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ABSTRACT

A study examined the types of writing courses currently offered by English departments at major universities, how they have changed over the last 10 years, and whether enrollments have increased or decreased during that period. The English departments at 198 institutions with graduate programs were surveyed; 105 usable responses were received (a 53% response rate). Results indicated that courses in creative writing, composition theory and rhetoric, and writing instruction were the most pervasive courses at the graduate level, with business and technical writing not likely to be available at that level. The required "service" writing courses along with the creative writing and advanced composition courses are the most pervasive courses at the undergraduate level. Freshman composition is almost universal. Even without freshman composition, writing courses are generally more available at the undergraduate level than at the graduate level, with the size of the institution determining the number of offerings. On average, 1.7 of the 2.3 graduate courses are new since 1975, and 3.9 of the 11 undergraduate courses are new. On average also, enrollments in writing courses have increased dramatically in the last 10 years while enrollments in literature courses have remained stable. Results suggest that within the past 10 years, writing instruction has expanded in both variety and size in colleges and universities. (References are attached.) (HTH)

Writing Instruction in Colleges and Universities

A Survey from 1975-76 to 1985-86

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A Survey of Writing Instruction in Colleges and Universities

1975-76 to 1985-86

As shown by publications such as Composition and Literature: Bridging the Gap, one of the more heated debates in English departments is the role of writing instruction. In certain departments, composition studies have been admitted as a legitimate specialization in doctoral programs and as an acceptable area for research. In others, both students and faculty specialize solely in literary studies. Moreover, the academic community beyond the English department along with business and industry have increased the demand for courses in business, technical, and scientific writing. Although there has been much talk of change in the character of English departments, little documentation exists of such change beyond anecdotal evidence. This article reports responses to a survey of writing instruction in English departments with graduate programs. It considers the types of courses currently offered and their enrollments and any changes that have occurred in the last ten years.[1]

The survey was intended to answer three questions:

1. What types of writing courses are currently offered in English departments at major universities?
2. Have these course offerings changed in the last ten years?
3. Have enrollments in writing courses increased or decreased in the last ten years?

We decided to study writing course offerings and enrollments between the

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academic years 1975-76 and 1985-86 because this period seemed large enough to demonstrate genuine change. In addition, events in 1975 caused many people to criticize the writing instruction available in American schools. The results of the second National Assessment of Educational Progress suggested that 9-, 13-, and 17-year-olds, on average, wrote poorly and that many 17-year olds wrote only slightly better than 13-year-olds (Mellon). Later that year, Newsweek published its famous article, "Why Johnny Can't Write," accusing the educational system at all levels of "spawning a generation of semiliterates" (Sheils, 58). Since English departments in colleges and universities are concerned not only with teaching students from throughout the campus to write but also to some extent with preparing English teachers to teach writing in elementary and secondary schools, it seems valid to see how the academy has reacted to this perceived need for improved writing instruction. Finally, as Berlin notes, graduate programs in composition were forming and "rhetoric was becoming a respectable academic specialty" in places by 1975 (121).

Method

In the fall of 1986, after two pilot studies, we surveyed 198 English departments randomly selected from Peterson's Graduate Programs in the Humanities and Social Sciences, 1985.[2] We requested a copy of the departments' 1985-86 course offerings with writing courses introduced after 1975 indicated by large check marks. A questionnaire asked respondents for the total annual enrollments, excluding summer, from 1975-76 and 1985-86 in graduate and undergraduate literature courses and a breakdown of annual

[2] Our responses showed that Peterson's Graduate Programs lists a few schools which in fact offer no graduate courses in English, and one university we surveyed has no undergraduate program at all.

enrollments in graduate and undergraduate writing courses. To remind those who had not returned the questionnaire, we sent a series of three follow-up letters (Dillman).[3]

