

ACADEMIC AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
MINUTES
February 19, 2007

Jorge Nobo, chair, convened the Academic Affairs Committee at 3:45 pm in the Boswell Room of the Memorial Union. Members present were: Pat Munzer, David Pownell, Bill Roach, Steven Elisha, Patricia Renn-Scanlan, Shaun Schmidt, and Loran Smith. Guests were: Dr. Ron Wasserstein and Dr. Dan Royer of Grand Valley State University.

Dr. Nobo introduced our guest who is the Chair of the Department of Writing at GVSU and who spent the past two hours talking to faculty about the two items of interest to the committee: (1) Directed Self-Placement for Freshman English and (2) Portfolio Group-Grading.

Dr. Royer said his university faced the same problem as others: What writing course should incoming freshman take? At GVSU, the choice was between EN 098, the basic writing class (WU equivalent, EN 100) and EN 150, the regular writing class (WU equivalent, EN 101.) GVSU struggled with this problem in several ways: use ACT English scores, high school GPA, or have students provide a writing sample at summer orientation. The results were that about 30% of students were enrolled in the basic class. But, upon closer review, GVSU found that some who were placed in the basic class should have been in the regular class and vice versa.

The first step was to determine whether there existed a placement problem or a grading problem. If a significant number of students who should have been in the basic class are doing well in the regular class, it may be a grading problem. So the first thing is to have standards as to what constitutes an A, a B, etc. If it is a placement problem, the answer GVSU developed was Self-Placement. It starts off with a letter from the Writing Department to every incoming freshman which explains the difference between the two courses and urges students to think carefully about which course is best for them. It is critical to emphasize that there is a meaningful difference between the two courses. A brochure accompanies the letter which asks students to take a brief survey which may help them to make a decision. During summer orientation, students are presented with a brief explanation of the two courses and why a student might take the basic course. Students then enroll but during the first week may switch from one class to the other.

Except for one semester, the number of students enrolled in the basic course is consistent at about 16% (compared to the 30% done by placement exam.) It is important that the course is not designated a remedial course, but an additional course to help students write; "if you choose it, you need it."

Dr. Royer then discussed the Writing Program at GVSU. He said that the writing process is only as good as the products they yield. Students write during the semester, their writing is critiqued and suggestions made but no grade is given. The grade in the course is based on products, not on attendance, participation, or how they work. Grade is given

at the end of the course when students submit a portfolio of three of their best products.

How the grade is determined starts with a group of five faculty who teach the same course. They meet for one hour each week and review three pieces of writing to determine what grade each piece should receive. Slowly, over the course of the semester (or about 10 weeks), this faculty group norms itself. They develop a consensus as to what constitutes A writing, B writing, etc. At the end of the course, a student submits the portfolio. The teacher doesn't comment, doesn't correct any errors but simply determines a letter grade based on the three pieces of writing. Without revealing that grade to anyone, the five faculty redistribute the papers among themselves and the second reader also assigns a grade (a straight A, B, C, or D). If the two grades agree, the instructor of record may add a + or - to the grade based on attendance, effort, etc (at GVSU, a + or - have different grade point values). If the two disagree, they give the portfolio to a third reader. If the process works as it is supposed to, there should not be many third reads.

"The aim of a first year writing course is to prepare students for the kind of writing they will be required to do in freshman and sophomore courses at the university." That makes the first writing course a service course and there is nothing wrong with that, in fact, he and his colleagues embrace the idea.

In response to questions, Dr. Royer made the following comments:

1. In the basic course (EN 098), students want to be there so teachers are more enthusiastic. So students have a greater incentive to succeed.
2. GVSU has the same problem as Washburn. They require transfer students to take EN 305 (WU equivalent = EN 300). But students take a Placement Exam. They have discovered that 70% of the students get the course waived as a result of the exam. Of the 30% remaining, if they take the Placement Exam a second time, 70% of THEM get the course waived.
3. There is a generalized rubric that constitutes what is an A,B,C, or D in writing. Everyone agrees on it and everyone says they use it. But, the rubric is an abstraction. One needs a practical application to a piece of writing to develop a consistent and normed grading system.
4. Grading as assessment. Individual grading is not standardized so the general rule is that grades can not be used for assessment purposes. But the public grading is normed. If one spends one hour a week every week for ten weeks articulating what you mean by an A,B,C,or D and at the end of term you share your graded paper with a colleague and most often that colleague arrives at the same grade, you have a standardized grade which can be used in assessment.

Meeting adjourned at 4:55 pm.

Next Meeting will be at 3:30 pm on March 5, 2007.