

Writing Across the Curriculum in a College of Business and Economics

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A recent study examined how written communication concepts and skills have been integrated into core courses in the College of Business and Economics at California State University, Northridge. Writing-across-the-curriculum programs have met with mixed success. We wanted to see how elements of such a program were working at our university. Through a survey of faculty, we found the presence of both formal and informal writing policies, differences in standards for writing in upper-division core courses, differences in assignments, differences in assessment strategies and in the results of such assessments, and, finally, differences in perceptions about whether WAC is a good idea. In general, faculty do provide opportunities for students to write, but many feel students write poorly and thus can handle only easy assignments, and many faculty consider themselves ineffective teachers of writing. Based on this study we recommend the implementation of team-taught, interdisciplinary courses; the development of standards for writing and assessment; and training programs for faculty who want to integrate writing into their courses.

Keywords: Writing across the curriculum, core classes, economics, business

HOW WRITTEN COMMUNICATION concepts and skills have been integrated into core courses in a College of Business and Economics was the subject of the research reported in this article. The study took place at California State University, Northridge (CSUN) during the 1999-2000 academic year. The research has implications for revising and developing business communication courses to reflect the writing assignments required in upper-division core courses, for developing standards concerning writing and assessment, and for training faculty members who integrate writing in their courses. After a brief review of the literature on writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) programs in the context of business programs, we describe the findings from our study.

Brief Review of WAC Programs in Business Programs

WAC programs, which became popular in the 1970s, encouraged faculty members outside the writing disciplines to view writing as an integral part of their disciplines rather than the sole responsibility of those who teach in the writing disciplines. As described in *The Development of Writing Abilities* (Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, & Rosen, 1975), a theory upon which WAC is based, WAC required faculty members to adopt writing methods concerning developing assignments and explaining them to their students, helping students complete the writing process, and assessing their students' work. Moreover, it encouraged faculty members to use main function categories. These categories include transactional writing in which the writer uses "language to get things done: to inform people, to advise or persuade or instruct people" and expressive writing in which the writer maintains journals and freewrites (Britton et al., p. 88). Utilizing both writing methods and writing categories is time consuming and, at the same time, promotes learning among students. White (1994) claims it forces them to make sense of what they already know. Likewise, Elbow (1973) states, "Meaning is not what you start out with but what you end up with" (p. 15). Furthermore, he views writing "not as a way to transmit a message but as a way to grow and cook a message" (p. 15).

Evidence is apparent that business programs have incorporated WAC in their curriculum. In these programs, writing is a legitimate part of each discipline; students are required to transfer the knowledge and skills learned in their traditional writing courses to their business courses. For example, in Ranney and McNeilly's project (1996), writing assignments were incorporated into an introductory international business course. Using a team approach, a subject specialist and a writing specialist developed the assignments, explained them to the students, and evaluated them. The project's successful results included improving students' writing, enhancing their awareness and understanding of international business issues, and assuaging faculty members' fears that the addition of writing assignments results in a reduction of course content.

In a study by Stout, Wygal, and Hoff (1990), faculty members who participated in a year-long training program enhanced the written and oral communication skills of their financial accounting students by touting the importance of good communication skills and requiring them to maintain journals, make an oral presentation, and complete a small-group formal writing assignment.

Harmon (1990) also incorporated informal and formal writing exercises in his personal finance course. Students were required to make journal entries and to prepare papers using word processing and spreadsheet software. Likewise Hall and Tiggeman (1995) required their students to prepare five "writing-to-learn" assignments in their introductory finance class (p. 12). These short, frequent, and informal writing assignments improved students' understanding of finance concepts and enabled instructors to assess their students' comprehension.

Although supporters believe that WAC improves the students' understanding of concepts and enables instructors to assess their students' comprehension, skeptics claim that faculty members are insecure when assigning writing to or evaluating the writing of their students and cannot allocate sufficient time to both content and writing instruction.

When Corbin and Glynn (1992) employed WAC in their marketing program, they surveyed business professionals to establish a writing standard and then developed a written communication policy. This policy required students enrolled in Marketing Strategy to participate in a writing workshop and prepare a portfolio. Faculty members evaluated each portfolio and students were assigned a passing grade, referred to the writing center to revise the portfolio, or assigned an incomplete grade. Although the faculty members found the program beneficial, they perceived the assessment process as burdensome. Likewise, Riordan, Riordan, and Sullivan (2000) found their WAC project significantly improved their students' writing skills; however, they expressed concerns such as the "varying levels of comfort in delivering classroom lectures" about writing and the increase in the amount of time to prepare and grade writing assignments (p. 57). Munter

(1999) concurs, "Other faculty are not trained to teach business writing (p. 109). Moreover, she claims, "The assignments are wrong" (p. 109) and the "teaching of writing takes more time than WAC allows" (p. 110). For these reasons, she contends that WAC does not work (Munter, 1999).

