveness as W-courses. On the other hand, the view was also expressed that the Council needs to trust that faculty members teaching the W-courses will not diminish the writing component of a W-course. Revocation of W-status could engender ill feelings which could ultimately be damaging to the Writing Program. Furthermore, the task of reviewing 1/3 of the writing courses each year would be unduly burdensome on members of the Composition Council.

Simplified review schemes were considered, based mostly on self-reporting by the faculty member and/or department. Ultimately, it was decided that we should postpone any final decision on periodic review until after we have collected some assessment data, some of which will include information about the W-courses themselves. It is possible that there isn't a problem here and that periodic review will not be needed.

**8. WRITING COURSE EVALUATION FORMS.** We recommend that the Composition Council re-design the evaluation forms that are used for the W-courses. The forms should be made shorter, emphasizing no more than 4 or 5 important points.

This is discussed in more detail in the assessment document.

**9. OTHER WORDING CHANGES IN THE WRITING PROGRAM LEGISLATION.** We recommend the following changes in the Writing Program legislation:

(a) In Section I (“Two Aims”):

Designated writing courses in the University Writing Program have two purposes: to develop expository skills and to teach the use of language writing as an means for creating and processing knowledge ~~instrument for thinking~~. Such courses aim to

develop students' ~~writers'~~ mastery of written language so that they may discover, organize, and communicate their knowledge.

**Rationale:** Several faculty commented that the original phrasing “the use of language as an instrument for thinking” is unclear and vague. A few said that they did not understand what it means at all. The revised text also clarifies the distinction between written and verbal language.

(b) In Section IV, criterion #2, add the following paragraph:

The writing process often varies by discipline and by instructor. Consequently, it is essential that faculty be clear about what is expected of students in the drafting/revising process as well as about the criteria by which writing assignments will be evaluated. Students should be held accountable for meeting these expectations and for treating each stage of the process with an appropriate amount of care.

**Rationale:** In the review, some faculty expressed frustration with the lack of care shown by some students on drafts of a major writing assignment. There is a feeling among many students that they do not need to put much effort into a draft – even one handed in for feedback – because they will have the opportunity to revise later. Worse, some students are reported to hold back intentionally on their drafts so that they can show improvement in later drafts. This is a source of frustration among many faculty, as meaningful feedback cannot be given unless the student puts an appropriate amount of effort into the drafts. Ultimately, it is the instructor’s responsibility to clarify the expectations for each stage of the draft and to hold students accountable if they fail to treat the different stages with appropriate effort and care.

Some on the review committee believe that the language should be stronger in this section to stress how important it is for students to treat each draft as their best work. A suggestion was made to add the following to the end of the above addition:

In particular, work which due to carelessness or procrastination essentially removes such a stage is inappropriate. Work at a stage in which it should be a student’s best, considered work to date may be expected to be free of mechanical errors readily identified by modern software, even if there will be further opportunities for revision.

(c) In Section IV, criteria #5:

5. ~~Teach writing to think~~ Teach the use of writing as a means of creating and processing knowledge.

W1 courses include writing assignments that cause students to engage in intellectual work. Types of assignments may include essays, abstracts, journals, emails, question formulation, field notes, lab notebooks, or short answers to prepared questions, all designed to use language as a resource for inquiry.

**Rationale:** Faculty were scathing in their criticisms of the phrasing of this criterion (“unclear,” “no sense,” “badly written,” “poorly delineated,” ...).

(d) In Section V, criterion #1:

1. Provide writing instruction ~~as needed~~.

**Rationale:** The modifications (suggested by a faculty comment) are in response to criticisms that the original wording “as needed” is unclear.

(e) In Section V, criterion #2, add the following paragraph:

The writing process often varies by discipline and by instructor. Consequently, it is essential that faculty be clear about what is expected of students in the drafting/revision process as well as about the criteria by which drafts will be evaluated. Students should be held accountable for meeting these expectations and for treating each stage of the process with an appropriate amount of care.

