

Washington and Lee University
External Review of the Writing Program
March 19-20, 2009

Submitted April 23, 2009 by

Leonard Podis, Oberlin College

Winifred Wood, Wellesley College

Overview and Charge

At the request of Dean Hank Dobin, we visited Washington and Lee University on March 19 and 20, 2009, to conduct a review of the University's Writing Program. It was clear to us that this review is taking place at a significant and timely juncture for Washington and Lee, for several reasons. First, the Writing Program has been in place long enough to allow for meaningful assessment of its strengths and weaknesses. This review is the first full-scale review of the Writing Program in over a decade, with its last review (in 1997) linked to the tenure review of its director, Kary Smout. More important, though, the University is in the process of enacting its new Foundation and Distribution Requirements. Because these requirements foreground writing, the university is clearly working toward a renewed commitment to writing, a commitment that found ample expression among the many people we interviewed as part of our visit. Finally, the university, under its new dean and its reaccreditation standards, is in the process of implementing several significant changes that impact and interact with its current Writing Program; these include the introduction of first-year seminars, the development of a Communications Center in the Williams School, and the shift to a four-week spring semester. It is clearly important to consider the interactions among these programs, and to develop appropriate structures, linkages, and pedagogical interventions that will allow writing instruction to reach W&L students in the best possible way.

In fall 2007, Dean Dobin assembled a Writing Review Committee (WRC)—distinct from but overlapping with the Writing Program Advisory Committee (WPAC) that has been in place for many years—charged with undertaking a self-study of the Writing Program. The self-study report provides a thorough history of writing at Washington and Lee and focuses on the current functions of the Writing Program and of its director, Kary Smout; these include oversight of the Writing Center, outreach and development of writing in courses across the disciplines, and running a placement exam each fall to determine which of three routes into (or around) writing the current class of entering students will take: placement in the required writing course (English 105); exemption from English 105; or placement into English 101, a course for ESL and other students who need extra help with writing. (The actual administration of English 105 does not lie within the purview of the WPAC, however). In addition to a description and evaluation of these activities, the self-study included a wealth of data collected by the university over the two decades leading up to and including its writing program, as well as recent survey data collected specifically for this study.

Our external review committee was charged with evaluating the program and suggesting strategies to strengthen the teaching and learning of writing at the university. Upon

arriving on campus, we were presented with a more detailed and encompassing charge that included questions about the content of the first-year writing courses, the role of the first-year seminars, and the shape of writing instruction more broadly at the university. In order to carry out our charge, we examined the Self Study Report sent to us, reviewed the host of supplementary materials provided with the self study, inspected additional data on a very useful web site put together by the Deans' Office, examined course syllabi for English 105, and conducted approximately a dozen on-campus interviews with groups having a stake in the Writing Program.

We were struck by this "final thought" offered by the report: "Washington and Lee is a good but not an excellent college for writing instruction" (22). We took it as our mission to assess the validity of that conclusion. What led the members of the WRC to arrive at this conclusion? If there is a problem with writing instruction at the University, what is it? In this report, we seek to identify and explore that problem, and to recommend approaches that will help W&L to offer the kind of excellent writing instruction it desires.

Before presenting our report, we want to commend Kary Smout, Director of the Writing Program, as well as the members of the Self-Study Committee (especially co-chairs Pam Luecke and Kary Smout) for their work in preparing the self-study, which gave us valuable insight into the Writing Program's considerable accomplishments since its inception and the challenges it faces today. Professor Smout is to be applauded for his staunch advocacy of writing and for the groundwork he has already laid for improved writing instruction. We also wish to express appreciation to Dean Hank Dobin for inviting us to campus and for the exceptional hospitality he accorded us during our visit. Finally, we're grateful to the more than fifty individuals we had the pleasure of meeting during our visit—faculty, administrators, and students—for their enthusiastic participation in the review process.

Strengths of Writing at Washington and Lee

Our dominant impression over two days of interviews at Washington and Lee was of a student body and a faculty who universally value the writing instruction they receive and provide. In many important respects, English 105 has succeeded in meeting its goals as a required general education course. It provides entering students with a substantial, engaging introduction to the challenges and rewards of college writing, especially in the area of literary analysis. As such it has afforded faculty members in the English Department an important opportunity to socialize new students into the academic community. For the overwhelming majority of students with whom we spoke, their English 105 course stands out as an integral feature of the Washington and Lee experience, the course that initiated them into college-level reading and writing. Students were quite vocal about the salutary effects of English 105 on their writing: in this course, their writing began to grow beyond the constraints of the five-paragraph high school essay, and they could work closely with a professor on the process of writing, learning to assess the strengths and weaknesses of their drafts and rethink the direction and expression of their ideas. Even students who lamented the limited focus of English 105—those who felt that exclusive attention to writing about literature did not prepare them for writing across the disciplines—expressed great satisfaction with the course as a valuable intellectual experience.

