CAP’s Final Recommendation on Writing Requirement

TO: Steering Committee

FROM: Committee on Academic Programs

RE: Final Recommendation on Writing Requirement

DATE: May 4th, 2015

**Background:**

On February 4th, 2015 CAP received a charge from the Steering Committee that outlined a proposed change in the College’s writing requirement. This charge quoted a memo sent from the Liberal Learning Program Council that suggested that there be a change instituted in the “mid-level” writing requirement. The change would involve and alternate policy in which “the mid-level requirement would be [spread] across a number of courses” rather than be fulfilled with a single course (which is the current policy). Steering asked CAP to “delegate to LLPC the work of crafting a preliminary recommendation” and that once this recommendation was completed “to seek testimony” on the proposed change.

**Testimony:**

CAP’s LLPC representative, Professor Anne Peel, agreed to speak to LLPC after discussions on this charge were held during CAP’s February 25th meeting. The requested recommendation was sent to CAP by LLPC’s chair, Professor Nelson Rodriguez, on April 7th, 2015. CAP solicited testimony via an email sent to the TCNJ campus community, through its Student Government representatives, and through an open forum that was held on April 29th, 2015. This forum was conducted by Professor Nina Ringer and was also attended by several other representatives from LLPC.

**Final Recommendation:**

CAP recommends the proposed revision in the College’s writing requirement and that the alternative mid-level writing option be approved as is outlined in the policy below.

**Writing-Enhanced Curriculum Proposal**

**April 6, 2015**

**Background**

The writing-intensive requirement has been in place at The College of New Jersey for more than ten years now, since Fall 2003. The existing requirement, that students fulfill through the First Seminar, a mid-level writing-intensive course and a senior capstone in the major, locates and separates the writing-intensive experiences into discrete courses.

In the summer of 2014, the Department of Chemistry, identifying a problem in their students’ writing ability by the time of the mid-level writing-intensive course, proposed to the Director of Writing a new way to address these writing concerns:

“The chemistry department proposes to adopt a new system whereby several course are utilized in combination to fulfill TCNJ’s mid-level and capstone writing intensive requirements. The Department has currently assigned CHE 372 (Thermodynamics) as the department’s mid-level writing intensive course (approved by TCNJ writing program in 2009). While CHE 372 has successfully met the writing intensive guidelines of the TCNJ writing program (http://writing.pages.tcnj.edu/), we find that it does not expose students to different writing genres nor does it provide students the opportunity to write within each of the chemistry sub-disciplines. These issues, coupled with increased enrollments in CHE 372, necessitate a new paradigm for teaching students how to write as chemists.

This need to emphasize writing beyond CHE 372 is echoed in the 2013 departmental external review, which states: ‘*We encourage the department to follow through on their plans to distribute the writing-intensive requirement among several courses rather than continuing to concentrate the requirement in CHE 372 (Thermodynamics). This modification would achieve a more balanced workload for faculty, demonstrate to students the importance of writing in all areas of chemistry, and offer an opportunity to develop writing skills over time throughout a student’s major curriculum*.’”

Because this proposal represented a structural change, the Liberal Learning Program Council determined such a change would need to go to the Committee on Academic Programs. Research led us to the innovative Writing-Enriched program at the University of Minnesota.

**Definition of a Writing Enhanced Curriculum**

Though our current model is an adequate method for teaching students writing skill in the discipline, we propose a more writing-infused curriculum as an optional path for satisfying the writing-intensive requirement. This option does not replace the writing-intensive courses already established, but can enhance what we currently offer. The requirement could be modeled on the very successful Writing Enhanced Curriculum (WEC) program at

the University of Minnesota, begun in 2007. This model has become a well-established approach there, with 23 departments with approved Writing Plans, and other colleges and universities instituting the program on their campuses. Probably the most compelling benefit of the WEC model is that departments explore the types and numbers of writing assignments their majors need, determining:

* what specific composing processes are integral to this discipline;
* which courses are using writing or composing assignments, and which courses would benefit from a writing or composing assignment;
* how the courses can most effectively sequence those assignments;
* the writing proficiency this discipline expects from the majors by the time they graduate;
* how student writing should be assessed;
* what instructional support is needed for this plan.

Though some departments are already offering writing assignments in courses other than the writing-intensive, they are not necessarily sequencing assignments in the way that a departmental study could allow, looking closely at the possibilities for how the assignments could build upon one another. The WEC model would formalize that practice, providing the opportunity for more sustained writing practice for the four years of the major.

Guiding principles from The University of Minnesota WEC Program:

1. **Writing can be flexibly defined as an articulation of thinking, an act of choosing among an array of modes or forms, only some of which involve words.**
2. **Writing ability is continually developed rather than mastered.**
3. **Because writing is instrumental to learning, it follows that writing instruction is the shared responsibility of content experts in all academic disciplines.**
4. **The incorporation of writing into content instruction can be most meaningfully achieved when those who teach are provided multiple opportunities to articulate, interrogate, and communicate their assumptions and expectations.**
5. **Those who infuse writing instruction into their teaching require support.**

Beginning from data gathered through a student survey, a faculty survey and a professional affiliate survey, interested departments create a WEC. To formulate the departmental Writing Plan, over a recommended four meetings, faculty determine the writing types and proficiencies their students need. They examine writing assignments faculty are already using, determine whether or not they need to create additional assignments, and organize how the writing assignments are sequenced across their course offerings. The combination of these courses becomes the Writing-Enhanced Curriculum. The Plan is then submitted to the Writing Committee for feedback and approval. At TCNJ, we could include within this plan the existing writing-intensive courses in each department. Because WEC is an optional writing-intensive path, only departments that want to participate would create a Writing Plan.