**10. CONTINUING REVIEW OF THE WRITING PROGRAM.** We recommend that review of the Writing Program be conducted at regular intervals. In particular, a review should be conducted within 5 years to assess the effects of the changes implemented here.

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The remaining issues were discussed and are presented here, even though no formal recommendations are made.

**11. DEVELOPMENTAL (“REMEDIAL”) WRITING COURSES.** We are unable at this point to recommend the formation of developmental/remedial courses specifically for writing instruction. This is an issue with ramifications beyond the Writing Program and should be discussed at a university-wide level.

**Rationale:** The issue of remedial writing courses drew a wide range of opinions, both positive and negative. On the positive side, several people expressed a desire for courses to assist those students who come to Bucknell with a weak background in writing. On the other hand, other faculty commented that this is what W-courses are designed to accomplish. Concern was expressed that the availability of developmental courses might encourage faculty teaching W-courses to “pass the buck” rather than addressing writing instruction themselves. Also, the question was raised about who would teach developmental/remedial courses. None of the faculty expressed any desire to teach remedial writing courses themselves, and the Writing Center staff is overworked as it is.

**12. WITHHOLDING OF W-CREDIT.** There were conversations about the possibility of giving instructors of W-courses the option of withholding W-credit even for students who pass the course. Opinions both among faculty and among members of the review committee were divided on this issue. We recommend that this possibility be explored in the future, but we are unable to make a concrete recommendation for or against the idea of separate W-credit at this point.

**Rationale:** There are strong arguments on both sides of this issue. It is also worth noting that there was correlation (although not a perfect correlation) between the division (mathematics/sciences/engineering/social sciences versus humanities) and the faculty views on this issue.

Humanities instructors were more likely to be opposed to the idea of giving faculty the option to withhold W-credit. Several faculty commented that they did not see how a student could pass a W-course without reasonable writing skills; consequently, the issue should be moot. Strong concern was also raised about the pedagogical message that would be implied by the separation of course credit and W-credit. A fundamental principle of the Writing Program, according to this argument, is the statement that writing itself is an integral part of the acquisition and retention of knowledge. Separating W-credit from course credit sends the opposite message that course material – even in a writing course – can be mastered without significant writing on the part of the student.

Concern was also raised about whether it would be possible for the “W-fail” option to be used in a consistent manner, considering the large number of different professors from different backgrounds who teach W-courses. And summer W-courses would have to be available for those students who lose W-credit needed for graduation.

Mathematics, science, engineering and social science instructors were in general more favorable to the idea of giving faculty the option to withhold W-credit. Faculty in these divisions commented that there are other components in the course that contribute to the final grade, such as exam scores, so a student could fail in his/her writing but still pass the course with good grades in the other components. Some faculty favored the option of withholding W-credit as a means of giving the students additional incentive to work hard on the writing component of the course. According to this argument, if students can get W-credit without taking the writing seriously, then students will be more likely to leave a W-course without having benefited from the writing component. And if an instructor has the option of withholding W-credit for a student with a passing grade, then the student has a strong incentive to take the writing seriously.

Some faculty also commented that they feel that granting W-credit is a statement on the part of the faculty (certification, in essence) that a student is able to write effectively. A few faculty commented that they recall situations (not many) where a student passed their course but where they (the faculty) were uncomfortable granting this “certification.”

If withholding of W-credit were to become an option, several safeguards would have to be implemented: (a) a series of unambiguous warnings – including a mid-term grade – would have to be given to the student to alert him/her to this possibility; and (b) a faculty member would have to take several steps during the semester – including an in-semester referral – before withholding W-credit at the end.

**13. APPROVAL PROCESS FOR W-COURSES.** There were conversations about the role of departments in the process by which W-courses are approved. Most significantly, there were discussions about how (rare) disputes between the Council and an individual faculty member should be resolved and whether or not departments should be asked to write a letter putting a particular writing course in perspective of the major curriculum.