Similarly, the faculty who teach the course—all members of the English Department, together with the five adjunct faculty we interviewed—described exciting courses that bring together literary texts in provocative ways intended to promote thought and analysis, courses that appeared fun and satisfying to teach as well as intellectually rigorous. Though the self-study did not offer enough information for us to predict that the composition pedagogy offered by these courses would be up-to-date, our interviews with teaching faculty reassured us that these courses are taught with attentiveness to current best practices, including a process approach to writing, peer editing, emphasis on argument, and discussion of strategies for transferring skills to other disciplines. As appropriate for instruction in a small liberal arts university, faculty were willing to give (and for the most part, enjoy giving) students ample individual attention on their writing, a support that students appreciate deeply. Instruction across the courses is not perfectly consistent—faculty varied, for example, in the number and nature of papers they assigned, and argued over how much research writing they could fit into a 105 course (all complained of the short semester), but our impression overall was that the faculty enjoy a good balance between reasonable consistency and reasonable autonomy in their course design. In sum, the English faculty (and here, we include the adjunct writing faculty) is convinced that they are offering the best possible courses in writing they can, and indeed, we did not hear any disagreement with this claim.

We found other pockets of engaged writing instruction as well. At the first year level, the first-year seminars that we heard described all offered interesting projects that reflected discipline-specific approaches to research and writing: a project on oral history as a research method, for example, asks students first to read and criticize selected case studies focused on modernization in Turkey, Bangladesh, and the Midwestern United States, and then to undertake a local project of their own, one in which students interview long-time local farmers in the area to develop a picture of changing agricultural practices. At the junior and senior level, students described gateway courses in several departments, courses that present and require discipline-specific expertise before allowing students to advance to 300-level courses; we heard, too, about valuable senior research seminars, capstone courses, and senior theses, all of which offer discipline-specific instruction that students both enjoy and value. In some cases, these courses developed as the result of a single individual's labors to produce the writing that person thought necessary in that division (George Bent's work in Art History stood out notably); in other cases, the courses resulted from strategic departmental planning (in English, for example, and also in psychology). We heard one wonderful description of a course taught in cognitive psychology that required students to investigate and write about a different research question each week ("At first, I thought I had to find the right answer to the question," commented the student, "but then I realized that most of these questions don't yet have a single right answer, but are questions that people are still debating about."). We heard instances of students learning important writing skills through summer research projects with faculty members. And finally, we learned of at least two departments (history and biology) that have recently revamped their entire curricula to include staged approaches to writing.

Although Washington and Lee has concentrated its Writing Program in a single individual, Kary Smout, who was hired specifically to develop writing instruction at the university in 1991, we found that the university now has a good number of faculty, both junior and tenured, who have strong expertise and training in writing from other sites and other institutions. Notable among these are Suzanne Keen of English, who has chaired the WPAC since 2001 and who co-directed the Bass Writing Program at Yale before

coming to W&L, and Pam Luecke, co-chair of the Self Study Committee and a working journalist who now teaches business journalism at W&L. The junior faculty who have worked in other strong and well-respected writing programs and who can bring exciting new ideas to writing instruction at W&L should not be overlooked; among others, we identified Genelle Gertz, Theresa Braunschneider, Allison Bell, Rebecca Harris, and Curtis Jirsa as people who bring strong voices, excellent teaching, and fresh insights to the project. Moreover, the five adjunct faculty that we interviewed, who collectively teach about half of the English 105 courses, bring the commitment that can only come from deep experience of and knowledge about the enterprise of writing instruction.

Finally, we want to emphasize the positive attitude, good will, and good humor that we found among members of both the WPAC and the Writing Program Review Committees. Both groups obviously enjoy working together; the latter, in particular, reported a generative series of committee meetings that led all of them to want to explore writing in greater depth with each other. This is a happy outcome for a group of faculty working together, and we saw, with these individuals, the prospect of continued good work.

Definition of the Problem

The self-study report argues “that one semester of required writing instruction for 80% of our students and none for the other 20% is not enough.” Other data suggest that as many as 25% of the student body report arriving at their senior year without having done any significant writing after English 105. Moreover, only half the faculty surveyed reported assigning 21 pages or more of writing in their classes. At first, we were inclined to disagree with these estimates: the students we talked to seemed surprised that not enough writing was happening at W&L; their own experiences entailed much writing (“I have to write a paper in every one of my courses, every semester”; “I just turned in two 10-page papers and I’m writing two theses”), and they seemed not to know students who did not have similar experiences. But eventually we turned up stories of students who in fact do not write much. These tend to be students in the sciences (and, perhaps apocryphally, in business and possibly politics) who either evade writing, or simply feel that it is more important for them to acquire skills in, say, computer science, than to opt for elective courses that demand writing. The self study lingered over one other finding that suggests ineffective writing instruction over the four years: the recent Collegiate Learning Assessment report which found that W&L seniors do not perform in writing at the levels predicted by their entering SAT scores, especially with respect to “making an argument” and “critiquing an argument.”