**Our current Writing-Intensive model**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Fall 2015 | First Seminar | Introduction to conventions of academic writing |
| Fall 2017 | Mid-Level course in major | First disciplinary writing-intensive |
| Spring 2019 | Senior capstone | Writing-intensive study in major |

Currently, students are required to take at least three writing-intensive courses.

**A potential WEC model**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Fall 2016 | First Seminar | Introduction to conventions of academic writing |
| Spring 2017 | Discipline | One writing or composing assignment |
| Fall 2017 | Discipline | Two writing or composing assignments |
| Spring 2018 | Discipline | Two courses, each requiring one writing or composing assignment |
| Fall 2018 | Mid-level writing-intensive course OR WEC | One course requiring multiple drafts and feedback |
| Spring 2019 | Discipline | At least one writing or composing assignment in preparation for the senior capstone. |
| Fall 2019 | Discipline | At least one writing or composing assignment, possibly the capstone. |
| Spring 2020 | Discipline | At least one writing or composing assignment, possibly the capstone. |

**Rationale for the WEC**

* Designing the curriculum allows departments to explore the writing they are offering in each course in the major, and how they can best sequence the writing skills involved;
* Departments communicate a clear message to students that writing is essential in their major;
* The writing intensive experience would not be reserved for a few courses, but writing activities would be spread across the courses, creating instead a writing-intensive curriculum. In this way, students would get more exposure to writing by more frequent practice, essential for developing as confident writers in the discipline;
* With potentially stronger writing skills, students would graduate better positioned for the job market.

A sustained effort at writing is fundamental to development of skill in writing in the discipline. We believe a WEC program could help us achieve that sustained effort. It provides students a thoughtful and deliberate approach to writing in the discipline. It offers faculty an opportunity to discuss the writing and composing in their discipline, what proficiencies they expect from their students, and in what ways they might offer those assignments.

“The WEC model develops from two related convictions. First, those who teach undergraduate students in the disciplines should be the ones to shape the writing instruction and assessment that occur there. Second, curricular infusion of discipline-relevant writing instruction will not be adequately achieved until local faculty groups have had a chance to examine, and possibly revise, assumptions about what writing and writing instruction look like and entail. At the heart of the WEC process, therefore, is a series of facilitated discussions in which departmental faculty react to student writing samples and survey data and then react to their reactions, all in the name of generating content for their Writing Plan” (Anson, et al.).

**LLPC Preliminary Recommendation**

LLPC recommends an optional path for the mid-level writing-intensive requirement. The FSP would remain the first writing-intensive course. Departments could continue with the mid-level writing-intensive course OR replace the mid-level writing-intensive course with a WEC, offering students more opportunities for writing assignments that would culminate in the senior capstone. The capstone would remain the final writing-intensive requirement. Departments wishing to adopt WEC would submit a proposal to the Writing Committee, the committee which approved the writing-intensive courses. Proposals approved by the Writing Committee would be submitted to LLPC for final approval. The Writing Program will pursue opportunities to act as liaisons to help departments work through their proposals and to provide additional resources for information.

Works Cited

Anson, Chris M., Deanna P. Dannels, Pamela Flash , Amy L. Housley Gaffney. “Big Rubrics and Weird Genres: The Futility of Using Generic Assessment Tools Across Diverse Instructional Contexts.” *The Journal of Writing Assessment*. January 2012, Vol. 5, Issue 1.

The University of Minnesota Writing-Enriched Curriculum website.

<http://wec.umn.edu/>

The site is a rich resource that includes:

Surveys that help departments formulate Writing Plans; The approved Writing Plan from each participating department; Detailed bibliography; Detailed assessment plans.

<http://wac.colostate.edu/principles/>

<http://wac.colostate.edu/principles/>

**Bibliography:**

Adams, Ben. [“From Problem Set to Design Proposal: Fostering Discipline-Relevant Writing(and Writing Instruction) in Mechanical Engineering.”](http://wec.umn.edu/IWAC%202012.BA.pdf) University of Minnesota – Mechanical Engineering.

[“Are students enrolled in WEC majors seeing changes in writing instruction?: WEC & SERUcollaborate for a baseline measurement of student perceptions of writinginstruction at the University of Minnesota.”](http://wec.umn.edu/pdfs/2nd%20brief.SERU.Final.pdf) WEC Assessment Update, December 2010.

[The Future of WAC is WEC: Infusing Relevant Writing into Diverse Undergraduate Curricula](http://wec.umn.edu/IWAC%202012.PF.ppsx) (Power Point Show)

[“Is student writing improving as a result of WEC?: Assessing discipline‐specific studentwriting at the University of Minnesota.”](http://wec.umn.edu/pdfs/WEC%20Brief.9-20-2010.Final.pdf) WEC Assessment Update, August 2010.

[“What Do Students in WEC Units Say About Writing and Writing Instruction?: Findings from Undergraduate Student Group Interviews.”](http://wec.umn.edu/pdfs/3rd%20brief.student%20interviews.pdf) WEC Assessment Update, February 2011.

WAC Clearinghouse. “Statement of WAC Principles and Practices.” [http://wac.colostate.edu/principles/http://wac.colostate.edu/principles/](http://wac.colostate.edu/principles/)