

To: Department Chairs

From: Faculty Senate Subcommittee for Writing and Reading
Dan Melzer, Chair

Date: April 12, 2006

Re: Proposed changes to the Writing Intensive Requirement

M E M O R A N D U M

The Faculty Senate Writing and Reading Subcommittee would like to take the opportunity provided by Beth Kivel to open a dialogue about the proposed change to the writing intensive requirement made at the Faculty Senate on March 30, 2006. The Subcommittee wanted to briefly address Dr. Kivel's concerns and provide more information and resources for faculty to consult as they consider the writing recommendations put forth by this inter-disciplinary group. The stated concerns fall into two areas—the process taken in making the recommendation and the substance of the recommendation itself—so this memo attempts to provide some clarification on both of these issues. In addition to this memo, faculty can access the full proposal of the Writing and Reading Subcommittee in both long form:

http://www.csus.edu/acse/archive/0506/06_fsa_mar_30_A-1.doc

and as an executive summary:

http://www.csus.edu/acse/archive/0506/06_fsa_mar_30_A.doc

In terms of process:

At the Fall 2005 retreat of the Faculty Senate, a special session was held to discuss the writing experiences of our undergraduate students. Faculty from across campus shared their thoughts, concerns, and hopes for student writing and felt there was much to be gained by envisioning the writing careers of our students more comprehensively. There was a sense that many requirements had been made over time without an over-arching sense of how they all worked together as a cohesive whole, thus a need was identified by this Faculty Senate group that changes could improve the university writing program. As the Writing and Reading Subcommittee had been established to address campus writing requirements (it contains representatives from each college and the General Education/Graduation Requirements Committee, the University Reading and Writing Coordinator, the University ESL Coordinator, the Writing Programs Coordinator, and the GVAR Coordinator), the Subcommittee was charged with taking the faculty concerns and generating a proposal to set forth a more comprehensive writing experience for our students. The Subcommittee was given until April 2006 to review the faculty concerns, examine our current writing requirements, explore the best practices at other universities, consider research on the theory and practice of writing, and submit a proposal which would articulate a progressive sequence of writing experiences to enhance our students' learning.

After much research and deliberation, the Subcommittee developed a number of recommendations that would create a more programmatic and theoretically sound approach to undergraduate writing instruction. It is important to note that the writing intensive requirement

proposal is only one of many suggested revisions to the current curriculum—all of which were designed to build logically upon one another so as to be more interconnected—and changes were suggested at the freshman, sophomore, and junior levels so that at each step our students would be building their writing and learning skills. Although budgetary concerns were not the charge of the Subcommittee, it did take great care to make suggestions that would not require substantially increased funds during a time when academic funding is quite tight. That said, the Subcommittee did recognize that the proposed changes would impact several departments, and thus suggested that, if approved, the changes be phased in over an appropriate period of time.

The Subcommittee then forwarded its proposal to the appropriate Faculty Senate committees: reporting first to the General Education/Graduation Requirement Policies Committee, then to the Curriculum Policies Committee, and finally to the Faculty Senate Executive Committee for their input and consideration. Interestingly, the writing intensive requirement recommendation has actually been under discussion and consideration since 2002, when it was originally drafted. It was approved by the Writing and Reading Subcommittee, approved by the Curriculum Policies Committee, approved by the General Education/Graduation Requirement Policies Committee, forwarded to the Faculty Senate Executive Committee, and, in April 2005, given a first reading at the Faculty Senate.

In terms of substance:

There is a large body of research in composition theory, cognitive development, and educational processes that explains how writing skills move from general principles to specific, disciplinary practices as students advance. Rhetoric and writing specialist David Bartholomae notes, “There comes a point...where ‘field-specific’ or ‘domain-specific’ schemata (what I have called ‘interpretive strategies’) become more important than general problem-solving processes. Thinking, learning, writing—all these become bound to the context of a particular discourse.”¹ As the Subcommittee reviewed the relevant literature and comparable programs at other universities, it became apparent that most “writing intensive” courses were housed within a student’s major department. Students move from general academic writing skills in their freshman composition classes, to more advanced writing skills in intermediate classes (thus the recommendation to modify English 20 as part of the proposed changes), into discipline-specific courses in their upper-division curriculum. Thus, it was not the sense that students should not do any writing outside their discipline, but rather that the university should recognize the need to emphasize the place of writing within the discipline as students move toward more advanced work.

While the Subcommittee would love to see more writing in every class a student takes, clearly this is not a realistic goal. There are limited funds to support the smaller class size necessary to focus specific attention on writing. The consideration was then raised about where these funds would be best spent. Allowing the writing intensive requirement to be taken outside a student’s discipline certainly utilizes the many benefits of writing as a mode of learning, but it neglects the research that shows advanced writing is more domain-specific. Taking the class within one’s chosen field enables students to use writing not only to learn but also as a way of participating in their major discipline’s critical conversations. Focusing on disciplinary writing has been a key

¹ Bartholomae, David. “Inventing the University.” *When a Writer Can’t Write: Studies in Writer’s Block and Other Composing Process Problems*. Ed. Mike Rose. New York: Guilford Press, 1985.

concern of the university for some time. Departments are now required to address the writing of their majors in departmental reviews, surveys have been taken that show students and faculty are disappointed with the amount of writing taught within the major, and alumni have noted that they were often required to write much more than anticipated in their post-graduate jobs and had not been as well prepared in their disciplinary writing as they could have been. The Subcommittee suggests that if finite resources are available to support student writing at the upper-division level, these resources are best spent in preparing majors to fully participate in their chosen fields.

The trend toward moving writing intensive courses into the major is not only evident in the national research, it has also been evident on our own campus. For more than ten years, the writing intensive requirement (a graduation requirement—not a general education requirement) could be taken within the major, and this option is now available in over half of the departments on campus (32 departments). If this requirement were moved entirely into the major, students would still get exposure to writing-rich environments in their general education courses (which mandate a certain amount of writing). Thus, the general education requirements would still enable students to envision the place of writing for life-long learning while allowing the writing intensive requirement to solidify a more discipline-specific knowledge of writing and learning.

The Faculty Senate Writing and Reading Subcommittee appreciates Dr. Kivel's specific recommendations, most of which call for research on the issue under consideration. The Subcommittee carefully considered a wide variety of research and has included a brief annotated bibliography at the end of this memo that details the scope and findings of a sampling of the research that was considered. The other recommendation calls for conversation, and the Subcommittee understands that the Faculty Senators will undertake this conversation within their departments and among themselves when arriving at a decision on the recommendation. In addition, if departments would like further information on how this change might impact a specific curriculum and/or student population, the Subcommittee would be delighted to send representatives to meet with faculty to answer questions, brainstorm ideas, and envision applications.