

Report of the Hewlett working group on writing requirements at Macalester College

Introduction

As one of several working groups established by the Hewlett Grant's Center for Teaching and Scholarship, eight faculty and staff met regularly during Spring semester of 2002 to consider how to improve writing instruction at Macalester College. The origins of this group go back to an English Department ad hoc committee that proposed a writing requirement and the strategic directions report that cited a need for a more rigorous writing experience at Macalester College. As there is no writing requirement for Macalester College students, this working group looked at that question as a focal point for a wider discussion of writing across the curriculum. We reviewed the earlier recommendation for a writing requirement by the ad hoc committee of the English Department (November 7, 2000). We looked at several articles, one book, *Reconceiving Writing, Rethinking Writing Instruction* (Joseph Petraglia, ed., Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995), and Joel Baer's "Report of a Survey of Forty Comparison Colleges with Respect to the Teaching of Writing Across the Curriculum" (June 11, 1999). Through this reading, a faculty survey we conducted, and much lively discussion, we arrived at the recommendations contained in this report.

This working group offers two models for a writing requirement at Macalester College, a minimal model that might be realistic in the current fiscal position of the institution and an ideal model that would be desirable were resources unlimited. Our minimal model agrees with the general outline of the ad hoc committee's proposed writing requirement; however, we offer modifications. In particular, we recommend:

- a single "W" course designation, rather than the two separate designations of that committee's report;
- specific student competencies for FY courses and "W" courses, which is significantly different from the earlier committee's method for describing the courses; and
- fourteen specific recommendations to Macalester College to help improve writing instruction (the earlier committee only discussed the writing requirement):
 1. Improve "W" course designations
 2. The College should establish a clear list of outcomes for student writing in first year courses, and assist faculty in meeting these objectives.
 3. Departments and Programs should establish a clear list of outcomes for student writing in the major.
 4. The College should run a pilot program assessing the use of a standard text for FY courses (Transition to College Writing).
 5. The CST and MAX Center should provide teaching materials—handouts, guides, sample assignments, books, etc.—for faculty.
 6. The MAX Center should provide increased Web support for students.
 7. The MAX Center should provide MAX Center Liaisons with "W" courses.
 8. The College should institute student writing prizes/ publications.
 9. Bring outside consultants and speakers to campus to discuss the ways in which other institutions educate students in writing.
 10. Faculty incentive for teaching of writing.
 11. Pilot FYC lab-course.
 12. Investigate an e-portfolio, possibly optional.
 13. Consider financial assistance to enable each FY student to purchase a computer (notebook or desktop for room), based on financial need.
 14. Accountability for writing instruction.

The details of these recommendations follow in the body of this report.

“Charge”

Faculty and staff joined this working group after responding to the following description, circulated by the Hewlett Office:

Macalester has no writing requirement: should there be one, and if so, what might it look like? Writing helps students: "...develop the ability to use information and communication resources effectively, be adept at critical, analytical and logical thinking, and express themselves well in both oral and written forms" (Statement of Purpose and Belief). How can writing assignments further students' effective use of information and communication resources? Develop critical, analytical and logical thinking? Help students effectively and clearly express themselves in appropriate forms? How might writing instruction benefit service learning, internships or faculty research? What are the most effective ways to respond to and evaluate student writing? What are the multicultural dimensions of writing, responding, and evaluating?

Membership

Jean Beccone (Library), Stephen Burt (English), Adrienne Christiansen (Communication and Media Studies), Jim Dawes (English), Michael Dickel (Macalester Academic Excellence Center), Terri Fishel (Library), Clay Steinman (Communication and Media Studies), and Erik Wiertelak (Psychology).

Ellen Guyer (Dean of Academic Programs), Leland Guyer (Spanish) and Sarah Horton (Religious Studies) also kept in contact with our work through email.

