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Division of composition would aid the University

Composition courses may have a chance at the University. Writing instruction, which has often been neglected, underfunded and politicized here, could receive a real boost if the College of Liberal Arts adopts a recommendation to create a division of rhetoric and composition separate from the Department of English.

Recommended by a committee chaired by Frank Bean, professor of sociology, the proposal would place renewed focus on writing instruction. Presently composition plays second fiddle to literary studies because many professors find writing instruction too boring and pedestrian. After all, they say, anyone can write a five-part paper. Consequently, some of the most important things undergraduates learn get relegated to graduate student instructions.

But the proposal – which would necessarily improve undergraduate writing – does not have

the blessing of Department of English Chairman Joe Kruppa. In Kruppa's words: "It is not a sound academic idea." Kruppa's analysis, though, falls short on all counts.

From the standpoint of improving instruction, the idea's merits are without limit. Such a division would allow greater specialization in academic prose and technical writing, which has suffered funding cutbacks.

The rhetoric division could also perform different functions such as coordinating and setting standards for writing component classes in other departments. Such specialization is difficult now because of the department's concentration on literature and criticism scholarship.

The Department of English – which has been plagued by governance problems – would benefit from the smaller, more manageable size. The department, which has more than 90 faculty, would become more efficient and would not be

as vulnerable to divisive feuds between instructors of rhetoric and literature.

The importance of mitigating departmental infighting cannot be underestimated. The department has suffered greatly since 1985 when it almost abolished freshman composition. Parlin Hall gained unwelcomed notoriety again in 1990 when a few faculty determined they should employ freshman composition as a means of indicting mainstream political perspectives.

The University needs to reform current writing programs to make them provide for and demand more from undergraduates. Schools as diverse as the University of Minnesota and the University of California at Berkeley have similar programs from which they have profitted. Berkeley even has separate departments for composition, literature and rhetoric. One professor said Minnesota's program is highly

acclaimed. Equally important, Art Geffen, associate professor of English, said, "It is a very responsibly run program."

Responsibility in the Department of English has dwindled in the past years. Its leaders, unable to manage the department rife with struggle, have fled to other schools. As Lance Bertelsen, associate professor of English, pointed out Monday ("Duban's departure nothing special," *Firing Line*), prominent faculty have left for Stanford and Northwestern. Two others went to the University of Minnesota. Composition instruction at the University must improve. In today's job market, graduates need the skills necessary to write resumes and present reports. To make this possible, Robert King, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, should follow the Bean committee's suggestion. Only a responsible program will keep undergraduates learned and competitive.