Research Method

During the 1999-2000 academic year, we conducted a normative survey research study to collect data about WAC. We personally interviewed members of the population at our university, which includes 55 full-time faculty who teach at least one of the 11 upper-division business core courses in which written communication concepts, skills, and techniques are incorporated.

During the week of May 16, 2000, we sent each faculty member an e-mail message explaining the study's purpose and requesting an interview. Thirty-five faculty members (64 percent) expressed interest. Each of us scheduled interviews throughout the summer; one conducted 15, the other, 16. The interviewees represent each of the seven departments within the College. The majority of the interviewees have a terminal degree (Ph.D. or J.D.). Eighteen hold the rank of professor; 7, associate professor; and 10, assistant professor. Only 7 of the interviewees are female.

The interview guide is reproduced in Appendix A. A panel of experts reviewed early drafts and pilot tested it. It served as the basis for face-to-face interviews that lasted about 30 minutes. All but two of the interviews were tape recorded. Immediately after the interview, we made notes to enhance and supplement the tapes and then transcribed them. Subsequently, we exchanged transcripts and tapes and compared each other's printed text with the tape to ensure reliability, according to a practice recommended by Lee (1999). The transcripts were reviewed twice—the first time to make notes of potential trends and patterns and the second to concentrate on one question at a time to consider words, content, internal consistency, specificity of responses, big ideas, and the purpose of the interview (Krueger, 1988).

Findings

Data were organized into five categories; similarities and differences are reported about policies, standards, assignments, assessment, and perceptions.

Both Formal and Informal Writing Policies

CSUN's formal writing policy, which has been in effect since 1997, requires all upper-division general education courses to be writing intensive. For each course, students must complete writing assignments totaling a minimum of 2,500 words. Unlike the University, the College of Business Administration does not have a formal policy; however, two of its departments, Economics and Marketing, do. Because the Economics Department's upper-division core courses are a part of general education, the University's policy is imposed. On the other hand, the Marketing Department acknowledged that effective communication skills are highly valued by the business community. Therefore, their policy, established in 1990, requires a statement on syllabi about written assignments conforming to the rules of proper grammar, including spelling, or the grade will be lowered.

The remaining departments have informal policies. Business Law and Management have always had their policies, which require faculty members to have at least one written assignment in their classes. The Departments of Accounting and MIS, Finance, and Management Science have had their policies since the 1995-1996 core review; they encourage faculty to incorporate writing in designated courses.

Differences in Writing Standards

A single writing standard does not exist for upper-division core courses. Of those faculty who incorporate writing in their classes, the assignments are content specific, but the number and type differ. The most common types of assignments include legal briefs, exams (essay and short answer), responses to end-of-chapter problems, and short assignments that range from a single paragraph to a two-page memorandum. A few faculty members require longer

assignments. For instance, marketing faculty have students prepare 15-page business plans.

The respondents indicated that the assignments they now require are not nearly as difficult as they were initially. For instance, an economics professor stated, "At one time, students were required to choose a book from a list of four and write a book report." He complained, "For our students, this was tough." In fact, "One student revealed that she couldn't even read the book; although she could read the words, she didn't know the context of anything he referred to." Another economics professor now requires only two essays instead of a term paper "because students were incapable of identifying a problem and focusing a paper on that problem." Moreover, "Plagiarism was a problem." Finally, an accounting professor now requires only one short writing assignment instead of the four he once required. He justifies having fewer assignments "because of the poor students I now have, I have to spend my time teaching them content." Furthermore, "With these students, it's just counterproductive—they'd be wasting their time, they wouldn't be improving, and they'd be losing substantive knowledge they desperately need."

Variety in Writing Assignments

Faculty use a variety of writing assignments that require students to apply theory and think analytically. For example, rather than repeating numbers from a spreadsheet, a finance professor requires students to analyze the information and communicate it. The students must decide whether something is better or worse and then provide evidence that supports their decision. Moreover, students are required to analyze their audience. An economics professor challenges his students to take a complicated or technical issue, explain this issue in language that can be understood by someone outside the discipline, and then present it in a letter or memorandum.