The first paragraph of Section XI of the legislation states:

The Composition Council will approve courses to be designated ‘W’ according to the criteria developed by the Council. Faculty members, departments, or programs may

propose individual courses for approval. The intention of the Council will be to help all courses meet the criteria. The Council will consult with instructors, departments, and programs as needed to interpret the criteria and to assure that 'W' designations have essentially common meaning across the University. No course may be designated 'W' without approval.

We decided that this language already allows for departmental input into the process. Consequently, there is no need for a change in the language.

Our discussions with the faculty and departments also make it seem prudent to remind the faculty how the approval process works. As stated in the portion of the legislation quoted here, the intention is not for the Composition Council (which is predominately a faculty committee appointed by COI) to turn down proposals but to work with other faculty "to assure that 'W' designations have essentially common meaning across the University." In practice, most W-proposals are approved by the Council without comment. For the remainder, the Writing Program Director contacts the faculty member directly to discuss the course, asking questions to clarify issues that were not clear to the Council from the proposal. Frequently, the responses to the questions are sufficient for approval of the proposal. Occasionally, the Council inquires about whether small changes can be made to the course to satisfy the remaining criteria. In most of these cases, negotiated changes can and are made and the course is approved.



## **Appendix A: Charge from COI**

**To:** Composition Council

**From:** Ann Tlusty, chair of Committee on Instruction (COI)

**Re:** Writing Program Review

COI has reviewed the Composition Council's Semi-annual report of activities, and wishes to thank the Council for their efforts and the comprehensive reports accompanying their recommendations. We are responding at this time to the first of those recommendations, and will consider the remainder of the report at a later date.

In response to the Composition Council's recommendation that a series of discussions with the Faculty about various issues concerning the Writing Program be initiated, COI charges the Council to form a sub-committee made up of faculty for the purpose of assessing faculty opinion of current Writing Program procedures, administration, and criteria, and if deemed necessary, recommending procedural changes to the Program.

Rationale: In view of the fact that the Writing Program and W-course criteria have not been reviewed or assessed by the faculty since 1987, we agree that a conversation to this end is warranted. The current climate suggests that at least some faculty are uncomfortable with current procedures. Changes, however, need to be based on a systematic canvassing of faculty opinion. Such a discussion will also inform the faculty about Writing Program procedures. Because the Writing Program was established as a faculty-owned program, the areas of concern outlined by the Composition Council were raised by the faculty, and the goal of the charge is to initiate discussion among the faculty, management of the assessment process would best be served by a sub-committee consisting of faculty members.

## **Appendix B: Current Writing Program Legislation**

# **THE BUCKNELL UNIVERSITY WRITING REQUIREMENT AND PROGRAM**

**Bucknell University  
Lewisburg, PA 17837**

## **BACKGROUND**

In May 1981 the Bucknell University faculty provisionally approved a new graduation requirement for writing, to be fulfilled by writing courses in the disciplines. Following two years of experimentally developing and offering such courses, the faculty in May 1983 adopted the requirement and program described below, to go into effect with the freshman class entering in August, 1983.

## **THE REQUIREMENT**

Every candidate for any undergraduate degree must successfully complete three writing courses to be selected from courses designated W1 (one course) and W2 (two courses).

## **THE PROGRAM**

### **I. Two Aims**

Designated writing courses in the University Writing Program have two purposes: to develop expository skills and to teach the use of language as an instrument for thinking. Such courses aim to develop student writers' mastery of language so that they may discover, organize, and communicate their knowledge.

### **II. Two Types of Courses**

Courses intended to fulfill the University writing requirement are of two types: foundation (W1) and practice (W2).

W1 courses are introductory. They have as one of their primary objectives the teaching of fundamental techniques in writing expository prose. These courses are not to be remedial.

W2 courses are distributive. They offer students guided practice in writing in differing fields across the curriculum. They teach the skills necessary to write for the course/discipline.

W1 and W2 courses may be offered in any department.

