

ACADEMIC AFFAIRS COMMITTEE  
MINUTES  
OCTOBER 16, 2006

Jorge Nobo, chair, convened the Academic Affairs Committee at 3:32 pm in the Boswell Room of the Memorial Union. Members present were: Pat Munzer, Jane Carpenter, David Pownell, Shaun Schmidt, Bill Roach and Loran Smith. Invited guests present were: Ron Wasserstein, Margy Stewart, and Bradley Siebert.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES: The committee voted to approve the minutes of the October 2, 2006 meeting.

AGENDA: 1. Discussion of University General Education English Requirement. No Action Taken.

Jorge Nobo began the discussion by referring to several of the questions about the English requirement that he had prepared for the October 2, 2006 meeting but were not covered at that time. He inquired whether the objectives, implementation, and assessment methods were the same across all sections of EN 101 and EN 300. Bradley Siebert replied that there was a little less uniformity in EN 300 because almost all sections are taught by tenured professors who have a high degree of autonomy and who have other primary interests. There is a uniform expectation about the amount of writing and the types of writing. The length of the research paper could vary from 6, 10, or 15 pages depending upon the professor. It would be impossible for EN 300 faculty to evaluate the portfolios of students in another faculty's section.

Margy Stewart said that En 101 has common goals and common assessment for both the individual student and program assessment. Random selection of pre-test and post-test from various sections are reviewed by EN 101 faculty using a common rubric.

A question was asked about the former practice of teaching sections of EN 300 for specific majors, I.e., Business, Health, Social Science, Law, etc. Bradley Siebert answered that it became impractical to continue that structure. Students took the class when it fit their schedule rather than by emphasis. He explained that EN 300 focuses on explanatory, analytical reasoning, and critical thinking skills. He provided a copy of the EN 200/300 five year review. (see attachment.)

Jorge Nobo then inquired about the objectives or criteria a student currently must meet in order to earn an A in EN 101 and EN 300 and a C in En 101/EN 300. Margy Stewart replied that in EN 101, student portfolios must earn an excellent on each of three criteria and this constitutes 50% of the final grade. The remaining 50% would require a student to show excellence in class participation to merit an A grade in the course. For a C average, the student must achieve a satisfactory in each of the three criteria. There are no specific, empirical, quantifiable criteria used in grading these papers. Students get better at writing by writing. She emphasized that there is more to effective writing than grammar; there is also thoughtfulness.

Bradley Siebert noted that a strength in reasoning or a powerful argument can overcome a certain amount of errors in grammar and technique. He agreed with Margy Stewart that developing some type of quantifiable system in grading is uncertain.

Loran Smith suggested that there was, perhaps, a disconnect between the English expectations of some faculty and the expectations of the English faculty regarding the English requirement. Pat Munzer disagreed with Smith's generalization and Bradley Siebert said that he had heard just the opposite from some faculty. Bill Roach raised a related issue when he reported that surveys have indicated that students are not writing in cursive. This impacts writing skills as well as the length of student writing on timed tests.

At this point, Ron Wasserstein interjected that almost all classes could be subject to the same issue of "outsiders" expectations versus a department's expectations. So concerns about skills are not limited to writing. If we want to emphasize writing at Washburn, we are all going to have to do it. Bill Roach agreed and suggested the reduction in the number of faculty giving comprehensive finals may be a contributing factor to lack of writing opportunities for students.

Loran Smith hypothesized that perhaps we are dealing with the wrong topic. Perhaps the nature of General Education isn't the real issue but rather, it is the nature of contemporary college students. Most of our students are good students but they have established the standards rather than the faculty by simply deciding how much work is adequate and then refuse to do more. Perhaps the real question is not how General Education

can prepare our students but rather, how can we prepare our students for General Education? Ron Wasserstein commented that the National Survey on Student Engagement has indicated at least one consistent result: students see themselves as "under-challenged." Washburn student responses are about the same as our peer schools but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't discuss what to do about it. Pat Munzer says that her students can develop arguments but putting those arguments together and forming an opinion is the difficulty she sees.

AGENDA ITEM: Possibility of creating a Department of Composition and Rhetoric. No Action Taken.

Jorge Nobo said that these problems are not confined to Washburn but are nation-wide. He wanted to change the conversation to another topic: creating a Department of Composition and Rhetoric. Jorge Nobo referred to the work of Dr. Dan Royer of Grand Valley State University on the Self-Placement of students in English classes. There was some discussion of advantages and disadvantages of creating such a department. Jorge Nobo noted that a number of schools are creating such departments. Margy Stewart said that anything that would provide students with more opportunity to write would be beneficial. Another option is the Freshman Seminar approach, a team-taught combination of two courses that would allow students to make connections between two quite different disciplines and, at the same time, require purposeful writing.

Bradley Siebert also suggested that we need some sort of control over when students take EN 300. For example, some rule that it must be taken in the first 100 hours of credit or something like that. We also need something a bit more programmatic than "Writing Across the Curriculum." In addition, several people indicated that each department could/should create "writing intensive" courses in its required major courses.

Margy Stewart suggested than anyone concerned about how the EN 101/300 people approach their task is welcome to attend staff meetings, portfolio reviews, or sit in on a Freshman Composition class just to see what is going on.

Meeting Adjourned at 4:55 pm.

Next Scheduled Meeting: Monday, November 6, 2006 at 3:30 pm in the Boswell Room of the Memorial Union.