Students have difficulty identifying relevant information and writing concisely. For instance, a management professor has students read a Harvard case of approximately 20 pages. He assigns questions for each case and then limits students' responses to two

pages. He claims, "Students have difficulty sticking to a 2-page limit; reading a 20-page case and filtering out what is relevant is a challenge because they could easily write 10 pages."

The majority of the respondents provide their students with all of the information they need to prepare an assignment. Many professors responded like this economics professor, "I provide my students with the articles and websites—they never have to go to the library; I've made it easy for them." Likewise, for his finance paper of 8- to 12-pages on important course topics, this professor claims that "Students summarize information from the textbook and my lectures—no outside research is required."

For those few faculty who do require students to gather information from primary or secondary sources, the number of sources is limited. For example, a management professor's three-part writing assignment instructs students to find an article in a prominent journal, choose a topic in the course and analyze the article "through the lens of the topic," and, finally, to draw a conclusion about or summarize the topic. A management science professor requires an eight- to nine-page report; his groups of students "interview a manager and read a few articles."

Although the assignments encourage students to apply the writing process (planning, gathering, organizing, writing, revising, formatting, and editing), faculty provide their students with very little or no information concerning process. Many respondents agree with this management science professor, "At this point in their career, they should know how to write." Others indicated that students who have taken a business communication course should know how to prepare documents and think analytically. For example, an accounting professor said, "I assume that students know the parts of a memorandum, and, therefore, I don't give any instruction on how to prepare them or what to include; I tell them to review what they learned in their business communication course." Another professor shared, "I learned to write on the job." He stressed, "I am a law teacher—not a writing instructor."

Others complain that their time is spent on teaching the course's content. According to an accounting professor, "I don't

have time to teach the writing; I don't know what to do." Another professor believes that "students would learn more from reiterations of the assignments; but because of the time constraint, it is not possible in the Management 360 course." Finally, "I have no time to spend on process; I tell them here's a question, and I want a quality answer—not a yes or no response."

Other respondents indicated their discomfort with teaching students the writing process. Many agree with this economics professor, "If I were a student, I'd be worried having me teach writing; I would rather teach math." He claims, "I write by radar; because I've written articles for publication, I know the parts to include." Yet, "It's hard for me to use the words that describe writing theory." For example, "I ask them to prepare an introduction, but I'm unable to tell them the actual parts to include."

Although most faculty spend little or no time on process, some use techniques such as role modeling and thinking out loud. Many faculty, for instance, show examples and let their students know how they would approach them. For example, a management science professor states, "I walk the students through a problem as part of my lecture by bringing a computer to class, running the statistical analysis, and interpreting the results." One economics professor claims that process is implied in his lectures, "Although I do not give them examples of written essays and discuss how to write a good, coherent essay, I spend a lot of time on problems." For example, "I draw a model on the board, talk about it, and jot down key points." A management professor gives "students a handout in class as well as three samples of good reports. He claims, "Each one differs in writing style and organization, but each is an excellent paper."

Some business law faculty spend a considerable amount of time on process; they show their students how to brief cases using the IRAC method. One professor reveals that the format is flexible but the content is not. He claims that students prepare essays rather than a report. Because "they view essays with a creative mind set, I get a third of the papers with an introduction that has nothing to do with the assignment; then they shovel facts in at

the end.” He cautions them to “get rid of the introduction, then tell me what is important.”

Other than requiring assignments to be prepared using word processing software, faculty do not provide additional information concerning the final document. The respondents ask their students to submit polished papers; at best, they get a rough draft. According to one accounting professor, “I expect some type of organization and format but get a five-page paragraph with no headings.” A management professor poses this question to his students, “Is this a competent business report by a consultant to the CEO of an important client organization?” Conversely, a marketing professor gives students a “grading template for the 20-page double spaced business plan, which shows the most important topics, how long the pieces should be, and what marketing is looking for.”

Variety in Types and Results of Assessment

Few faculty assess their students’ writing assignments. Many interviewees responded like this economics professor: “Although I don’t collect the homework, I do offer to read their answers.” But for those who do assess, they believe their students exhibit three levels of writing: competent, average, and poor. One accounting professor believes “about one-third of the students are doing college level work.” Moreover, “The middle third is lost as far as organization; they are able to present grammatically correct sentences, but they are unable to present points logically—there is no logical train of thought.” Finally, “The bottom group has big problems.” Likewise, a professor complained, “Sometimes it’s pretty depressing; some students just cannot write clearly or to a point.” Further, “Each paragraph should have a point to it, but sometimes it’s just fact after fact.”