### III. Summary of Criteria for W1 and W2

Purposes	Common Traits	Differentiating Traits	
		W1	W2
To develop expository skills	1. Writing instruction	Recurring, frequent instruction	Instruction as needed
	2. --in writing process	Introduce writing process	Support writing process
	3. --in expository skills	Teach skills	Support skills; teach techniques needed for the course/discipline
	4. Frequent and substantial writing	No Difference	
To teach the use of language as an instrument for thinking	5. Writing to learn, as well as to communicate	Introduce writing as thinking	Use writing to teach concepts in the course/discipline

### IV. Specific Criteria for W1

W1 courses will:

1. Include recurring instruction in writing.

Methods of instruction will vary. There is no single model for teaching a W1 course. But whether the instructor is assisted in teaching by student peer editors or by tutors, whether to the whole class, to small groups, to individuals, or in combinations of these methods, the important aim is to reinforce the development of skills by frequent instruction (weekly, if possible).

2. Teach the writing process: planning, composing, revising, editing.

By teaching writing as stages in a process, by presenting strategies for each stage, and by allowing time for reworking, instructors enable students to improve thought and to improve communication.

3. Teach the following expository skills:

- addressing intended audiences
- achieving purposes
- organizing the whole paper, paragraphs and sentences
- choosing appropriate words
- punctuating and spelling correctly

Since the W1 course is the foundation course in composition, it should teach those expository skills that are a) generally recognized elements in higher-level discourse, and b) needed by the majority of students entering Bucknell. Analysis of a writing sample collected from the class of '86, in August 1982, indicated that students entering Bucknell need instruction and practice especially in the first four items on the above list.\*

\*Results of the writing sample are reported in The 1982 Writing Skills Assessment of Bucknell Freshmen and Its Implication for Writing Across the Curriculum.

4. Require frequent writing from each student. The instructor, who may be assisted by student peer editors or by tutors, should see a substantial amount of this writing.

For mastery, students need to write more than instructors alone can read. However, a substantial amount of writing should receive response to aid revision. The response need not be time-consuming, but it should be prompt and request (weekly, if possible). Response to work-in-progress should occur in addition to evaluation of finished writing for grading.

5. Teach writing to think.

W1 courses include writing assignments that cause students to engage in intellectual work. Types of assignments may include essays, abstracts, journals, question formulation, or short answers to prepared questions, all designed to use language as a resource for inquiry.

## **V. Specific Criteria for W2**

W2 courses will:

1. Provide writing instruction as needed.

Instructors will determine which writing skills or techniques are demanded by writing for the course and will provide instruction in them. Methods of instruction will vary, but appropriate assistance must be provided by instructors, who may be assisted by student peer editors or by tutors.

2. Support the writing process.

W2 courses recognize the benefits of writing in stages to clarify meaning and improve communication. Whenever possible, the schedule of writing assignments will require drafting and re-drafting, will provide response, and will allow time for revision.

3. Teach the techniques of writing needed by students or expected in the discipline.

W2 courses recognize that students enter a course with writing skills on which to build but which may need reinforcement, development or adaptation in a new context. Instructors will teach writing techniques expected in the discipline and will provide review of strategies and methods of research as needed.

4. Require frequent and substantial writing.

W2 courses recognize the need for practice in writing. Students will write often, in multiple assignments or in preparation for one large assignment. Many types of writing (reports, abstracts, summaries, interpretive or argumentative essays, notes, documentation, manuals, fiction, poetry) are appropriate to W2 courses.

5. Use writing to teach subject matter.

W2 courses emphasize that writing enables acquisition and retention of information and ideas. Whenever appropriate, students will be required to put course materials in their own words to explore, internalize and synthesize subject matter in writing. This kind of writing should occur in addition to finished, graded work.

## **VI. Order of Courses**

Students will take one W1 course, for instruction in the first year. They will take two W2 courses, for sustained development throughout the four undergraduate years and for guided practice in differing disciplines, including the major.

W1 courses must be taken in the first year. W2 courses should normally follow W1 courses. A W2 course will count toward the University writing requirement if it follows a W1 (or, in exceptional cases, is concurrent with a W1). At least one W2 course must be taken after the first year. Some majors may require a W2 in the last two years.