In selecting our sample, we considered only those colleges and universities located in the United States, eliminating Canadian universities and American institutions in Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and elsewhere. Our sample consisted of half the total population of 396. The usable response was 105 (53% response rate), more than 25% of the total population. English departments from across the United States responded: from the University of Minnesota at Duluth to Texas Christian, from Boston University to California State University at Bakersfield. Besides varying in location, the responding colleges and universities also varied in size; the largest had a 1985 university enrollment of 52,434, and the smallest an enrollment of 1216. Among the universities and colleges responding, 50.5% enrolled less than 10,000 students, 28.6% enrolled between 10,000 and 20,000 students, and 21% enrolled more than 20,000 students. The sample was dominated by public institutions (75%). We chose departments with graduate programs because we thought that they would take the lead in incorporating writing courses into both the undergraduate and the graduate majors. We reasoned that the changes occurring at universities with graduate programs would reflect genuine change in the profession.

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[3] We are very grateful to our respondents, who in most cases cheerfully and conscientiously filled in our demanding questionnaire. We appreciate the time and effort they gave this study.

Responses

Response to the survey will be reported in the order of the questions: first the information about current course offerings, then the information about courses instituted in the last ten years, and finally the enrollment figures. Because the information was difficult or impossible to locate, some responses had missing data. In addition, the writing courses we asked about were not taught in all the colleges and universities in our sample, and hence no enrollment figures were available. We have indicated the size of the sample used in each computation.

Current Course Offerings in Writing

In examining copies of the course offerings, we classified writing courses according to the most commonly offered types among those courses available only for graduate credit, those available for both graduate and undergraduate credit, and those available only for undergraduate credit. Then we determined the percentage of colleges and universities in our sample that have at least one course of a certain type; the average number of writing courses available for graduate credit, undergraduate or graduate credit, and undergraduate credit at the institutions in our sample; and a breakdown of the number of writing courses according to the total enrollment of the college or university. This section reports those statistics and also gives our findings about writing courses not offered in the English departments.

Table 1 shows the percentage of respondents whose departments offer at least one course of a certain type.

Table 1

Percentage of Departments Reporting at Least One Course, 1985-86

	Graduate	Undergrad/grad	Undergraduate
Creative[4]	36.3 (99)	42.1 (97)	90.2 (102)
Business/Technical	9.1 (99)	20.1 (95)	74.0 (100)
Composition/Rhetoric	42.0 (100)	15.4 (97)	12.8 (102)
Teaching Writing	52.6 (99)	18.6 (97)	19.8 (101)
Teaching Technical Writing	8.1 (99)	5.1 (97)	————
Advanced Composition	————	17.5 (97)	89.2 (102)
Remedial	————	————	70.7 (102)
Freshman Composition	————	————	98.1 (102)
ESL	4.3 (94)	2.2 (94)	50.6 (95)
Other Writing Courses[5]	19.1 (99)	5.2 (96)	24.5 (102)

Note: The number of responses on which the percent is based appears in parentheses.

[4] Creative Writing includes courses in script writing and play writing as well as courses in poetry and fiction writing.

[5] Other Writing Courses is a broad category of courses that do not seem to fit anywhere else, including various writing workshops and independent studies in writing and courses not commonly offered, such as personal essay writing for graduate students. It does not include journalism courses, which do not often appear in the English departments we surveyed, and linguistics courses, which are usually more concerned with spoken than written language.

Courses in creative writing, composition theory and rhetoric, and teaching writing are the most pervasive writing courses at the graduate level, with business and technical writing not likely to be available for graduate students. A 1983-84 survey by the ADE (Association of Departments of English) reported a similar finding (Huber and Young, 42). In the colleges and universities polled in both the ADE survey and our survey, graduate curricula consisted primarily of literary study, with about half the English departments in either survey offering writing courses.

The required "service" writing courses along with creative writing and advanced composition, which may also be required, are the most pervasive at the undergraduate level. Freshman composition is almost universal, with 98.1% of our sample reporting at least one course. Two or more freshman composition courses are offered at 91.2% of the departments in our sample, and three or more at 47.1%. Again these findings are similar to those reported in the 1983-84 ADE survey. Even if freshman composition is not considered, writing courses are much more widely available (or required) at the undergraduate level than at the graduate level, with many more than half the colleges and universities in both surveys offering creative writing and business and technical writing to undergraduates.