Recommendations for a Writing Requirement at Macalester College

First and foremost, we believe that the Macalester community at all levels must agree with and be invested in any writing requirement. Writing cannot be successfully taught as a discrete skill in one semester, divorced from other learning, but must be taught in an integrated manner across the whole curriculum. Students must see the value of the writing that they are required to do—and what it communicates—before they will invest the energy into learning how to do it well. In order for writing instruction to succeed, writing must be: applied to significant academic, social, civic, and personal contexts for students during all of their four years at Macalester; learned in various rhetorical and discursive settings; and valued by students, staff, and faculty. Finally, student writers must be held to high standards of clear communication for all of their “public” writing—public here meaning anything from what is turned into a professor to a publication in a journal. To accomplish this, the institution should make explicit efforts to improve writing instruction on campus. We make these fourteen recommendations:

Institutional recommendations

We recommend the following steps to improve writing instruction here at Macalester. We believe these recommendations would potentially improve student writing and its instruction, ideally as part of a requirement, but even if implemented as we maintain the *status quo*:

1. Improve W course designation

An important way to improve writing instruction as it currently exists at Macalester College is to create clear, operational definitions of what a “W” designation means for a course. The expectations and understanding of what a “W” designation means are unclear at this time among faculty and students. In order to clarify the designation, we recommend that the faculty adopt a definition for “W” courses along the lines of what we have drafted (see below). All courses that currently hold a “W” designation should have that designation removed. All faculty and departments that wish to have a course designated as “W” or writing intensive would re-apply to the Registrar and the Dean of Academic Programs through a process designed by those offices, using the new definition of a “W” course to

establish criteria for giving the designation to the course. These criteria should be as clear and simple as possible. The faculty should consider whether or not it is desirable to have every department offer at least one “W” course. We also recommend considering a low cap to the number of students for a “W” course, given the extra work involved in responding to drafts and papers. We have drafted operational outcomes below as a starting point for discussion (see number 2).

2. *The College should establish a clear list of outcomes for student writing in first year courses, and assist faculty in meeting these objectives.*

This committee has drafted a list of outcomes for discussion among the faculty for the First Year Course. It is our belief that faculty would be better able to teach writing across the curriculum and that as an institution Macalester would be better able to assess its success in teaching writing if we have statements of goals and objectives, in the form of writing competencies and operational outcomes for our students. We have drafted competencies/operational outcomes (see below) as a starting point for discussion.

3. *Departments and Programs should establish a clear list of outcomes for student writing in the major.*

The faculty of each department should also draft writing outcomes for their majors, indicating the specific writing competencies students should be able to demonstrate upon graduation. Departments and Programs should also determine the requirements for inclusion of “W” courses as part of the major requirements. The MAX Center and the Center for Teaching and Scholarship should collaboratively assist departments in this effort.

4. *The College should run a pilot program assessing the use of a standard text for FY courses (Transition to College Writing).*

We propose to test the usefulness of a text, *Transition to College Writing*, as a supplement to first year courses. This text is relatively short, at eight chapters, and could be assigned at a chapter a week through the first half of the semester at a minimum (two chapters a week would not be that difficult for most of our students, in addition to other content readings). If a critical mass of courses used the text, the MAX Center could hold workshops each week linked to the readings. Another possibility is to ask incoming students to read the book over the summer. Our proposed pilot, to be run during 2003-2004, would have 2 or 3 sections of first year courses assign the text over the summer, and 2 or 3 use it during fall. We would follow students through fall and spring semesters, matching them with students who did not use the texts but took their FYC from the same division, or even department if possible. With qualitative interviews of the students and samples of their writing, the study would try to richly describe the effect of using the text in the two different methods versus not using the text. While we realize that this won’t have a sample size large enough to determine objectively that using the book or not using it, or using it one way versus the other, is going to make students write better, we feel that having this study will provide us with much better information about the book than the usual methods of text selection, and will help the faculty make a better informed decision about adopting the text for first year courses in subsequent years.

5. *The CST and MAX Center should provide teaching materials—handouts, guides, sample assignments, books, etc.—for faculty.*

The Center for Teaching and Scholarship and the MAX Center should work together to provide readily available (and online) support materials for teaching writing in general, as well as for teaching writing in specific divisions and departments. This would include gathering materials faculty might donate (such as handouts, successful assignments, grading rubrics), researching available materials in the public domain (including internet links), and developing appropriate materials specific to Macalester College. These materials should be gathered in a physical location (either the Center for Teaching and Scholarship or the MAX Center), as well as online. The purpose of a physical space would be to allow for interaction between faculty who are looking at the same time for materials. An online discussion list

could also be established for Macalester faculty and staff interested in the teaching of writing.