These are observations and results, however. They are not explanatory. While we were attentive to these results, the shape of the self-study itself caused us more concern, suggesting symptoms of what we came to see as a greater problem of structure and leadership. Below, we identify five such symptoms:

- ***Focus on small matters; lack of vision.*** The self-study discusses, as its first main consideration, the question of the placement exam for English 105, and concludes that the placement exam should stay as is. To our minds, this beginning, and this conclusion, signaled a self-study that seemed unduly preoccupied with small issues—placement—and not enough with developing and asserting a larger vision of writing at Washington & Lee, one that takes into account current state-of-the-art practices in composition pedagogy and writing-across-the-curriculum. In fact, it appears that the

WPAC labors unduly in areas where we believe labor can be conserved (placement, hiring tutors) and might be better served expending its energy on more broad-scale, visionary planning.

- **Structure of the Writing Program.** There is a strong (and not entirely rational) division of duties between the Writing Program and the English Department. The Writing Program, ironically, does not administer the one component that typically constitutes the core of a writing program, the required first-year writing courses; that area of administration falls to the chair of the English Department, who oversees the hiring and evaluation of adjunct writing faculty, the distribution of courses each year among faculty, the review of syllabi, and the planning of curriculum in writing. Administration of other writing-program-related activities is divided between the director and the WPAC. Communication among the three—the English Department, and Writing Program director, and the WPAC—is facilitated and made friendly by the circumstances that the WP director is a tenured member of the English faculty and that the co-chair of the WPAC is also a member of English. But this also ensures that most significant talk about writing at W&L remains within the domain of the English Department. This circumstance leads to the following issue.

- **Concentration of first-year writing instruction in the English Department.** Upon reading the report, we were immediately struck that first-year writing instruction rests entirely in the English Department, and that the courses are strongly literature-based. In fact, students may read so many bulky novels in a single short semester that we found ourselves wondering how much time is actually left for writing instruction (our subsequent interviews with teaching faculty allayed this worry somewhat). The success of English 105 notwithstanding, this structure and approach is decidedly old-fashioned with respect to contemporary composition pedagogy, and perpetuates the attitude toward writing that students bring to college from high school: that “writing” is part of the subject of “English,” and not something that matters in other domains (the students we interviewed referred to their writing courses as “English,” a phrasing that disconcerted us each time we heard it). An approach to writing that is entirely literature-based simply cannot provide preparation for the many aspects of writing that students will later need to wrestle with: writing longer papers, writing with data, writing critically from sources, and writing in the many genres that are non-literary.

- **Competing Writing Centers.** Another overriding preoccupation of the self-study is the development of the Communications Center in the Williams School. The expressed concern is the inequality of funding between the Communications Center and the Writing Center, and possibly the duplication of efforts represented by having two tutoring centers. We see the concern as masking a deeper anxiety, and possibly a deeper symptom: if the Communications Center was necessary, does this mean that the Writing Center is not doing its job? This anxiety, in turn, may reflect a systemic unwillingness for W&L as an institution to confront the issues of writing in the disciplines. Are there enough institution-wide discussions of disciplinary differences to generate an understanding of why a handful of disciplines might believe that they need a different model of writing support service?

- **Conceptions of writing instruction as grammar instruction.** The interviews and the survey data revealed that a broad cross-section of the university community—faculty, students, and administrators—hold very traditional notions about the primacy of “grammar” in writing instruction and believe grammar instruction should be a central

feature of English 105. This undercurrent of opinion runs counter to the official views expressed by the writing committees we interviewed, the self study, and the Writing Center's mission statement. Nonetheless, despite the disclaimer issued by the Writing Center, the faculty survey revealed that a majority of instructors who refer students for tutoring do so for help with grammar. Likewise, when we spoke with the tutors themselves, grammar loomed large in their understanding of their priorities. While some acknowledged that it was difficult to decide whether to focus on word- and sentence-level issues or higher order concerns, there was a general sense that students "don't have enough background in grammar." When one tutor noted that it has been difficult for her to shift her focus to students' arguments rather than their grammar, a second observed that there was a tacit understanding among tutors that they would inevitably have to deal with tutees' grammar in their sessions. The self-study urged that the issue of grammar be taken up by the university as a whole (10). This recommendation struck us as odd. Yet the tutors thought it made sense. Asked about this recommendation, one tutor replied, "It would be helpful," and another stated her belief that "all 105s should include a component of grammar."

