

Report from portfolio workshop May 2011

This portfolio workshop discussed the need for the College to pay more attention to writing, the need for improvement in teaching practices, and the possibility of changes in the portfolio project.

Recommendations for how the College can increase the attention it pays to teaching writing

- The College should aim to assure that all students have the opportunity to improve their writing during their Grinnell careers. To meet that goal, the College should implement the recommendations made in the workshop report from last year: to strengthen the tutorial; to make intensive writing courses with limited enrollments available across the curriculum; to challenge departments and concentrations to articulate the communication skills required in the major or concentration and map out how their courses teach those skills; to augment the culminating experiences--MAPS, seminar papers, performances, presentations—with more serious attention to how students communicate.
- When College representatives discuss the tutorial, they must construct this course not as the place where students learn to write but as the place where students begin their 4-year process of learning to write. The tutorial should aim to introduce assumptions, themes, and techniques that students will continue to encounter in upper-level courses.
- The College needs to assure that a wide array of intensive writing courses is available across the curriculum. Advisors must be aware of them and must talk with students about the need to develop writing skills across the four years. A wide variety of students would benefit from an increase in the number of writing-intensive courses--not just students who need extra help with their writing, but strong writers who want to develop their skills even further and solid writers who would like to add greater nuance and sophistication to their prose.
- To deal with the patchiness the portfolios suggest about how we teach students to write at Grinnell, we need to reemphasize mid-level writing. While the tutorial may introduce writing as a process and the MAP may help students in the process of writing a culminating paper, we need to assure that the courses in between those emphasize writing as a process. Students need the opportunity to take many courses that include scaffolding and revision as normal parts of the writing process.
- To achieve the goal that all students have the opportunity to become competent writers, the College needs to expand the Writing Fellow program.

Recommendations on teaching practices:

- Faculty need to consider carefully the feedback they give in the body of the paper. Using “track changes” to make comments may help both improve the readability of such comments and allow the student to distinguish between minor errors and major problems. In addition, giving the student a narrative summary of the paper’s strengths and weaknesses may help students improve their writing.
- Faculty should act on the assumption that feedback is more helpful if students are able to revise.
- Carefully constructed peer review—where faculty guide students to analyze rather than evaluate—can help improve student writing. We thought that peer review worked well where the reviewers were asked to identify structural elements of the writing, to identify the thesis, and to trace how the topics sentences and evidence connect to the thesis.
- Having students reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of their own writing can help them improve.
- Faculty members who lay out clear expectations in their assignments encourage better writing. If the faculty member intentionally explains what writing skills the assignment will help students develop, students have more opportunity to improve.
- Faculty may wish to assess the students’ recognition of how writing is a mode of learning.
- Faculty should consider whether students are being rewarded with high grades for weak effort.
- Faculty should make assignments that are clear, focused, and enticing.
- The College must offer faculty multiple and continuing opportunities to improve their teaching of writing, not just in summer workshops but in 4:15 and lunchtime workshops, with refreshments provided. Both the Dean’s office and departments must encourage faculty to work toward this College-wide goal; for example, first-time tutors should receive robust targeted invitations to attend the portfolio and tutorial workshops before they teach tutorial.
- As the College moves forward with strategic planning, it should consider offering a 2-2 class load to allow time to teach, assess, and improve teaching. The End of Course evaluations should ask questions about how writing has improved. Faculty activity reports should also reflect how teach about writing.

- We should define what we mean by teaching writing, and include not just formal academic papers as assignments in courses but also include writing to learn such as Lab notebooks, blogs, wikis, and informal papers.
- The College should include in its assessment efforts more transcript analysis to figure out what skills students are actually exposed to.

The group made suggestions about how the portfolio project might be improved.

- They found that criterion 2 [coherent analysis] and criterion 3 [effective argument] are difficult to rank because both include more than one thing.
- Now that the portfolio project has been going for four years, organizers should consider changing or adding criteria. For example, students might be asked to submit an assignment they found particularly difficult, and explain why; if they don't have a paper that meets a criterion, they might be asked to include another paper and explain why they chose it. In particular, seniors might be asked to contribute a piece of writing they are proud of, one that reveals the best feedback or best assignment, a piece of writing they did for a non-academic audience, or a essay for admission into a program they care about.
- The participants were interested in having more exit interviews, with senior portfolio keepers, asking questions such as:
 - Why didn't you take more high-level courses?
 - What did the portfolio project not let you do that you would rather have done?
 - What piece of writing are you most proud of?
- The workshop might include more detailed transcript analysis
- The organizers might consider including students as participants in the portfolio workshops.
- Organizers might do exit interviews with seniors other than those in the portfolio project about how their trajectory through the curriculum has improved their writing.
- Since the reading load in this workshop is so heavy, participants in the portfolio workshop should be encouraged to read quickly or to skim. (This suggestion was implemented in the workshop in August 2011.)
- Organizers of the portfolio project should consider how to solve the problem of whether the structure of the project (timing, requirements) interferes with our getting the culminating papers from students.