6. *The MAX Center should provide increased Web support for students.*

In addition to using the Web for providing the materials mentioned in number 4 above, the MAX Center will develop more web support for students, and increase the visibility of what is already available. Writing support for faculty and students should be linked on the web so that faculty have easy access to what students have available.

7. *The MAX Center should provide MAX Center Liaisons with "W" courses.*

The MAX Center will endeavor to assign a peer tutor to each "W" course where the faculty wishes a liaison to the MAX Center. This tutor would keep in contact with the faculty member, copying handouts and assignments for other tutors, publicizing hours when writing tutors are available to the students of the course, and otherwise working out with the faculty member ways for the MAX Center to support the writing in that specific course. This tutor would not become a preceptor for the course. However, the tutor would be able to provide knowledgeable support to students in the course as a result of communications between the tutor and the instructor. The tutor would also keep the other writing tutors informed of what assignments students are working on, what expectations the faculty member has for the assignments, and other relevant information to help with tutoring students from that course. This will help assure that the MAX Center provides the best support possible to students in these courses.

8. *The College should institute student writing prizes/ publications.*

We believe that student writing prizes would help raise the profile of successful student writing at Macalester in several ways. By successful writing we mean not only writing by those students who came to Macalester College writing well and who continue to do so, but also writing by those students who have improved markedly their writing quality and now write much better than when they arrived here. Macalester should increase the profile of the awards currently given out. In addition, consideration should be given to offering more awards, within majors, disciplines, and the college-wide student body. This award-winning writing, plus the writing done through various grants and fellowships during summer, J-term, or the academic year, should also be collected and published, either online, in conventional print form, or, preferably, both. Having such a publication to send home to parents would raise the profile of Macalester student writing. Having a venue for their writing beyond the course instructor, especially for prizes and awards that might have money attached to them, potentially would increase students' commitment to their writing. This would not be necessarily for creative writing, which already has venues. Nor should this merely be a "best essay" contest. There should be an editorial process and thought put into selection that leads to depth and breadth of student writing done at Macalester College.

9. *Bring outside consultants and speakers to campus to discuss the ways in which other institutions education students in writing.*

The Center for Teaching and Scholarship and the MAX Center should bring in outside speakers and consultants on teaching writing (such as the MAX Center did in Spring, 2002, with Keith Gilyard). Examples include the Harvard Expository Writing Program National Consultants, directors of successful writing across the curriculum (WAC) or communications across the curriculum (CAC) programs at peer institutions (in our survey, faculty offered as examples of successful writing programs: Brown's Writing Fellows program, Clemson's Pearce Center for Communication, Victoria Aarons at Trinity University, Sarah Lawrence, Carol Rutz at Carleton, Harvard Expository, and Grinnell), leaders in WAC and CAC research and theory, etc. Consideration should be given to scheduling a symposium or workshop, possibly during J-term or summer, where faculty could concentrate effort, as well as to accessible speakers who do one-time talks. Speakers could be asked to contribute their thoughts / talks in the form of an essay to the publication suggested in number 7 above, or to a separate publication on writing in the liberal arts, should we have enough speakers, interest, and funds for a separate publication.

10. *Faculty incentive for teaching of writing.*

There was heated discussion on this recommendation, which likely reflects the sort of discussion it will engender among the faculty as a whole. However, several faculty felt strongly that incentives for teaching writing would help motivate faculty to teach it more in their courses. The main disagreement arose over how to provide this incentive. Course release was considered problematic by faculty from the sciences, given the way labs count for teaching there. Summer money or ftr money was considered more acceptable, but problematic due to the high cost. We did think that offering a summer workshop on teaching writing, with summer funds, to those faculty who agreed to offer “W” courses, might be a viable option, although funding issues obviously remain. Perhaps the Center for Teaching and Scholarship and the MAX Center could work together on planning a pilot summer workshop for a limited number of FYC faculty and W course faculty, if the institution can fund it. Faculty who attend would receive summer funds or ftr funds, in addition to working together with outside facilitators to develop their writing instruction ability.