They attribute students’ poor writing skills to something other than English being their second language. An accounting professor has “come to expect poor communication skills; however, some of them, especially the foreign students, try. Another professor believes that “Students do not pay enough attention to

detail—sloppy; moreover, they do not spend enough time on the assignment.” Finally, this professor believes that “Students need better language skills and need to be more concerned about error-free papers; content is not the only component.”

Faculty who inform students of their writing weaknesses do so by returning marked-up papers or papers with comments. Generally, these comments focus on students’ mastery of English basics (grammar, spelling, and punctuation) and organization of sentences and paragraphs. Many of the professors mark obvious errors and unclear text; however, one economics professor revealed, “Some students’ problems are so big that I wouldn’t know where to begin helping them; there are papers that are turned in that do not have a single correct sentence (sentences without verbs not dangling participles).” On the other hand, two professors (business law and management) provide students with lengthy comments. Using a database of comments comprising frequently made mistakes, they cut and paste to provide students with a personalized evaluation.

A small number of faculty perceive themselves to be excellent writers. These professors have taken a number of writing courses. One management professor revealed, “I had an English teacher in high school who spent her lunch hour with me twice a week to improve grammar, so I feel pretty confident about grading writing.” Furthermore, “I am learning additional finer points from the English T.A.s, which I appreciate.” A finance professor realized that, “Writing is not one of my strongest suits, so I actually took extra courses to improve my writing.” Yet, “I still have trouble and feel awkward about grading the student’s technical writing style.”

Some professors admitted feeling incompetent when grading writing. An accounting professor believes, “Part of the problem is that we are expected to evaluate something that we have not been trained to do.” For example, “I know what I like about art, but I don’t know much about it.” This professor is “comfortable grading the analysis and argument yet uncomfortable grading an awkward sentence and not knowing what is wrong with it.”

For those who require their students to write but do not evaluate their writing, they claim they are unable to verbalize students’

writing weaknesses, yet they identify poor writing because the passage does not make sense. For example, an economics professor stated, "I know when a sentence is awkward but not what is wrong with it; for some students, I cannot tell them much about how to improve their writing, so I am less comfortable grading writing." A management professor commented that "It's harder to tell a B student how to make their [sic] paper an A."

Overall, faculty perceive writing to be important; however, they are uncomfortable grading their students' writing. A business law professor believes, "We are all responsible for their writing education; I take language skills into account when grading, but I do not define how I do that." He feels ". . . uncomfortable about putting a factor into the grading process and not being able to define it." One professor revealed, "Writing is a bad way to test whether the students know economics; I want students to be writing because it is important, but it is a dichotomy in grading." He believes, "As economists, we are uncomfortable grading writing, because it is not our natural skill."

Moreover, they have difficulty assigning and justifying the grades to students. A finance professor said, "Students who are poor writers usually receive at least a C if the content is present—I want them to succeed." Others agree with this accounting professor, "Even though my students turn in handwritten, poorly organized assignments and present only part of the concepts, I still assign a C because I want to motivate them—not turn them off." Likewise, this economics professor said, "I very rarely give a grade less than a C on writing, so I have students who get an F on an exam's content and still manage to pass." In other words, respondents are fearful that the majority of their students would fail assignments if their writing were truly evaluated.

Professors also have trouble distinguishing between students who understand the content but have trouble communicating it and those who really do not understand. For instance, a business law professor complained, "Poor writing is difficult to grade; the students may have the content right, but you cannot figure that out because of the writing." A finance professor agrees that "Some

students do not know how to think logically, or they can think logically, but cannot write it down.” Finally, another professor believes, “Sometimes when I talk to them, I know they understand the concept and can do the math; but you would never know that from reading their papers.” He believes, “They know what to say, but cannot express it.”

For students who need help with their writing, assistance is available. Few students, however, take advantage of it. In fact, many professors responded like this management science professor, “I invite students to visit me for extra help, but, of course, no one ever has.” In addition to faculty, teaching assistants assigned to large class sections provide tutoring. On the other hand, some faculty said they do not assist students with their writing; they refer them to the Learning Resource Center, which provides tutorials that range from grammar and mechanics through sentence and paragraph structure to techniques for organizing essays, hour exams, and research papers.