On the average, departments in our sample offer a total of 16.4 writing courses. Approximately 3.2 of these are available for graduate credit only, 2.3 are available for either graduate or undergraduate credit, and 11 are available for undergraduate credit only. As expected, the size of the university or college is an important factor in writing course offerings. Table 2 shows the average number of writing courses offered by the departments in our sample with less than 10,000 students, those with 10,000 to 20,000

students, and those with more than 20,000 students.

Table 2

Average Number of Courses According to Institutional Enrollment

	Graduate	Undergrad/grad	Undergraduate	Total
> 10,000	2.02 (49)	1.45 (47)	9.04 (51)	12.34 (47)
10,00-20,000	3.17 (30)	3.03 (30)	12.77 (30)	18.97 (30)
< 20,000	5.76 (21)	3.40 (20)	13.29 (21)	22.30 (20)

The larger schools report almost 6 graduate courses in writing, on the average, while the smaller schools report only 2.

Along with our request for a copy of their courses offerings, we asked department heads if writing courses were taught in departments other than English at their colleges or universities. In answering our question, 55.2% (based on 105 responses) said "no"; 44.8% said "yes." Since most of the respondents who said "yes" listed only two or three courses while their course catalogues show many writing courses under the domain of the English department, the majority of writing instruction at their schools was clearly the English department's responsibility. Writing courses sometimes taught by other departments include business writing, technical writing, English as a Second Language, and remedial writing.

In addition, our respondents showed great interest in Writing Across the Curriculum. Although we did not ask about Writing Across the Curriculum

programs, 18.1% (based on 105 responses) volunteered the information that their college or university had interdisciplinary writing courses, and 29.5% suggested that their institutions should implement such a program or was planning to do so. These percentages, which total almost 50%, support Griffin's claim that Writing Across the Curriculum "has now spread to institutions of higher education across the country" (403).[6]

Changes in Course Offerings Since 1975-76

To see how the departments in our sample have changed their course offerings over the last ten years, we tabulated and classified the new courses that our respondents had indicated with check marks. According to the responses, many writing courses have been introduced since 1975-76. On the average, 1.7 (about 56%) of the 3.2 graduate courses in writing are new; 1.2 (53%) of the 2.3 writing courses available for either graduate or undergraduate credit are new; and 3.9 (35%) of the 11 undergraduate writing courses are new. The trend toward increased graduate instruction in and about writing is supported by two other surveys. The first, conducted in 1978 by Graves and Solomon, found that at least one new graduate course in composition and rhetoric had been instituted since 1974 in 50.5% (45) of the universities

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[6] The ADE survey reports that 57% of English departments collaborate with other departments in Writing Across the Curriculum programs (45). While these results lend even more support to Griffin's claim than ours do, the definition of Writing Across the Curriculum remains problematic. (The ADE report gives no definition, and our respondents used their own. Meanwhile, Griffin's definition was broad enough to include our own university; our department teaches advanced business, technical, and criminal justice writing courses but not as part of an organized Writing Across the Curriculum program.)

surveyed. The second, conducted in 1986 by Chapman and Tate, identified 53 universities with specializations in composition and rhetoric. Complete descriptions of 38 programs indicated that all had been established in or after 1970 and 29 of the 38 had been instituted after 1975.

Changes in Enrollments Since 1975-76

Based on the enrollment figures our respondents provided, some of which were approximations, we calculated the average enrollments in literature and writing courses for 1975-76 and 1985-86, the increase or decrease in those enrollments over the last ten years, and the average enrollments in commonly offered writing courses in 1985. The increase in writing enrollments has been large and almost unanimous.

Table 3 shows the average enrollments in literature and writing courses for the schools in our sample offering those courses in 1975-76 and 1985-86.