This discrepancy, we found, is reflected in a discrepancy in the university's own mission statement and FDRs. The wording of both the mission statement (the Washington and Lee program "requires competence in the use of English") and the Writing Foundation Requirement ("learn the conventions of standard English; "learn to choose words more precisely, to write clear sentences and effective paragraphs...increase their confidence with written language") together give primacy to language in a very narrow sense; other competencies that we think are central to good writing instruction (for example, "the capacity to deal with complex ideas") expressed elsewhere in the mission statement are linked more to education in the majors than to instruction in writing. While the new Foundation Requirement in writing is a clear improvement over the earlier Gen Ed requirements (with some emphasis on rhetorical issues such as audience awareness and thesis), we believe that it continues to reflect what is generally called the deficit model of writing pedagogy, a largely discredited belief that writing instruction must primarily concern itself with students' lack of correct language to express ideas effectively at the sentence level or to use the conventions of mechanics and punctuation properly. In the wake of several decades of scholarly research and theoretical inquiry in rhetoric and composition studies, writing is currently viewed as a complex cognitive act that is socially constructed and situated. Most writing instruction across the nation includes common practices of support for writing as a mode of learning and discovery and as an evolving process that involves peer review and opportunities for revision, writing in the disciplines, and analysis of rhetorical situations. Fortunately we encountered awareness of these newer approaches among a number of faculty members with whom we spoke, including most instructors of English 105, yet overall we developed a strong conviction that a genuine "writing to learn" culture has yet to develop on campus.

Our recommendations thus begin with a re-thinking of the program's vision and its structure, and are followed by a scaled set of suggestions, divided into three areas of concentration: first-year instruction; the Writing Center, and assessment. In each section, we provide recommendations ranging from the long-range and visionary to the immediate and practical.

Recommendations

I. The Writing Program as a Program

The current Writing Program does not have sufficient scope or resources to support the kind of overarching vision of writing at W&L that we sense the faculty at the university desire. We begin, therefore, by urging a rather dramatic reconsideration of the current structures to create a program with the power and capacity to generate and implement a vision of excellent writing instruction across a student's full four years at Washington and Lee. We recommend that W&L implement the following:

1. ***Redistribute duties and charges between WPAC and the English Department.***

In particular, a more powerful Writing Program Advisory Committee needs to be constituted, charged with the development and oversight of the university's full set of Writing Programs, including its first-year writing courses. This committee should report directly to the Dean of the College, and should work with higher administration to enact a new vision of writing at the University. The committee should not concern itself with administrative details such as performing placement or selecting writing tutors. The committee should include a mix of tenured faculty with the power and experience to enact change, and junior faculty who bring new ideas from their graduate school experiences, and should have a chair and membership that rotates every three to four years, in accordance with the university's normal committee rotations; such rotation would give a broad cross-section of the community the opportunity to consider the nature of writing instruction. The Writing Review Committee provides a good model for what this reconstituted WPAC could be.

2. ***Rethink the vision of writing at Washington and Lee.***

This rethinking could be spearheaded by the new WPAC, with the aid of the recommendations we provide in this report. The university's mission statement and its Foundation and Distribution Requirements provide outcome statements; it is the job of a Writing Program to provide a vision, a theory and a pedagogy (or set of pedagogies) for accomplishing those outcomes. In our meetings with faculty and administrators, we discerned two possible models for upper-division writing instruction at W&L. Several faculty members suggested that the proper site for designing writing instruction is the department, and indeed, much of this work is already well underway. This approach would be severely vertical, producing (for better or worse, we are not sure) a set of departmental silos, each approaching writing instruction in its own way. A more horizontal approach would involve more generalized writing instruction (as might occur across the first year, or through a set of coordinated "W" courses offered in the sophomore and junior years). The WPAC could consider the implications of these two competing approaches, and/or ways of integrating the two approaches.

These discussions would, we hope, entail a new articulation of the nature and function of writing as a central mode of intellectual inquiry and discovery in the education of students at Washington and Lee. This articulation would serve to unite the approaches developed within separate departments. To keep pace with research findings and with the newer reality of writing and writing instruction at selective liberal arts colleges, W&L

must reject the outmoded conception of writing as essentially a mechanical or instrumental set of skills and embrace a view of writing as central to the development and expression of complex critical thinking. We recommend that the reconstituted WPAC should articulate a new vision for writing that goes well beyond conceptualizing it as the mere command of grammar or the control of “English.” In other words, we urge W&L, with the help of WPAC, to act decisively to revise the prevailing “deficit” model that informs the campus community’s understanding of writing and writing instruction.

3. ***Restructure the role of the Writing Program Director.***

We do not believe the Chair of the English Department should bear the burden of oversight of a crucial component of the Writing Program; nor do we believe that burden should fall entirely on Kary Smout, the current program director. We recommend that an additional faculty member be charged with the responsibility of leading the full set of Writing Programs; this could be one of several talented faculty members who are already on board at W&L (perhaps in a rotation), or a new tenure-track hire, ideally at the senior level and most likely a specialist in rhetoric and composition. At most institutions offering rich writing instruction, the roles of the Writing Center Director and the roles of the Writing Program Director are kept separate; each job is demanding, and each requires a separate skill set. In our own experience, it is important for each position to be a faculty position. We think that individuals responsible for inspiring disciplinary faculty to teach with writing must also know what it is like to work within a classroom. The responsibility of teaching places a further demand on a person in these roles, and argues for the necessity of two positions.