## **VII. Substitutions**

Entering students, including those with Advanced Placement English, who wish to substitute a W2 for the W1, must petition the dean of their college to be assessed individually for permission. Such students will take three W2 courses.

## **VIII. Writing Referral System**

### **A. Entering Student Referral**

Entering freshmen who, in the opinion of the deans and faculty, have not clearly demonstrated competence in writing will be directed by the deans to enroll during the first year in tutorials offered by the Writing Center.

### **B. Mid-term Referral**

In order to build on the working relationship between faculty and student as a course progresses, a formal mid-term writing referral system is available for faculty:

By means of a mid-term writing referral, which is submitted simultaneously with mid-term grades, the instructor identifies students who would benefit from consulting writing tutors. Instructors are encouraged to alert students (preferably before mid-term) that they have writing problems. Ideally the instructor provides students with as much diagnostic information about their writing problems as possible, perhaps by means of remarks on their most recent writing assignment.

Instructors may require students who receive mid-term writing referrals to visit the Writing Center regularly to work on writing assignments for the course in which the mid-

term writing referral was received. The instructor will receive the customary note from the Writing Center after each consultation.

Students who receive a writing referral will also receive a letter from the Writing Center encouraging them to consult with their instructors concerning their writing and inviting them to the Writing Center.

### C. End-of-Semester Referral

End-of-semester grade reports in all courses will include a box entitled "Writing Deficiency." A check in that box will generate a letter from the deans directing the student to the Writing Center, where staff members will assess the deficiency and help the student choose an option for correcting it. In order for the Writing Center to help students improve their writing, faculty should explain why the writing referral was given and, where possible, submit a sample of the student's written work that illustrates the deficiency. A form for this explanation will be distributed to the faculty with the final grade reports and should be returned to the deans when grade reports are submitted. The deans will forward a copy of this explanation to the student and to the Writing Center.

Students receiving an end-of-semester writing referral must confer with the Writing Center before the end of the first month of the succeeding semester and select an option for correcting the deficiency at that time. The Writing Center will inform the appropriate faculty member of the action taken to address the reported deficiency. Second semester seniors are not affected by the receipt of writing referrals.

## IX. Writing Course Distribution

It is expected that courses designated W1 and W2 will be widely distributed across the curriculum. Faculty advisers will therefore encourage their advisees to take W courses in a variety of disciplines.

All departments will share in offering W courses. The Academic Council will assure sufficient numbers and types of courses.

## X. Administration of the Writing Program

The Composition Council will determine policy for the Writing Program and will coordinate its activities. The Council will have seven members who will be appointed by the Committee on Instruction. Two of these members will come from the Department of English\*, one from the College of Engineering, and one from the Library. The other three will be chosen from three different divisions in order to gain the widest University participation. In addition to these seven members, the Council will have as a permanent voting member the Director of the Writing Program, who will be appointed by the Vice President for Academic Affairs in consultation with the Academic Deans, the Department of English, and the Composition Council. The Director will be attached to the Vice President's office. The Council of Deans will appoint a non-voting consultant to the Composition Council. The Composition Council will be a sub-committee of the Committee on Instruction. Terms of the seven non-permanent members will be for three years. The Council will elect its own chairperson.

(\* The number of representatives from English was changed from two to one by former VPAA Dan Little.)

The functions and duties of the Composition Council will include:

1. approving plans for assessing the writing of entering students;
2. approving plans for evaluating the writing of graduating students;
3. maintaining criteria for designating courses as W1 or W2;
4. assisting the various departments and faculty members with the design of their writing courses;
5. reporting annually to the Committee on Instruction on the operation of the Writing Program and proposing, for faculty action, any changes in the Writing Program that it wishes to recommend.

The Director of the Writing Program, as a member of the Composition Council, will share in the duties enumerated above, and in addition will:

1. implement the policies determined by the Composition Council;
2. administer the Writing Center;
3. consult with and advise faculty members on the design of writing courses;
4. administer the Writing Program budget.