11. *Pilot FYC lab-course.*

This is in process, through the library, with Clay Steinman’s FYC for Fall 2002. The purpose of this course is to assist students with technology, media, and research resources to more effectively find and present information. The CST should assess the success of the pilot FY course with a lab in bibliographic referencing and media technology being offered by Professor Steinman in Fall, 2002. If this trial provides evidence of the effectiveness of such an approach, it should be considered as a supplement to expanded efforts to ensure communication literacy among our students. These skills are integral to good academic writing.

12. *Investigate an e-portfolio, possibly optional.*

Some institutions are developing electronic portfolios for student writing. The institution could investigate this as a possibility for Macalester College. Although there was some discussion of having this be optional, the essential model is that students put completed papers on the web each semester, accumulating a portfolio of their work that can be accessed by parents, friends, faculty, staff, other students, etc. Knowing that their work will go “public,” students will be motivated to produce better finished products. Standard portfolios usually involve reflection by the students (in essay form), assessment by faculty or staff, feedback based on the assessment, and consequences for not meeting minimal standards (such as required re-submission, failure in a course if the portfolio is for a course, required writing course if writing standards are below minimum or even failure to graduate for institutional portfolios). An e-portfolio would need to reconsider how to or whether to incorporate or accommodate this type of “private” material if using a “public” venue, such as the web. As a community, we would need to decide how much or how little we would invest in such a portfolio. If it were optional, the main feedback mechanism would be the web itself.

13. *Consider financial assistance to enable each FY student to purchase a computer (notebook or desktop for room), based on financial need.*

While there are many labs on campus, with a wide range of hours, the working group felt that each student should have a computer available in their dorm room for writing. While many students do, there should be an effort to assure that those students who come to Macalester College in financial need have the ability to purchase a computer despite their lack of finances, through a grant program.

14. *Accountability for writing instruction.*

While the working group agreed that there should be some way to assure that writing instruction is taking place at Macalester College, that students achieve certain measurable competencies, and that courses that are designated writing courses include writing instruction, we could not agree on how to do this in a way that did not infringe on faculty and their academic freedom. We certainly do not advocate policing courses or creating

unnecessary bureaucratic procedures. However, we do feel that institutionally some person, committee, or office should have leadership responsibility to assure some sort of accountability for writing instruction at Macalester. How to do this should be decided by the faculty.

Models for a writing requirement

We offer two models for a writing requirement:

- a minimal model that accomplishes most of what the ad hoc committee proposed and could serve as a compromise between the status quo and the ideal, and
- an ideal model of what we could do with unlimited resources.

It is our hope that these models, along with the institutional recommendations, student outcomes, and “W” course definition, will provide the basis for an engaged dialogue among faculty about how we should teach writing to our students.

Minimal Model

- Implement all 14 of the institutional recommendations above, after appropriate discussion and possible revision by faculty.
- Create a robust writing component in the FY course.
- The Registrar and the Dean of Academic Programs re-designate W courses (see number 1 in our institutional recommendations above).
- The institution provides improved support for students and faculty with workshops, writing-designated FTR funds, and adequate staffing for support and instruction including at least two sections of College Writing each year.
- All students would be required to take the FY course and to take at least one “W” course in each subsequent year.
- Departments could determine whether or not they want the third or fourth year “W” courses to be in the student’s major (working out the logistics of double and triple majors) and could add a requirement that the senior capstone include a significant writing component for their majors.
- College Writing would remain optional in this model, with FYC faculty recommending weak student writers take it, and an additional section each year to help assure adequate seats.

We believe that this model would improve the amount of required writing instruction students receive. The hope is that this would then lead to improved student writing. However, the ideal model detailed next provides more assurances of the intended outcome, improved student writing, being achieved through more formal evaluation of student writing.