Table 3

Average Enrollments for Literature and Writing Courses, 1975-76 and 1985-86

	1975-6 mean enrollment	number with no courses	1985-6 mean enrollment	number with no courses
Grad. Literature	170.83 (78)	2	149.91 (93)	1
Undergrad. Lit.	2024.09 (81)	1	2017.41 (95)	1
Grad. Writing	34.02 (40)	40	66.69 (72)	20
Undergrad. Writing	2724.04 (76)	1	3482.83 (94)	1

The average increase in enrollments in graduate writing courses was 46.30 (based on 63 responses) students; at the undergraduate level, the average increase in enrollment was 656.37 (based on 76 responses) students. Even though we based our computations on fewer responses than we would have liked, the usable response is greater than half of our sample. It is clear that average enrollments in writing courses have increased since 1975-76 for the colleges and universities in our sample. An increase larger than predictable from the average graduate enrollments occurs because many universities that had no graduate writing courses in 1975-76 had established them by 1985-86.

Using the 1975-76 and 1985-86 enrollments in literature and writing courses and the institutional enrollments, we calculated the enrollment trends in our sample. Where the institutional enrollment increased, graduate literature enrollment increased in 46.4% (based on 56 responses) of those we sampled and declined in 53.6%. Undergraduate literature enrollments increased in 54% (based on 63 responses) of our restricted sample and decreased in 46%. On the average, enrollments in literature courses have remained relatively constant, with a slight increase at the undergraduate level and a slight decrease at the graduate level, even in universities and colleges with increasing institutional enrollments. On the other hand, enrollments in writing courses have increased dramatically. When university or college enrollments increased from 1975 to 1985, enrollments in graduate writing courses increased for 69% (based on 65 responses) of our sample, remained the same (usually 0) for 17%, and declined for only 14%. Enrollments in undergraduate writing courses increased for 90% (based on 58 responses) of our sample and decreased for only 10%.

These trends were also shown in the 1983-84 ADE survey mentioned earlier

(Huber and Young, 43). According to this survey, which does not take into account growth or decline in institutional enrollments, undergraduate programs for English majors showed a moderate increase in enrollment while graduate programs in literature remained stable. However, undergraduate degree programs in creative writing and technical communication grew significantly, while graduate programs in creative writing and rhetoric experienced similar large increases.

Table 4 shows the average enrollments for commonly offered writing courses.

Table 4

Average Annual Enrollments for Writing Courses, 1975-76 and 1985-86

	1975-76 mean enrollments	1985-86 mean enrollments
GRADUATE		
Creative	27.18 (34)	25.75 (52)
Bus/Tech (majors)	8.83 (6)	19.85 (13)
Bus/Tech (nonmajors)	16.20 (5)	42.81 (21)
Comp/Rhetoric	9.40 (15)	23.44 (48)
Teaching Writing	10.32 (19)	23.65 (51)
UNDERGRADUATE		
ESL	66.35 (29)	158.75 (56)
Remedial	353.71 (34)	399.96 (70)
Freshman Comp.	2250.73 (80)	2512.82 (97)
Advanced Comp.	176.54 (67)	177.38 (86)
Creative	95.00 (72)	110.89 (89)
Bus/Tech	249.74 (34)	396.46 (74)
Comp/Rhetoric	40.31 (13)	32.00 (34)

Except for undergraduate courses in composition theory and rhetoric and graduate courses in creative writing, enrollment in each of the commonly offered writing courses has increased since 1975-76. The slight enrollment declines for undergraduate composition theory and rhetoric and graduate

creative writing are probably too small to be meaningful and are offset by large increases in the number of schools offering these courses.

As Table 4 shows, a large portion of the enrollment in our sample departments is in "service" writing courses. These courses include English as a Second Language, remedial composition, business and technical writing for nonmajors at both the graduate and undergraduate levels, and freshman composition. On the average, "service" writing courses accounted for 51% (based on 69 responses) of the total graduate and undergraduate writing and literature enrollments in 1975-76; in 1985-86, they accounted for 55% (based on 83 responses). The "trend" of increased involvement in writing "skills" instruction that Cowan noted in 1975 has come about (iv): English departments gain approximately half their enrollments from "skills" instruction. In schools without graduate programs, we suspect this percentage will be even larger.