The Composition Council charges the Writing Center with the following:

1. from time to time, to assess the writing abilities of entering classes;
2. to provide individual assistance, remedial tutorials, and workshops for students;
3. on request, to hold seminars and workshops for faculty and teaching assistants in the teaching of expository prose;
4. from time to time, to evaluate the writing of graduating students as a check on the effectiveness of the entire program;
5. to consult with and advise faculty members on the design of writing courses.

#### **XI. Identification of W Courses**

The Composition Council will approve courses to be designated 'W' according to the criteria developed by the Council. Faculty members, departments, or programs may propose individual courses for approval. The intention of the Council will be to help all courses meet the criteria. The Council will consult with instructors, departments, and programs as needed to interpret the criteria and to assure that 'W' designations have essentially common meaning across the University. No course may be designated 'W' without approval.

The Council will approve new 'W' courses. Regularly offered 'W' courses will be re-announced each year, and reviewed by the Council every three years to assure the integrity of the Writing Program.

#### **XII. Review of the Program.**

The Committee on Instruction fully reviewed the writing program and reported to the University faculty in 1987.

## Appendix C: Additional Rationale for Lower W-Course Caps

Any recommendation for lowering of caps for any courses at a university will naturally be met with concerns about the practical difficulties involved in such a change. However, we feel that it is absolutely essential that there be a clear statement of policy about the desirability of limiting enrollment in W-courses. There are practical difficulties involved in having low caps on Foundation Seminars and on Capstone classes; there are practical difficulties involved in having low caps on creative writing courses and on sections for foreign-language courses and on sections for different laboratory courses, etc. All of these caps were instituted, however – despite the practical difficulties involved – because of important pedagogical reasons. Similarly, very significant pedagogical reasons exist for our recommendation about writing course enrollments and teaching credit.

The main difference with writing courses is that there is not currently a low cap on enrollment, whereas these other caps are already in existence. But this is a historical accident. Low caps (and additional teaching credit for courses with necessarily-large enrollment) *should* have been instituted from Day 1 of the Writing Program; had that been the case, then we would not require this debate now and writing courses would naturally be assumed to be small, just as Foundation seminars and Capstone courses are now naturally assumed to be small.<sup>1</sup> Our recommendation is needed to correct this oversight and to put the issue of writing course sizes “at the same table” as that for other small-enrollment courses for any future discussions of course sizes.

In our view, it is essential that we make a statement about the necessity of limiting W-course enrollments. There are several reasons for this view:

1. **Important statement of principle.** There are very strong opinions among faculty on this issue. We have just completed a 2-year review of faculty opinion about the Writing Program. Several faculty (including the entire English Department) expressed quite forcefully their view that course sizes are the single most important issue facing the Writing Program at Bucknell. Several faculty have commented (very passionately) that the university simply cannot expect good results overall from the Writing Program without limiting the class sizes and/or granting additional teaching credit for individual faculty who teach courses that must have large enrollments.

A statement about enrollment and teaching credit for W-courses would say a great deal about the University’s commitment to the Writing Program. By contrast, there is a view held among quite a few people at Bucknell that a refusal even to try to limit W-course enrollments would send a message that the university *doesn’t* adequately value writing courses or the faculty that teach them. Some have gone so far as to say that without adequate restraints on the course sizes, the Writing requirement itself is only a “pretend” requirement, something for the students to check off without having

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<sup>1</sup> Imagine for a moment that Foundation seminars currently had 24 students each, and a committee made a recommendation that *those* caps be lowered to 15. It is likely that that recommendation would be met with resistance: “It is a good idea in theory, but it is practically unfeasible. We don’t have the faculty to teach Foundation seminars with 15 students and would have to ask staff members to fill in. It would be prohibitively expensive from a staffing perspective. It would lead to feelings among the English department that they are being abused since they teach W1 courses for first-year students with 24 students. ...” All of these concerns would be (and *are*) valid, and yet the pedagogical importance of small Foundation seminars cannot be denied.



any real meaning.