Our experience also tells us that an institution benefits from having more than one voice speak for writing; when a single person is identified with writing instruction for fifteen years or more, it is too easy for half-interested faculty to ignore the words that are repeatedly spoken and for that program director to begin to feel that he is “preaching to the converted.” Departments rotate chairs every four years. Those physical education departments that can require four PE courses of their students have multiple faculty to speak for the value of a healthy body. So too must an institution develop the resources to have multiple faculty speak for the complex and changing nature of writing instruction.

We therefore would recommend that, at this juncture, Kary Smout’s position as “Director of the Writing Program” be redefined as “Director of the Writing Center,” and that a new director of Writing Programs be responsible for oversight and integration of the first-year programs and the upper-division programs. Although a new Writing Program director might find a home in the English Department, we believe that the person fulfilling that role should report directly to the Dean, to send the message that writing instruction lies in the domain of the entire university, not of a single department.

4. ***Dedicate significant discretionary funding to the Writing Program, with control over the budget assigned to the new Writing Program director.*** The budget should be large enough for the development of strong programming and strong research in rhetoric and composition, and perhaps enough to provide incentives for new faculty seeking to design writing-intensive (or “W”) courses. Common sources of funding at other small liberal arts institutions include alumni gifts and grants from foundations such as the Mellon and the Teagle, both of which encourage research across institutions.

II. First Year Instruction

There is strong evidence that most faculty and students are satisfied with a Writing Program that initiates writing instruction in the first year through a required writing course, and the evidence also suggests that most current sections of English 105, as well as the two sections of English 101, are excellent and effective courses. We see no reason to change or eliminate those courses; we do, however, see good reason to retool and expand their reach to align them better with a projected goal of providing integrated writing instruction across a student's four years at W&L. The recommendations below offer ways to gradually extend the content and reach of these courses:

1. Articulate a formal relationship between the first-year writing courses and the first-year seminars, and the role of both in initiating a university-wide approach to writing.

The university has launched an ambitious program of first-year seminars, existing alongside English 105. The newly redesigned English 105 courses resemble first-year seminars; most of the first-year seminars offer a strong writing component. (In addition, the WPAC recently proposed a set of writing-intensive seminar-like writing courses.) The university needs to understand the goals—mutual and distinct—of these two types of courses. We believe that the two have the potential of offering students a continuum of writing instruction throughout the first year, and that the two, taken together, have the capacity to demonstrate the complexity of writing as it manifests itself in different areas of inquiry. One possible approach would be to require all students to take two semesters of first-year writing-intensive courses. Weaker writers could take two semesters of writing courses; stronger writers could take two semesters of first-year seminars; most students would take one of each. A two-semester writing-in-the-disciplines model can be found at Cornell; a cafeteria approach of the sort described here can be found at Dartmouth.

2. Re-designate ENGL 101/105 as WRTG 101/105 and extend participation to faculty teaching across the disciplines, including first-year seminars.

A newly empowered Writing Program director working with a new WPAC or the dean could be charged with developing a mission statement to stress the complementary relationship between the currently required writing courses and the first-year seminars and other writing-intensive courses that would fulfill the requirement under the new WRTG rubric. The English Department has noted that some of its English 105 courses already are interdisciplinary in nature, reflecting its faculty's dual teaching roles in disciplines such as Women's Studies and Medieval Studies. This fact provides a starting point for widening the disciplinary responsibility for teaching introductory writing, and would begin the process of spreading the privileged, writing-rich work associated with taking English courses to students studying in other areas of the curriculum.

3. Reduce class sizes in ENGL 101/105 (or WRTG 101/105).

Before visiting W&L, we were suspicious of the high enrollment limit (18) in ENGL 101/105. Due to the labor-intensive nature of such courses, enrollments in comparable courses at selective liberal arts colleges are more commonly capped at 12-15. The most striking disparity, however, lies between English 105 courses (capped at 18) and the first-year seminars (capped at 12 or 15, depending on the department). There is no

doubt in our minds that this difference needs to be neutralized. The interviews we conducted confirmed our belief that the required writing courses at W&L (although smaller than they used to be) are still far too large to allow meaningful writing instruction to occur without exacting a very heavy toll on the teaching staff. Indeed, we heard from a number of faculty members who ranged from voicing concern to being distraught at the current situation. To be blunt, we encountered some serious faculty burnout in progress. We believe that if the responsibility for teaching the required first-year writing course were distributed more widely, it would be feasible to reduce class sizes without unduly straining faculty and curricular resources.

4. Require English (or WRTG) 101 or 105 of all entering students.

We heard from faculty teaching 200-level English courses that they need to spend time bringing those who exempted out of 105 up to speed; we did not hear strong arguments in favor of continuing the exemption. In our experience, AP English does not properly equip students to perform to expectation in college-level courses; in particular, it does not emphasize argument and the use of evidence, two skills that we believe are central to first-year instruction (Wellesley College does not accept AP credits in English, and we have begun to severely limit the number of AP credits students can count in other disciplines as well). We think it would be to every student's advantage to take at least two writing-intensive courses during the first year, perhaps in accordance with the cafeteria approach suggested above.

