THE EFFECTS OF WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM ON COLLEGES

Barbara Nodine began by describing the studies that she conducted at Beaver College in 1977 and 1981. She devised questionnaires for faculty members and students in all departments to answer. These instruments were designed to evaluate faculty attitudes and practices and students' attitudes toward writing. Nodine was concerned with documenting changes that have occurred as a result of faculty involvement in workshops that focused on writing across the curriculum.

The first part of the questionnaire addressed to faculty included the following items: number of papers required in a course, length of the papers, definition of audience for the student, description of the papers' purposes, format, allowance for peer and/or professor preview of papers-in-progress, presence of feedback from professor on papers-in-progress, use of ungraded writing assignments, and consideration of written expression as well as content. The second part of the faculty questionnaire dealt with faculty attitudes toward the importance of grammar, the importance of the composing process, the question of which departments should be concerned with teaching writing, the number of rough drafts allowed, willingness on the part of the teacher to help students learn to write within the context of his discipline, the penalty for mechanical errors, the value of drill in grammar, the use of writing assistants as readers, the use of pre-writing and editing as part of the writing process, and departmental responsibility for delivering adequate instruction in writing. The third part of the faculty questionnaire presented a student essay and asked faculty to read the paper and supply helpful commentary.

The student questionnaire, devised by a senior in psychology at Beaver College, examined students' opinions about writing in general, about their own process of writing, and about the writing techniques they had been exposed to in courses. Nodine discussed the results of the 1977 study in detail. Between 1977 and 1981, faculty members in the different disciplines participated in a series of workshops on teaching writing. They worked together to reinforce the importance of writing in each discipline, and they began to see the need for presenting writing assignments in such a way that students would understand and be alert for audience and purpose. Workshop faculty also agreed that greater consideration should be given to students' writing processes rather than to conventional rules and that the responsibility for teaching writing did not rest with the English Department alone.

When the faculty were again questioned in 1981, it was clear that they had more positive attitudes toward teaching writing. In particular, two items on the questionnaire indicated a positive change: a new focus on instruction in writing, and the opportunity for students to write more than one draft. Also, greater attention was being paid to diversity in the type and length of writing assignments and their comments to students were more helpful and positive. Nodine discussed other results of the 1981 survey, and she concluded by stating that she believes that individual faculty members, in their respective disciplines, must be the ones to decide what the writing requirements are in their particular courses. They need to think through their assumptions and meet with one another. Regardless of their field, professors should teach students to write in their discipline.

Since its founding in 1971, Stockton has had an interdisciplinary focus, allowing permeable programs to be housed in divisions. Faculty members have a program of primary affiliation and additional membership in any degree program of which they are knowledgeable and in which they would like to teach. Also, General Studies is a separate curriculum with no co-requisite courses. Each faculty member, except those in professional studies, is contractually obligated to teach two General Studies courses a year. These are individually designed, interdisciplinary courses in the general arts and humanities, social sciences, or mathematical and natural sciences. Students take thirty-two credit hours or one-quarter of their total coursework in General Studies. Faculty members are hired for their ability to stretch beyond disciplinary boundaries. Finally, the founding philosophy of the college was that academic skills were to be taught contextually in General Studies courses. No writing courses are offered, other than a creative writing seminar. There is no English Department; rather, there is a program which teaches literature and language, but not writing.

In 1975, a college-wide Task Force on Basic Academic Skills was convened and it recommended that incoming freshmen be tested in reading, writing, and quantitative reasoning, and that those students in need of instruction...
In these areas be placed in courses, Dugan was one of two faculty members hired to train faculty from academic disciplines to teach developmental writing and critical thinking. In 1976, they developed BAS 101 College Writing, the first writing course, and the first required course of any kind, offered at Stockton. Over half of the fifteen sections of BAS 101 were taught by faculty members from such programs as Chemistry, Environmental Science, Business Law, and Economics who had gone through three weeks of summer workshops on how to teach writing to unskilled incoming freshmen. Students were given full college credit for this course, and faculty taught it in place of the General Studies obligation. In 1976, faculty was also trained in holistic scoring so that it could read and evaluate the more than 1,000 placement essays. Thus, faculty was involved in the writing process from the beginning: teaching and testing writing were college-wide academic activities. Participating in reading placement essays gave faculty a sense of their own expertise, a sense that they could achieve consensus, a sense that they knew what good writing was.

In 1981, a Faculty Writing Task Force met and proposed a comprehensive writing program. It was based on the foundations of cross-college faculty participation in the BAS and WAC programs and expanded to cover students throughout the four years of college. To mobilize more intense faculty involvement once the comprehensive writing program was passed, two-week faculty writing institutes were conducted in the summers of 1982, 1983, and 1984. The faculty participants were paid $500 for their participation and met for eight hours a day. The forty-five faculty members who went through the training period now form a guiding nucleus that can be depended upon to help train other faculty.

According to Dugan, since 1978 all incoming freshmen have been required to take the New Jersey College Basic Skills Placement Test. It is a four-hour test, consisting of several parts: tests of computational skills, tests of algebraic skills, reading comprehension, sentence sense, and a twenty-minute essay test. The state requires all public institutions to administer the test as part of their data collection, but it does not require Stockton to use the results. The faculty uses the essay portion of the test for placement purposes, though it has expressed some dissatisfaction: Twenty minutes is not considered enough time, the annual topic is often found stunning in its dullness, and the turnaround time that elapses between the test and the receipt of scores is felt to be too long.

The New Jersey Department of Higher Education also mandates pre- and post-testing in developmental writing classes. Some New Jersey State and County schools use the New Jersey essay as the post-test, but Stockton does not. At Stockton, students are given the topics in advance to figure out what topic they would prefer, to organize their thoughts, to gather evidence, and to talk to others. They cannot bring notes or drafts with them when they write the essay. They have one hour to write. All essays are read together at the end of the semester. The identifying information includes the name of the student who wrote the essay, who the student is or whether they are a pre-test or a post-test. The third test is the Junior Writing Test. Faculty felt that one more opportunity was needed to evaluate the level of competence at the junior level. Students who qualify for the test are required to take it. They then take writing courses during the junior and senior years. In this way, writing is continued throughout the four years at Stockton. A packet of materials distributed to those attending the session—a brochure describing the Stockton Writing Program, a lengthy document entitled “Writing at Stockton,” and a statistical study called “Performance on the Fall 1985 Junior Writing Test”—are available by mail from Dugan.