The writing requirement is the *only* university-wide requirement; furthermore, writing ability is always stated as the single most-valued skill listed by employers.

Foundation seminars and Capstone classes are capped at 15 students each – clearly the university establishes low caps for courses that are considered of fundamental importance. The committee that conducted the review feels strongly that enrollment in and teaching credit for W-courses should be considered on an equal footing with these and other caps.

2. **Writing pedagogy.** The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has studied the issue of enrollments in writing-intensive courses and has released the following position statement:

“The improvement of an individual student’s writing requires persistent and frequent contact between teacher and student both inside and outside the classroom. It requires assigning far more papers than are usually assigned in other college classrooms; it requires reading them and commenting on them not simply to justify a grade, but to offer guidance and suggestions for improvement; and it requires spending a great deal of time with individual students, helping them not just to improve particular papers but to understand fundamental principles of effective writing that will enable them to continue learning throughout their lives. The teaching of writing, perhaps more than any other discipline, therefore requires special attention to class sizes, teaching loads, the availability of teaching materials, and the development of additional resources that enhance classroom instruction.”

<http://www.ncte.org/groups/cccc/positions/107680.htm>

”No more than 20 students should be permitted in any writing class. Ideally, classes should be limited to 15. Students cannot learn to write without writing. In sections larger than 20, teachers cannot possibly give student writing the immediate and individual response necessary for growth and improvement.”

<http://www.ncte.org/about/over/positions/level/coll/107626.htm?source=gs>

3. **Comparisons with peer institutions.** An on-line site lists caps for writing courses at several other institutions. The URL is <http://comppile.tamucc.edu/classsize.htm>. Looking through this list makes it clear that schools with which we would like to compare ourselves have significantly lower caps on their first-year writing courses. For instance, Beloit caps at 16 students, Brandeis at 17, Cornell at 17, Dickinson at 16, Duke at 12, Harvard at 15, Haverford at 15, Johns Hopkins at 15, NYU at 15, Princeton at 12, Stanford at 15, Wellesley at 15, etc.
4. **Concern about future “sliding.”** Our committee is concerned that if a clear statement isn’t made at this stage, the possibility (and, in fact, likelihood) exists that course sizes and/or teaching credit for W-courses will get worse. This is particularly relevant now in light of the move to a 5-course teaching load. In fact, we have

already heard rumors that the Engineering College's laudatory approach of granting extra teaching credit for heavily-enrolled W-courses is already in danger from the 5-course plan.

5. **Increasing faculty participation in the Writing Program.** Several faculty have commented to us that they have been hesitant to offer W1 or W2 courses out of fear of the additional workload that that would entail. This recommendation, if implemented, would almost certainly increase the number of faculty (from a wide range of departments) who would offer W courses. As one faculty member put it: "If I knew that I could limit enrollment to 20 students, then I'd probably make one of my courses a W2 course."

Ultimately, there are both curricular (principled) arguments and pragmatic arguments when discussing caps and teaching credit. From a pedagogical perspective, the recommendation is clearly appropriate. The objections that we have heard against the recommendation are pragmatic and ultimately financial in nature. For instance, concerns about curricular issues requiring some W-courses to be heavily enrolled can be mitigated by granting additional teaching credit to faculty who teach W-courses that must have large enrollments. Additional teaching credit of this nature would also alleviate concerns about faculty who might feel abused teaching these larger courses. (It should also be noted that there are many faculty who feel abused *now* teaching writing courses with large enrollments without any additional teaching credit, so this isn't a new problem that would be created by implementation of the recommendation.)

Ultimately, then, the most significant objection is financial. From that perspective, this is the ideal time to make a statement of principle in favor of limiting W-course enrollment considering that we are currently engaged in a Strategic Planning process which will be followed by a major capital campaign. The review committee does not expect that this recommendation will result in an immediate change in the W-courses. It is hoped, however, that this will raise this issue as one worthy of additional discussion during the development of tactics to support the strategic plan.