

## **How Assessment Led to A Proposal for a Grinnell Writing Program**

The purpose of the Portfolio Workshop is two-fold: to assess how we teach writing at Grinnell and to offer student participants feedback on the writing they submitted to meet four criteria (revision, coherent analysis, argument from sources, and use of appropriate grammar and style). To that end, from June 1-4, a group of 18 Grinnell faculty read portfolios from a sample of first-, second-, and third-year students, with each of the last two groups building on their previous submissions. Workshop participants found examples and accounts of exciting writing pedagogy through their collective reading and discussion: faculty provided intensive mentoring and guidance to help struggling students succeed, designed real-world tasks to engage students in critical thinking, employed in-class, non-graded small group writing to enhance discussion, challenged talented writers to develop even more refined skills, and employed effective practices of scaffolding and revision.

However, we also discovered that students at Grinnell encounter the curriculum in such different ways that we cannot claim all students gain exposure to an sequence of courses effective in helping them develop as writers, even though our mission declares our aim to produce “women and men who can think clearly and can write and speak persuasively and even eloquently.” We found that some students progress in their writing skills, and that others, for whatever reasons, do not. Our shared assessment of these portfolios also revealed findings crucial to the way we teach writing: that students need more direction to understand revision; that extensive feedback is more helpful to students in draft stages than on a graded piece of writing; that more specific, directive prompts tend to allow students to succeed even if they lack preparation for the demands of college writing; and that discussing writing with students benefits them whatever their level of skill.

We think that, currently, the construction of our writing program disadvantages the very students most needing help—those underprepared by their previous educational experiences. We conclude that our writing program needs additional structure that will encourage faculty to work intentionally toward providing all students equal opportunity to become better writers. We hope that, as the suggested changes are made and the portfolio project continues, we can learn from this qualitative assessment whether these changes improve student learning.

Since the goal of institutional assessment is programmatic evaluation and improvement, we recommend that Grinnell augment its writing program in certain intentional ways that will target students who enter Grinnell with fewer writing skills but will also challenge more skilled writers to improve. We envision a four-part program as follows:

***Part I: Strengthen the tutorial.*** The tutorial ought to remain our central focus for introducing the teaching of writing, although we must recognize that no one-semester course can, by itself, turn weak writers into strong ones. An important part of the Writing Program must be a reassertion that teaching writing is central to the tutorial. To that end, we need better training

and support for faculty who will teach tutorial to help them learn more effective writing pedagogy. Especially since we are asking faculty to teach tutorial earlier in their career than ever, and since we emphasize that teaching in the tutorial will strongly affect the granting of tenure, we owe it to both faculty and tutorial students to provide such training. Faculty need more opportunities to learn about how to teach writing; they need support for workshops during the year and for concentrated opportunities in the summer.

To ease their way and help focus our energies, we recommend that the College move away from our 10-item product-based rating scale used to judge writing in the tutorial and substitute a more process-oriented skills approach that would allow a more integrated teaching and assessment of writing throughout the four years<sup>1</sup>. We could begin by setting as standards for the tutorial the four criteria that the portfolio project examines—the abilities to revise, to analyze coherently, to argue from sources, and to use appropriate grammar and style. The tutorial ought to be dedicated to helping students begin to develop these skills; if these changes are made, the evaluation for the tutorial should be similarly revised to ask students to reflect on whether or not their professor assisted them in each of these four skills.

***Part II: Make writing intensive courses with limited enrollment available widely across the curriculum.*** We ask that each department offer at least one writing intensive course each semester; this process could begin with a few willing departments and gradually be phased in across the disciplines. These courses need not necessarily involve extensive writing, but should involve intensive mentoring about writing.

We suggest three potential models for structuring these courses: 1) a peer-mentor based model in line with the mentoring program in the Science Learning Center, in which the peers attend classes regularly and act as classroom community-builders; 2) a Writing-Lab mentored model in which Lab professionals attached to a specific class or area sit in on classes at least once a week and hold open certain hours for working with students in that class; and 3) a +1 credit add-on students can select for a particular course, in conjunction with enrollment in College Writing; the professor could work with the Writing Lab professionals, peer mentors, or both to offer those few students a more intensive mentoring experience.

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<sup>1</sup> We arrived at a tentative list of skills that we suspect might appeal across disciplines, but further work could refine this list: summarize, revise, integrate sources into own voice, be aware of audience, be aware of self as writer, become part of the scholarly conversation, communicate in different genres, write a clear thesis with a coherent narrative or intentional argument, use writing as a means of critical thinking and discovery, engage in a debate/discussion with the literature, realize that skills are transferable, learn when it's appropriate to seek help, and become familiar with disciplinary conventions.

Any of these models would provide opportunities now lacking in the curriculum for students to improve their writing skills outside the tutorial.

***Part III: Challenge departments and concentrations to articulate the communication skills required in the major or concentration and map out how their courses teach those skills.*** This goal is already being met, to some extent, through various departmental self-studies, but departments should be challenged to make constant the conversation about matching departmental goals with course level goals and activities. To encourage this conversation, the college should compensate faculty for the extraordinary time commitment such work requires. Most important, the faculty should share widely the results of this work.

***Part IV: Augment the culminating experiences--MAPS, seminar papers, performances, presentations—with more serious attention to how students communicate.*** These experiences should be widely available, though we do not suggest requiring them of all students. We do advocate using Professor Lopatto's assessment of these scholarly culminations and having this assessment be discussed with students at all levels, starting with the tutorial, so that the scholarly skills we expect students to develop are transparent to all. We also advocate that students in such projects receive strong encouragement to use available resources: for example, they might be advised to consult with the Writing Lab or engage in discussions with peer writing groups, so that they are cultivating a community of peer readers and scholars.

**Resources needed to implement this program:**

- Provide funds for workshops on writing pedagogy, both for those who will be teaching tutorial and for other faculty.
- Phase in funds for faculty hires so that smaller classes can be offered as Writing Intensive Courses.
- Pay Writing Lab staff to work part of the summer so that students doing summer MAPS have help available.
- Hire peer writing mentors across the curriculum.
- Allow money for faculty travel to see what other institutions are doing to improve writing instruction.
- Allow money for departments or concentrations that want to meet during the academic year or in the summer to focus on teaching writing. Encourage them to share their good ideas.

- Create a summer workshop for students to work on writing; not a model of remediation or of summer school, but a community of writers working on projects of interest to them—Watsons, essay contests, law review.
- Provide a professional in teaching writing who could consult with faculty about their pedagogy; such a position might eventually become part of a broader Teaching and Learning Center.
- Obtain grant money to help us accomplish these goals.