Mixed Perceptions about the Value and Success of WAC

When asked what faculty who teach a business communication course can do to assist them, the respondents acknowledged their ignorance of the topics that are commonly taught. Nevertheless, they want their students to possess strong basic English skills and the ability to edit their documents. An accounting professor claimed, “I am a strong advocate of this [WAC]; its importance was discussed in the core review.” In addition, the respondent believes “The only thing you can do in the business communication course is to give them basic writing skills and instruction in formatting and organizing.”

Respondents agree that WAC is a good idea. A marketing professor believes that because “it has been stressed during the last couple of years for all disciplines, many faculty have made an effort to include minor assignments in areas that have not had writing assignments before.” Additionally, another professor likes it because “WAC provides multiple opportunities for writing in various courses; the more writing people do, the better they get at

it." An accounting professor claims a benefit of reinforcing language skills is that "It helps students to understand the technical material, especially if you give students ambiguous issues." In other words, "They must think within the discipline and process the knowledge."

Even though they acknowledge the advantages of WAC, the respondents identified disadvantages. Most of them believe that WAC is time consuming. For example, a business law professor said, "Faculty are reluctant to assign writing because it is a lot of work; effort goes into the development of the assignment as well as the evaluation of the writing." Another business law faculty member complained, "How do I grade 145 of these homework problems 4-5 times a semester."

Respondents are concerned about the amount of time to read and evaluate assignments completed by average and poor writers. An economics professor believes "You can tell when an essay is well written—it just flows, the ideas are present and clear." Therefore, "It's easy to identify good papers and bad papers; however, it's that middle range—I don't know how well I'm doing." A finance professor commented, "Students do not write as well as they should; as a result, I have cut back on the number of writing assignments, especially in the lecture hall, because a poor paper takes so long to grade—up to 15 minutes."

Conclusions

Although faculty members appear to be supportive of WAC, they tend to incorporate its principles only minimally in their courses. Overall, faculty members provide students with opportunities to write by the time they complete their upper-division core courses. Yet because of students' poor writing skills, many faculty have revised their writing standards to include fewer, easier, and shorter assignments.

Faculty perceive themselves to be ineffective teachers of writing. Generally, they expressed discomfort employing teaching methods for writing. Although faculty members' assignments pertain to the discipline and require students to apply business com-

munication principles, students receive little or no direction on how to complete an assignment, how to conduct research, or how the assignment will be assessed. In other words, faculty members seem to expect students to complete the writing process independently because they believe a need exists to spend more time teaching course content than writing, they are unable to discuss writing in the vernacular, or they expect their students to possess writing skills, which is consistent with the literature.

Nevertheless, faculty members require students to write; yet because evaluating assignments is time consuming, they tend to base their evaluation of assignments on limited criteria or do not evaluate them at all. Faculty, for instance, appear to evaluate writing assignments based on the students' application of rules (grammar, mechanics, and so on) rather than the students' mastery of a business writing style. Faculty and students appear to have different perceptions of what constitutes a polished paper. Perhaps the students' version of a polished paper is guided by the grades and comments they have received on previous papers. Students appear to be rewarded, rather than punished, for poorly written papers—faculty seem to be reluctant to assign grades less than a C.

Recommendations

Based on these conclusions, the following recommendations can be made:

- Offer interdisciplinary courses that are team taught. One faculty member could provide instruction in the discipline; the other, in business communication.
- Develop standards for writing and assessment in upper-division courses that incorporate WAC. These standards should include (but not be limited to) written communication principles that address organization and style, mechanics and spelling, and appearance.
- Train faculty members who integrate writing in their courses. Develop a methods course that includes topics concerning developing assignments, instructing students, evaluating assign-

ments, and assigning grades that reflect the students' writing performance.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

1. Describe your policy concerning writing in this course.
2. Discuss the number, type, and difficulty level of assignments.
3. Describe writing assignments you require your students to complete.
4. What information do you provide your students concerning process? Product?
5. Do your students' writing skills meet your expectations?
6. Identify criteria you use to evaluate the writing of your students' assignments.
7. How do you inform students of their writing performance on each assignment?
8. Is the writing performance of your students reflected in their final grade? What percentage?
9. What assistance do you or does your department provide to students who do not meet the level of writing you expect?
10. On a scale of 1 to 5 (5 = most comfort), what number describes your comfort level when you evaluate your students' writing? Why?
11. What are your perceptions concerning "Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC)"?
12. Identify content, assignments, and other topics you believe business communication faculty could include in their course to prepare students for your course.
13. Discuss ways you believe the business communication faculty can assist you.

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