

SUNYCoW Resolution on Governance, Curriculum, and Faculty Expertise

The teaching of writing and rhetoric at the college level has long been recognized as a profoundly important part of higher education, particularly in the Information Age, and composition, rhetoric, and writing studies has grown steadily as a discipline over the last forty years to support it. College administrators should recognize, honor, and support that discipline in hiring priorities, staffing arrangements, and policy decisions.

Background

Over the last forty years, the academic discipline variously called composition, rhetoric, and writing studies, has evolved significantly. Rising largely from an institutional exigency – the widely felt need to teach required first-year courses in writing and rhetoric to undergraduates – the field has always had strong roots in pedagogy and practice. Of course, this perception about the importance of first-year writing courses, which prepare students to engage the world as citizen-writers, has only grown more adamant and more widely shared on college and university campuses in the years since the field began to formalize as a discipline. While veterans, new waves of students from minority communities, and international students helped drive and reshape the demand for writing education at the college level, all students have ultimately benefited from the foundational academic literacy skills taught by undergraduate writing programs in the United States, which higher education across the world sees as a model to emulate.

But the field's practical dimension has also been steadily buttressed by increasingly substantial scholarship rooted in a range of related disciplines, including linguistics, literacy studies, psychology, literary and cultural theory, and media studies. It now boasts a panoply of scholarly journals, university press imprints, competitive doctoral programs, and well-developed undergraduate Writing majors with strong enrollments across the United States. These publications and programs are informed, what's more, by the work of regional, national, and international organizations devoted to writing, rhetoric, and composition, including [the Conference on College Composition and Communication](#), [the Council of Writing Program Administrators](#), [the Association for Writing Across the Curriculum](#), and [the International Writing Centers Association](#).

For good reason, then, experts in composition, rhetoric, and writing studies have for many years now been generally recognized as the stewards of first-year writing courses on college campuses, as well as the most effective teachers of writing at the college level. Even in programs that involve writing-to-learn courses taught by faculty in other disciplines, the need for strong professional development support and a curriculum informed by strong scholarly engagement with the field is widely recognized. A good program in first-year writing or writing across the curriculum cannot be designed or administered by anyone who hasn't thought and read seriously about writing and what it means to teach it, even if this person happens to be a very competent writer him or herself. Best practices in the field, moreover, suggest that effective instructors in such programs should have similar sorts of training and backgrounds.

The Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), for example, insists in its statement of [Principles for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing](#) that those principles “presume that sound writing instruction is provided by professionals with degree-based credentials in Writing Studies, Composition and Rhetoric, or related fields, or that have been provided with and/or have sought out professional development in this area.” The organization’s statement on [Preparing Teachers of College Writing](#), goes on to suggest that “An investment in the training and professional development of writing instructors is an investment in student learning and success.” In its [Statement of WAC Principles and Practices](#), endorsed by CCCC, the International Network of WAC Programs (INWAC) suggests, similarly, that “program director[s] ha[ve] a grounding in WAC research, theory, and assessment.” The Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) concurs in its [Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition](#), insisting that “These outcomes are supported by a large body of research demonstrating that the process of learning to write in any medium is complex[...]Programmatic decisions about helping students demonstrate these outcomes should be informed by an understanding of this research.”

Resolution

As such, the SUNY Council on Writing, like many in the field, worries gravely about the failure of some university administrations to (1) consult meaningfully with faculty experts in the field on curricular revision, (2) appoint writing program administrators or writing center directors with such expertise, and/or (3) substantially value and cultivate such expertise in writing instructors. As the AAUP has amply objected, such practices lead not only to bad teaching but to the erosion and potential usurpation of the roles of faculty in governance as well.

Simply put, the teaching of writing in higher education needs more expertise, not less.

We do not mean that faculty outside departments of English or writing programs cannot help students learn to write effectively in their fields. Good faculty members in all disciplines provide meaningful writing assignments and experiences for students and offer thoughtful, formative feedback for student-writers. This is indeed at the center of what the writing across the curriculum movement has argued for many years. But expecting faculty without training in the field to either design or teach a central first-year writing course required of all students across campus, for example, significantly underestimates how difficult and complicated this work is, as well as how much scholarship and research it is founded on.

As such, the SUNY Council on Writing resolves in the strongest possible terms that:

- 1. The administrators of first-year writing programs, developmental writing programs, writing across the curriculum programs, and writing centers should have strong backgrounds of scholarship and teaching in composition, rhetoric, and writing studies, along with Ph.D.’s in the field wherever possible. If those individuals have terminal degrees in closely related fields (like creative writing or literary studies), they should have a significant history of teaching and engagement with scholarship in writing pedagogy and theory.**

2. Initiatives for curricular change and writing program development should always be undertaken only with leadership of those with such backgrounds on campus.

3. Writing instructors should be supported in every way possible to expand their working knowledge of scholarship and practice in the field.

Works Cited

CCCC. *Principles for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing*. October 1989. Last Revised, March 2015. <http://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/postsecondarywriting>

CCCC. *Statement on Preparing Teachers of College Writing*. November 2015. <http://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/statementonprep>

INWAC. *Statement of WAC Principles and Practices*, endorsed by INWAC and CCCC, February 2014. <https://wac.colostate.edu/docs/principles/statement.pdf>

WPA Council. *Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition*. July 17, 2014. <http://wpacouncil.org/positions/index.html>

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