

Report to the Writing Skills Assessment Committee  
from the Subcommittee on Assessment

**I. Charge**

One of the charges of the Writing Skills Assessment Committee is to develop a general policy for the assessment of writing courses in the College of Liberal Arts.

**II. Scope and Purposes**

The writing program in the College of Liberal Arts will include three required English courses and two courses with a substantial writing component, preferably to be taken in the student's major discipline. This program should include ongoing assessment at several levels. Assessment can serve the college's writing program by:

1. examining the teaching of writing in various disciplines,
2. examining the writing of practitioners in various disciplines,
3. identifying and defining objectives for existing and proposed courses in the required five-course writing sequence,
4. establishing a database on student performance for future assessments,
5. developing materials that can be used to train graduate students and faculty involved in teaching courses with substantial writing components in the disciplines,
6. examining the effectiveness of specific courses and components (such as the writing lab),
7. examining the effectiveness of the program as a whole,
8. accounting to the university community and the public at large on our efforts to produce graduates who are analytically and culturally literate.

We do not see the evaluation of individual teachers for purposes of salary and promotion decisions as part of the scope of the college's writing program assessment. We also do not see an immediate need for exit or proficiency examinations after a student has entered the program.

**III. Kinds of Assessment Procedures**

We have outlined above three major aspects of assessment: 1) descriptions of writing in the disciplines and ways of teaching writing in the disciplines, which can lead to 2) development of materials for training graduate students and faculty to teach discipline-specific writing courses, and to 3) the definition of objectives that can be assessed in formal and informal evaluations. Toward these ends we make the following recommendations:

- **Recommendation 1:** After writing-intensive courses are identified, the nature and amount of writing instruction in these courses should be examined. This investigation should produce both a profile of writing instruction in departments other than English and a list of faculty members interested in the teaching of writing.
- **Recommendation 2:** Selected in-depth studies of how students learn to write in particular disciplines should supplement the general information gathered through the surveys described in Recommendation 1. These in-depth studies could take several forms, including interviews with students, faculty, and alumni, examination of student papers in selected courses, and reviews of existing research on teaching students to write in particular disciplines.
- **Recommendation 3:** Materials for training faculty and graduate students to teach writing-intensive courses should be developed from information gathered through the surveys and in-depth studies of writing in particular disciplines. These materials could also be used in the continuing development of E346K courses.
- **Recommendation 4:** Ongoing course and program evaluation should be part of the College of Liberal Arts writing program. Particular questions to be addressed in such evaluations will be posed by those in charge of the writing program. We do, however, recommend that efforts begin immediately to provide some baseline data on the writing competence of present students at the University of Texas which can later be used for comparisons. We also recommend that longitudinal studies of students beginning the new writing requirement be initiated. These studies might extend beyond graduation so that we might discover if the writing skills taught in the university prove to be useful in later life.
- **Recommendation 5:** We recommend that the effectiveness of the present course sequence be first examined before any required exit or proficiency examinations beyond entry to the university be put into effect.

#### IV. Implementation

The person, committee, or office charged with administering the writing program will have direct responsibility for the development of courses, staff training, and the ongoing assessment of the writing program. We see this effort proceeding in two phases. The first phase will involve the descriptive effort outlined in Recommendations 1, 2, and 3, and in the descriptive part of Recommendation 4. The second phase will involve evaluation of the effectiveness of individual courses and the program as a whole. Both phases will contribute to the continuing development and refinement of writing courses in the College of Liberal Arts.

Activities in the first phase should include descriptive surveys and interviews with faculty that examine the kinds of writing required in particular disciplines and perceptions of writing by members of different disciplines. Writing assignments and student papers should be collected to identify characteristics of successful student writing. More focussed efforts could examine the writing of practitioners of different disciplines and how students learn to write in different disciplines. Two kinds of products will result: 1) materials such as student papers that can be used for training staff, and 2) materials that can be used in classroom instruction.