

UOAC Minutes 4/8/2011

The Undergraduate Outcomes Assessment Committee held its thirteenth meeting of the year at 2:00 pm on Friday, April 8, 2011, in the Taylor Room of the Campus Center.

Present: Peter Christopher, Michael Egan, Mustafa Fofana, Peter Hansen, Art Heinricher, Lance Schachterle

Guest: Jennifer deWinter

1. The committee approved the minutes of the meeting of March 25, 2011.
2. The committee welcomed Professor Jennifer deWinter to discuss writing programs on campus. Lance Schachterle indicated the committee was interested in finding out more about opportunities to incorporate writing in courses. In the early 1970s, he was an instructor at WPI for a required writing course that was not effective in developing writing and communication skills which could be applied outside of English literature courses. Students in such a required course were not motivated. Since the adoption of the WPI Plan, students have been required to write about subjects in which they have a stronger interest, especially in the Humanities Requirement, the IQP and the MQP.

Jennifer deWinter distributed a handout on Writing and Rhetoric at WPI which listed the faculty in writing and rhetoric and summarized a variety of courses and programs. These include courses in writing and speech for international students, courses devoted to writing and rhetoric, and inquiry seminars in writing, rhetoric, poetry, prose and creative writing. In addition, opportunities to major in Professional Writing or for a minor in Rhetoric and Writing are available at WPI. The Center for Communication Across the Curriculum (CCAC) offers tutorial services with writing as well as oral presentations. Lorraine Higgins, the director of the CCAC is in the pilot phase of a program to designate courses within a discipline as writing- or communication-intensive.

Many writing courses serve specific purposes. The technical writing course was intended for engineers; the professional writing course emphasized business writing; and the course on communicating about disease and public health was intended for students in the life sciences. A course on peer tutoring in writing prepared students to become tutors at the CCAC. Elements of Writing served the broadest audience and the number of sections had increased significantly to 12-16 sections per year.

Mustafa Fofana inquired about the feasibility of introducing a single format for research reports in the first-year which then could be used as a foundation in every course and project in later years, including the MQP. Others noted that different disciplines have different formats for their research, and the issue for students to learn when they encounter different report formats is how knowledge is constructed in different fields. Lance Schachterle noted that a template for project reports already existed for the IQP, and if particular engineering departments wished they could develop a similar template for those MQPs. Peter Hansen suggested the Dean of Engineering could raise this issue among engineering departments. Art Heinricher noted that assessments by some engineering

departments report that a very high percentage of MQPs (~90 percent) are already adequate or better in writing.

Jennifer deWinter discussed the ways in which writing may be integrated and reinforced at multiple levels in the curriculum. An engineering department she worked with at another university required seniors to submit a writing portfolio before graduation for review by a panel of faculty and industry representatives. Since the portfolio was to be evaluated by industry, students took the exercise very seriously. She also noted that longitudinal studies of writing indicate that good, competent writers do not become good, competent writers until about age 25. It typically takes 8 years and a lot of writing and rewriting to become a good writer. Writing effectively also requires multiple skills depending on the context. The ID2050 program for off-campus project centers provides an excellent model for writing instruction, in scaffolding the skills of drafting, writing, and revision. A student in professional writing is also studying biomedical engineering MQPs to see if these reports can more closely follow the model of professional articles in the discipline.

The committee also discussed the potential for integrating undergraduate- and graduate-level programs in writing. Currently under discussion are master's programs in scientific writing or a 3 course certificate in writing for graduate students. Undergraduate programs in writing, rhetoric, and communication remain the priority. However, if a larger number of graduate students were trained in writing, they might be able to assist in the integration of writing instruction in the disciplines. Another model would provide resources to faculty to develop unit-specific activities for writing instruction in their courses. The committee noted that additional resources would be necessary for training and implementation for new initiatives in writing, and thanked Jennifer deWinter for the informative discussion.

Meeting adjourned at 3:00 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Peter Hansen, Secretary