Ideal Model

Overview

- Implement all 14 of the institutional recommendations above, after appropriate discussion and possible revision by faculty.
- Create a robust writing component in the FY course, with assessment of student writing outcomes separate from the course grade.
- Increase the number of College Writing sections offered each year to accommodate a majority of incoming students’ taking the course.
- The Registrar and the Dean of Academic Programs re-designate W courses (see number 1 in our institutional recommendations above)
- The institution provides improved support for students and faculty with workshops, writing-designated FTR funds, and adequate staffing for support and instruction.
- Each Department would determine whether or not to include a specified “writing in the major” course for their students.

- An exit writing assessment would be developed by the institution. This could be done through a portfolio, a required writing component to senior projects, an extended essay, or other appropriate assessment tool.
- The MAX Center and the Center for Teaching and Scholarship could lead the efforts to develop both the FYC and exit assessment tools.

Writing Requirement

- All students would be required to take the FY course.
- Some students would be exempted from College Writing based on the writing assessment from the FY course, but most students would be required to take College Writing by the end of their second year. The exact percentages would need to be worked out and, no doubt, adjusted as the assessment is implemented.
- Students would also have to take at least one “W” course in each of their third and fourth years.
- Departments would determine whether or not to require a “writing in the major” course as one of the two “W” courses, or whether or not they want the third and fourth year “W” courses to be in the student’s major (working out the logistics of double and triple majors) and could add a requirement that the senior capstone include a significant writing component.
- Each student would be required to demonstrate minimal writing competency to graduate, based on the assessment developed by Macalester.

This model would insure both writing across the curriculum and specialized instruction in writing for most Macalester students, and for all who need it. The assessment tools would provide assurance that students are learning what we intend. We note that writing assessment is a complex, controversial, and expensive undertaking.

Proposed FYC student outcomes

Students learn:

- How to plan, draft, and revise a college-level paper
- How to construct a thesis statement
- How to organize an essay
- How to use argumentation and evidence to support claims
- How to cite evidence using a standard citation style, such as MLA, APA, CMS, or CBE
- How to build a list of works cited using a standard citation style, such as MLA, APA, CMS, or CBE
- How to present a well-reasoned academic argument to a skeptical audience
- The importance of clear writing and proper grammar and usage in academic writing

Proposed W-designation operational definitions

A W-designated course includes, in addition to emphasizing what was learned in the FYC:

- Three or more writing assignments during the semester (at least one of which is an academic argument); or one larger research or term paper with at least two drafts turned in and responded to (see #2 and #3) before the final draft
- Draft and revision of more than one writing assignment (or response to and revision of more than one draft for one assignment) with required faculty, preceptor, or peer response to drafts before revision
- Attention to student writing, defined minimally as comments on drafts and their revisions that address both content and global writing issues (e.g., questions of organization, development of arguments, use of evidence, audience, paragraph structure and flow), as well as grammar and proper usage, but may also include course time

devoted to discussing student writing processes, desired qualities of academic writing, or writing in the discipline

- Attention to disciplinary writing, defined minimally as both 1.) discussing some assigned readings not only in terms of content, but also in terms of how they are written (e.g., how arguments are organized, topics introduced, conclusions drawn, evidence used) *and* 2.) introduction of some of the various forms of writing within the discipline (e.g., field notes, lab notes, online discussions, formal reports, theoretical papers, research reports, peer-reviewed journal articles, letters to the editor, etc.—for some courses, consideration might be given to non-academic forms of writing by professionals in the field, for example, courses in the arts might focus on arts criticism or grant proposals and reports)—these could be introduced through readings, writing assignments, or class discussion, but should in any case be explicitly discussed as forms of writing found within a disciplinary field
- Grading of writing assignments that reflects writing quality as well as content mastery

Students learn:

- Some varied uses of writing in the field of study (see # 4 above)
- How academic arguments are written in the discipline of the course
- What constitutes appropriate evidence in the discipline of the course
- How writing is most often organized in the discipline of the course (e.g., standard formats, if any; typical forms of papers written in courses in the discipline; typical structures of academic journal articles; or, typical forms of professional, non-academic writing)
- A standard citation style for the discipline of the course (e.g., MLA, APA, CMS, or CBE)
- The importance in the discipline of clear writing with proper grammar and usage