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riting Program Bulletin

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Last month, I was invited to contribute one of my profiles of writing intensive courses to the “Focus on Teaching” column in the forthcoming issue of the Faculty Senate Newsletter. I chose to feature the mid-level course in Computer Science and I hope everyone will take a look at this wonderful course.

In this issue of the Writing Program Bulletin, then, I’ve decided to do something different. I was trying to think of an appropriate analogy for introducing my topic, something with enough parallels to be useful (but not too heavy), and it finally hit me: the upcoming holiday season’s pressure to throw parties, prepare meals, and create festive, meaningful experiences for our families and friends. How do we do this? Some rely on family traditions and do the same thing each year; others periodically try new recipes or even new rituals; still others—often those doing it for the first time on their own—start from scratch or try to blend traditions in new ways.

What all these approaches have in common is that at some point the planner must envision what the day (or party) will look, taste, feel, and sound like. Only with some outcome in mind can anyone plan an event. And while our efforts don’t always produce what we’d imagined (in 1985 my Beef Wellington was politely eaten by everyone but it was not requested again the following year!), it’s hard to go about creating something without at least some sense of what we’re shooting for. That ideal image is what guides all of our choices and decisions.

The same goes for our courses and the curriculum at large. So, as the Director of the Writing Program, I’d like to pose a question: in an ideal world, what would the final, revised, polished pieces of writing by graduating seniors in your department look like? What will your majors be able to do? What will they know? How will this be embodied in their writing? And what do you think needs to be in place here at TCNJ to make that happen?

I’m posing this question for several reasons. First, on the most general level, just thinking about our goals can help us become more purposeful in what we do on a daily basis. These questions are not, in other words, intended to initiate any sort of curricular overhaul. Second, I’ve heard many stories from other campuses about how when faculty members from different disciplines discuss the role of writing in their courses, everyone gains new insights and has a clearer sense of how they want to use writing in their own courses. Below are some observations from the Director of the Writing Program at Carlton College on what has transpired after it implemented a required sophomore writing portfolio several years ago:

As faculty have continued to read portfolios, they have learned that their own teaching is affected by familiarity with student work across the curriculum. Faculty seldom get a chance to read work they have not assigned, and the portfolio allows for an efficient means of appreciating Carleton students’ experience as college writers. Through this rich experience of reading student work, faculty calibrate their expectations in their own courses, often revising their assignments to reflect what they have learned from assignments written by colleagues.

While I am not suggesting that we adopt Carlton’s portfolio requirement (although that would certainly be interesting!), I do think that the interactions prompted by such cross-disciplinary exposure have yielded invaluable insights for their faculty and a stronger curriculum for students. Given that we have recently gone through our own curricular transformations, including the development of writing intensive courses in the disciplines, I wonder if the next step is to talk more about what we are doing, what we expect, and how we can support one another as we continue to improve the curriculum.

Third, I’d very much like to promote an appreciation of how the growth of students in a given major is very much connected to their development in general education and elective courses as well. While writing is not a static skill like a tool that one carries around in a toolbox and can use in any situation equally well, it **is** a competency inherently linked to other cognitive processes and ways of knowing. Its “strength” (or weakness) is also influenced by motivation levels and investment in what’s being written. Thus, a student can write clearly and cogently with a strong sense of voice in one context, and significantly less clearly in a different context. What can be done so that students better “transfer” their abilities in one course to another? What can we do to help develop certain skills which students can then build on in subsequent courses? How can we become more “fluent” in talking with one another despite widely varying terminology from discipline to discipline?

One idea I had was to start with some questions on Form Genie, including some ideas for next steps and potential continuations of the discussion. Please take some time in the next month or over the break to answer the questions on this anonymous Form Genie Survey

[**https://jedi.tcnj.edu/webteam/cgi-bin/formgenie/formgenie.pl?form=27443**](https://jedi.tcnj.edu/webteam/cgi-bin/formgenie/formgenie.pl?form=27443)

1. What kind of writers/thinkers do you want students in your department to be by the time they graduate? Describe them and their abilities in as much detail as possible.
2. Describe the kind of college-wide writing-based curriculum that you think would produce this kind of writer/thinker here at TCNJ.
3. What kinds of things do you think we need (or need more of) in order to achieve this curriculum? Options could include anything from courses, resources, faculty training, etc.)?
4. How might we plan to create/acquire/develop these things?
5. Please check any of the following in which you’d be interested in participating:

* A writing listserv whose purpose would be to discuss curricular development or enhancement.
* A writing listserv whose purpose would be to share methods, assignments, solutions to particular pedagogical problems, etc.
* A day-long forum for interaction with experts to learn more about various models and options.
* Reading groups that would meet periodically over the course of a semester to discuss books such as Anne Beaufort's *College Writing and Beyond: A New Framework for University Writing Instruction*.

Allanswers will be made available for faculty to read in January. Then in the spring semester, faculty will be invited to participate in and/or provide additional ideas for initiating some of the suggested ideas.