5. Eliminate the placement exam.

If all students are required to take two semesters of writing during their first year, a placement exam seems necessary only to identify those students whose writing is especially poor. As one faculty member suggested during our interviews, directed self-placement might serve students better, in that it gives them ownership of the choices they make, and also helps them begin, even before entering college, to consider where and why they have weaknesses in writing. Dan Royer and Roger Gilles, who initiated the concept, have a good website offering resources, as well as an edited collection of essays. The website is at: <http://faculty.gvsu.edu/royerd/dsp/index.htm> Wellesley College uses a modified form of directed self-placement and Dartmouth College invites entering first years in doubt about their writing to submit portfolios for review and comment by the Writing Program Director, with the result that more students than ever are choosing to enroll in the equivalent of English 101. Finally, an unusually thoughtful article on the problems of placement appeared in the most recent issue (Vol. 60) of *College Composition and Communication*: Irving Peckham, "Online Placement in First-Year Writing." We urge any group charged with rethinking placement to consult these and other resources readily available. Any of these approaches might lead to an increased demand for sections of English 101; we do not see this as a bad outcome.

6. Expand faculty development for all faculty teaching writing intensively, both in the first year and beyond.

The model of the twice-a-semester shoptalks has been in place for a long time; it might be time to shake things up a bit. These shoptalks have covered a wide and interesting range of topics, but they have not produced systematic thinking about the approach to writing taken at W&L, nor did we see strong evidence that approaches and assumptions underlying the English 105 courses are made known to all teachers equally and are

continually examined and reconsidered by all stakeholders. At the very least, those engaged in teaching first-year writing should regularly discuss student writing together, in order to deliberate the goals and values of writing instruction, of grading, and of course content. Faculty workshops can avoid becoming insular by bringing in high-profile outside speakers from time to time. And furthermore, faculty development opportunities can introduce other directions a writing program might want to take—a focus on technology and web-based writing, for example, or a focus on public speaking and communication across the curriculum. A faculty reading group might explore new ideas in rhetoric and composition. Again the most recent issue of *CCC* (Vol. 60) offers a possible starting point in an article by Rebecca S. Nowacek: “Why Is Being Interdisciplinary So Very Hard to Do? Thoughts on the Perils and Promise of Interdisciplinary Pedagogy.”

7. Make thoughtful use of the new four-week spring semester.

The four-week teaching window suggests all kinds of interested writing-intensive opportunities to us. While we heard faculty members worry about fitting a conventional writing course into that time block, our own imaginations were fired by any number of unconventional avenues to take, including some innovative opportunities for weaker writers (perhaps a psychology course that focuses on stereotype threat and other current research on intelligence, with a strong focus on writing and grammar taught in accordance with the models suggested by the best research). We’d suggest beginning with a workshop for faculty to devise new ways of creating writing-focused courses.

III. Tutoring and the Writing Centers

We do not believe the current peer tutoring program is working well at Washington & Lee. We have already noted signs of the ill health of this program, the most notable being the creation of a separate (and much better-funded) program in the Williams School. Other problems include the small size of the peer tutoring staff at the College Writing Center and the lack of adequate tutor training. A major drawback of the current small staff of tutors (approximately 12) is that the WC operates only 10 hours per week (Sundays through Thursdays, 8-10 p.m.). By contrast, according to the Hanover Research Council Report on writing instruction at 22 liberal arts colleges, writing centers at peer institutions “[operate] an average of 40.52 business hours (median of 34.5)” per week. The writing center at Hamilton College, which employs only undergraduate tutors, is open 66 hours per week. Because high-profile writing centers with robust peer tutoring programs are generally regarded as major components of strong writing programs, it is reasonable to conclude that, by strictly limiting the exposure of peer tutoring in its current Writing Center configuration, W&L is missing an important opportunity to encourage a contemporary approach to writing as a socially situated mode of learning. The small size of the peer tutoring corps at W&L also precludes the use of tutors as writing-intensive course assistants (often called Fellows or Associates), one possible incentive that might be used to induce more faculty to teach writing-intensive courses.