The largest of the "service" writing courses, freshman composition accounted for 45% (based on 78 responses) of the total graduate and undergraduate writing and literature enrollments in 1975-76 and 43% (based on 89 responses) in 1985-86. Obviously, fears about the demise of freshman composition (Smith) have not come true. Although Smith reported that fewer colleges and universities required freshman composition in 1973 than in 1967-68, the current enrollments are slightly larger than the 40% reported in that 1967-68 survey (Wilcox). Among the colleges and universities in our sample, 23.6% had established new courses in freshman composition since 1975-76.

Although enrollments in freshman composition have remained almost the same, enrollments in other "service" writing courses have increased dramatically from 1975-76 to 1985-86. The increase is particularly large in

English as a Second Language and technical and business writing courses. In both cases enrollments are probably larger than those reported because the courses are not always taught in English departments. Large increases in business and technical writing enrollments have also been reported by other researchers. In a 1984 survey that received 568 responses from English departments, Rivers reported that 261 (46%) offered business writing and 359 (63.5%) offered technical writing. If their department offered those courses, 64.9% of the respondents reported dramatic growth. In our survey 74 departments, close to 75% and at least twice the number offering courses in 1975-76, reported enrollment from at least one course; and enrollments from 1975-76 to 1985-86 for those colleges and universities offering the courses increased substantially.

Summary

During the fall 1986, we conducted a survey to determine the current status of writing instruction in English departments with graduate programs and to assess any changes that have occurred in the last ten years in the number and types of writing courses offered and enrollments in those courses. Our respondents included 105 English departments randomly selected from Peterson's Graduate Programs in the Humanities and Social Sciences, 1985. The responses to our survey are summarized below:

-- Writing courses most often available for graduate credit include creative writing, composition theory and rhetoric, and the teaching of writing. Those most often available for undergraduates include a range of "service" writing courses such as business and technical writing, remedial writing, freshman composition, and English as a Second Language.

Also available for most undergraduates are advanced composition, which may or may not be a "service" course, and creative writing. Courses in composition theory and rhetoric and teaching writing are less likely to be available for undergraduates than for graduate students.

— More than half of the writing courses available for graduate credit have been instituted since the 1975-76 academic year. More than a third of the writing courses available for undergraduate credit have been established since the 1975-76 academic year.

— On the average, enrollments in writing courses have increased dramatically in the last ten years while enrollments in literature courses have remained stable.

— "Service" writing courses account for more than half of graduate and undergraduate writing and literature enrollments in our sample. Freshman composition, the largest "service" course, has remained almost the same in enrollment, but dramatic increases in enrollment have occurred in business and technical writing, English as a Second Language, and remedial writing courses.

The results of our survey suggest that, within the past ten years, writing instruction has expanded in both variety and size in colleges and universities. Certainly our survey documents such an increase for English departments with graduate programs; these departments have seen growth in undergraduate and graduate enrollments in writing courses and have increased the variety of courses offered at both undergraduate and graduate levels. Admittedly, not all members of the profession view these developments favorably. Many literature specialists shudder at the notion of English

departments being overwhelmed by "service "courses and argue for retrenchment, a return to the concept of the English department as the bastion of literary study. However, based on the findings presented here, it seems unlikely that retrenchment is possible: the pressures of survival for English departments may mean that to retain their prominence and size within the academy, they must do even more than they are now doing to meet the need for various kinds and levels of writing instruction. Given this reality, even the most devoted literature specialist must accept the widening of the English program and its possibilities.

We cannot speculate about the effects of the changes in English departments on teaching future "Johnnies" to write. Although the 1984 writing scores on the National Assessment show no improvement in writing scores from 1974, improvement from 1979 was indicated, and elementary and secondary teachers seem to be spending more classroom time on writing (Applebee, Langer, and Mullis). However, we hope that our survey will illuminate some of the ways in which change has occurred and demonstrate that the trend is national, affecting university instruction in writing and the preparation of future writing teachers at all levels. While change and debate will take place on a department-by-department basis, the outcome will affect not simply the institution immediately served but the profession of English studies as a whole.

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