One result of the fine work of the Writing Review Committee is that the Writing Center has now moved to a much more attractive and more visible site in the university library. We see this move as setting the stage for exciting changes. In addition to our recommendation (above) that Kary Smout’s position become a dedicated Writing Center Director position, we recommend the following:

1. Maintain the Writing Center as a peer tutoring center.

While the WRC wondered whether professional tutors might be in order for this writing center (to conform to the services offered by the new Williams School Communications Center), we believe strongly in a peer tutor model. As peers within the academic discourse communities in which all student writers operate, they are more likely to fulfill the roles of learning catalyst and sounding board for their tutees and less likely to assume a hierarchical position as quasi-instructor who dictates what should be written. This issue of hierarchy is especially important in considering ways of countering the deficit model we discussed above. While some students and faculty alike may find comfort in the notion that the grammar of students' papers gets "fixed" at the writing center, we believe this is an approach that should be eschewed. As we have seen, while it is also possible for peer tutors to fall into such a directive mode seeking to address the "poor grammar" of their tutees, it is less likely, especially if some training and education in state-of-the-art pedagogy is provided. In many places, the Writing Center, staffed by peer tutors, serves as a microcosm for students that mimics what faculty do in their own writing practices—collaborating with colleagues, sharing drafts with friends, testing ideas in drafts for editors, getting feedback, and making revisions for presentation or publication through the process of peer review. Finally, peer tutors are often preferred to professional tutors because peers are held to be more accessible and approachable than professionals. Students who are reluctant to visit the Writing Center due to feelings of stigmatization may be less hesitant to consult a knowledgeable peer than a professional.

2. Significantly increase training/education for the peer tutors.

At present, tutors initially receive only a two-hour orientation from the director of the writing program with follow-up staff meetings throughout the semester to address issues pertaining to writing. Many state-of-the-art programs, by contrast, offer their peer tutors a dedicated course or a systematic, thorough training program in composition pedagogy. A course or a robust training program would allow tutors to theorize about the advantages and disadvantages of tutoring according to various models and to make enlightened decisions about how to work with their tutees. Besides improving the efficacy of the tutors, a good program of training and education for a significantly expanded tutoring staff could be a key element in reshaping the culture of writing instruction on campus from a deficit model to a more contemporary pedagogical model.

3. Increase the budget for the Writing Center.

At present, the Writing Center's budget of \$4,900 severely limits its potential and the college's ability to restructure it in a way that would support the reinvigoration of writing instruction at W&L. As the Hanover Report revealed, the average budget of peer institutions is \$38,000, more than seven times the size of W&L's College Writing Center budget. To us, the concern raised by some on campus that there is a "disparity" between the budgets of the Writing Center and the Williams School Communication Center is beside the point. Whatever the University decides to do about the Communications Center (which we discuss further, below), it is crucial that the College Writing Center budget be dramatically increased. Given the current opportunity to re-conceive the Writing Center's structure, practices, and role in the University, it is absolutely crucial to expand its budget.

4. Develop an online scheduling system.

Perhaps the quickest way to increase visibility and use of a peer tutoring center, especially given today's technological economy, is to develop an online system for scheduling and logging appointments. Free software is available from the Princeton Writing Center (if the W&L protocols support this software). Some schools report that their IT people have written good scheduling programs for them.

5. Advertise the tutoring services more broadly.

Because so many of the students we spoke with did not seem to know of the existence of the writing center (including many of the tutors, who claimed not to have even known about the writing center before they were invited to be tutors), it is obvious that the writing center needs to do a better job of making its presence felt on campus. It is possible that there is a fear that more advertising will produce more use than the center is currently prepared to handle, but we believe that worry can be allayed with an expanded set of hours and an improved scheduling system.

6. Keep better records of student visits.

It is essential for a strongly functioning writing center to keep reliable logs of student visits, both for continuity of help provided (tutors can consult earlier logs to determine what issues might have been worked on previously with a student), and to assess the nature and value of the use of the writing center. We saw a good set of statistics of the number of student visits to the center over the last 10 years; this report was quite useful to us. We would like to see an equivalently careful record of the nature and outcome of student visits.

7. Extend Peer Tutoring Beyond the Writing Center(s)

At present, Washington and Lee does not make use of peer tutors who work within a particular course to help students with the challenges and rewards of composing and revising their course essays. Indeed, this approach of integrating or "mainstreaming" peer tutors into the curriculum by employing them as writing associates (or fellows) in writing-intensive courses is common at many selective liberal arts colleges and universities (e.g., Swarthmore, Brown, Lafayette, Oberlin). Such writing associates generally attend classes to establish themselves as members of the learning community, read some or all of the weekly assignments, hold conferences with their tutees to work on brainstorming, composing and revising, and occasionally assist with writing-related activities such as writing workshops or peer response groups. This type of tutoring has proved highly successful in providing focused assistance to students enrolled in writing-intensive courses, in enabling faculty members to enrich the writing instruction they are able to offer, and in preparing writing associates for further work in academia or education (e.g., as graduate TAs or high school English teachers). Although W&L currently has no writing associates, nearly everyone with whom we spoke expressed enthusiasm for the idea. Implementation of this approach would be a natural outgrowth of two recommendations we make above, to increase the size of the peer tutoring staff and to increase the program's budget substantially. As is true at other institutions, it struck us that the availability of a writing associate would be an incentive to attract some faculty members to offer a writing-intensive course.

IV. Additional Recommendations and Thoughts

Our intent in offering the recommendations in Sections I through III above is to present a scaled set of recommendations that would allow W&L to make change on either a sweeping scale or a small scale. We recognize that budgets are tight right now, and have tried to make proposals that could be implemented without great expense as well as the more costly proposals that we think are necessary to demonstrate an institution's strong commitment to writing instruction. The above sections focus on those components that are central to the current ideals of the W&L program. In this section, we consider a few extra pieces, with the following recommendations.

1. Recognize the growing interest in the gateway courses and the senior year.

Our interviews with a small group of juniors and seniors and with the writing tutors indicated to us just how important their majors are to students, and how much their thinking coalesces and focuses around their major courses. (This struck Wini as quite different from the way students talk at Wellesley, where the distribution requirements, the tendency to double-major, and many extracurricular requirements diffuse a focus on the major.) Despite W&L's FDRs, and despite students' appreciation of the many interesting courses they have taken to fulfill them, students showed a real attachment to their major departments, and strong awareness of the sequence of courses that produced better writing for them. Those who had taken gateway courses appreciated them. This seems a promising direction that is well underway in several departments; coupled with senior research seminars and senior theses, this may well be the site of curricular instruction around which the most productive conversations about writing pedagogy could occur. We recommend building a critical mass of "senior experience" courses that would include senior seminars, capstone courses, senior tutorials, and honors projects already in place. Along with first-year seminars, such senior experience courses have become very popular at selective liberal arts colleges in recent years.

2. Consider a middle tier of "W" courses.

We heard strong interest from many faculty in developing a series of writing-intensive or "W" courses at the sophomore and junior level. These might well be connected to a student's major or might occur in courses that meet the FDRs. We have mixed feelings about this recommendation, however. With the first-year seminar program already underway, and with departments focusing on other approaches to writing at the junior and senior level, an additional layer of required writing-intensive courses might not be feasible. However, if there is strong interest in developing this kind of requirement, the "W" courses might serve as a vehicle for creating conversations across departments about the particular goals of writing instruction that W&L faculty share, thereby mitigating the "silo effect" mentioned earlier in this report. "W" courses can also be sites of innovation: of implementing write-to-learn strategies, for example, or of exploring new forms and genres of writing (narrative nonfiction, or digital writing, for example), and could certainly be courses that would be offered during the four-week spring semester. Any program of required writing-intensive courses needs careful oversight to ensure that these courses don't simply assign more writing, but in fact provide *instruction* in writing. We recommend that the newly constituted WPAC be empowered to determine the need for this option, and also for leading discussions about ways to generate "W" courses that are both innovative and instructionally sound.

3. **Reconsider ways to help those students most in need of help.**

We heard many veiled comments about students who seemed to need “grammar help,” and finally we asked outright if these students are disproportionately ESL students. The answer (from writing tutors) was “yes,” and we found ourselves wondering if much of the talk about grammar was, in fact, a complaint about students who don’t speak English as a native language. We also heard cautious speculation that two or three departments might be responsible for generating this number of needy ESL students among their ranks (here, Business, Politics, and Computer Science stood out notably). We strongly believe that these students are an important part of our communities and their needs (together with their strengths) need to be recognized and met. To this end, we believe that the approach taken by the Williams School in developing a Communications Center specifically to meet the needs of their students is a good one. We do not have enough evidence here to suggest other specific strategies for these students, but we urge W&L to collect that evidence and develop strong evidence-based programs for these students. To that end, we conclude with a brief section on assessment.

V. Assessment

Like many writing professionals, we are skeptical about writing assessment mandated by outside agencies, particularly assessment that takes the form of tests that do not recognize the complex, socially constructed nature of the act of composing. With that said, however, our interviews told us that W&L is served by a reaccreditation agency (SACS) that, though becoming increasingly stringent about mandating assessment, still allows individual schools to determine the form their assessment measures take.

We learned of two instances of assessment of writing performed to meet the mandates of reaccreditation agencies, and in both instances, saw promise. At the moment, it appears that assessments have been designed almost after the fact, to produce something to show for reaccreditation; the writing assessment done by the WPAC comes to mind. In contrast, the Williams School developed an assessment design as part of a strategic planning approach. They began by naming writing as one of five areas to work on, and in particular as an area that could be assessed with the goal of seeing measurable results. The Communications Center was a tangible result of this plan; the two professional writing tutors were charged with developing an assessment strategy. While the first year’s assessment was flawed, the plan included review and revision of the assessment procedure. This impressed us, and we would use this example to argue that any changes to the Writing Program build some form of program assessment into the plan from the very beginning.

What we have not yet seen in either assessment plan is a feedback loop, a systematic way to take the findings of the assessment procedures back into the program. Nor have we seen assessment tools that are designed to reflect the pedagogical values of a program that constantly scrutinizes its approaches to writing, its assumptions about how students learn to write, and the particular values the institution holds about the kinds of writing it wants to see. So far, the assessment tools are pretty generic, focused on standard measures of “good” writing. We would urge W&L to develop a more nuanced approach to asking and answering the questions that matter to the university and to build these questions into its assessment strategies.