

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



Vancouver Senate Ad Hoc Committee on Writing and Communication Skills
c/o Enrolment Services | Senate & Curriculum Services
Brock Hall 2016 – 1874 East Mall
Vancouver BC V6T 1Z1

4 April 2008

To: Senate

From: Senate Ad Hoc Committee on Writing and Communication Skills

RE: Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Writing and Communication Skills

Motion #1: *That the Report of the Ad hoc Committee on Writing and Communication Skills be received.*

Motion #2: *That Recommendations 1 through 9 contained in pages 7 and 8 of the Report of the Ad hoc Committee on Writing and Communication Skills be approved.*

Jurisdictional Note: Although the Committee's report refers to "the University" or "UBC", the Committee is aware that the Vancouver Senate and its committees have jurisdiction that is limited to UBC Vancouver. While the Committee would be pleased if UBC Okanagan adopted a similar policy, the Committee's observations and recommendations apply only to UBC Vancouver.

MANDATE AND COMPOSITION

At the May 16, 2007 meeting of Senate, the following terms of reference for the ad hoc committee on Writing and Communication Skills were approved:

1. To review the work of the "Write, Write, and Rewrite Report" presented to Senate in May 2001 and previous Senate reports on writing skills;
2. To consider submissions from faculties and other units on the optimum structure(s) for the teaching of writing and communication skills to students over the course of their programs;
3. To recommend to Senate:
 - a. What is/are the objective(s) of teaching writing and communication skills to students and how can success in achieving this/these objective(s) be assessed;
 - b. Whether a centralized or decentralized approach is optimum for the teaching of such skills; and
 - c. What would the resource implications be of any recommendations to Senate; and
4. To report back by December 2007 with the committee's recommendations. (The deadline was extended to March and then to April 2008 by agreement of Senate)

The composition of the Committee is as follows:

Dr. Dennis Danielson, Representative of the Department of English
Ms. Diana Diao, Senator, Student Caucus
Dr. Bruce Dunwoody, Associate Dean, Faculty of Applied Science
Dr. David Fielding, Senator, Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences



Dr. Christopher Friedrichs, Senator, Faculty of Arts
Dr. Janet Giltrow, Representative of the Faculty of Arts
Dr. Paul Harrison, Representative of the Faculty of Science and Senator, Joint Faculties (Chair)
Dr. Peter Marshall, Senator, Chair of the Curriculum Committee
Dr. Peter Ward, Senator, University Librarian
Dr. Ronald Yaworsky, Senator, Convocation

SUMMARY

This report was informed by a review of the work of several previous committees that have explored this issue (see Appendix II) and the happy circumstance that put at least two people who had participated in those discussions on the current committee. In addition, the broad representation of academic units in the membership of the committee ensured that many current initiatives in learning and teaching at UBC Vancouver were brought to the table. Additional ideas and advice were provided by other academic units at UBC Vancouver (through the Committee of Deans), at UBC Okanagan (through Senate and Deans) and Enrolment Services units.

It was relatively easy to reach consensus on the *principle that development of proficiency in writing and other communication skills is fundamental in an undergraduate education* and the University is therefore responsible for providing students with experience of communicating both in a research context for scholarly purposes and in more general ways as educated citizens. The first principle leads to a second, viz that *at least some of the learning should take place in the student's discipline and therefore a distributed model is endorsed*.

The Committee feels that all undergraduate degree programs should require several courses (we settled on the equivalent of nine credits) that provide guided instruction and feedback on writing or other forms of communication (see Appendix I). If such a requirement were instituted, then three credits of the requirement should be fulfilled with a course requiring extensive writing in the English language, preferably to be taken in the first year of the program. The additional credits could be within dedicated writing/communication courses or integrated within courses having a larger purpose. A "communication course" must provide formative feedback before any summative evaluation of communication abilities occurs: that is, it must emphasize constructive, collegial response to student writing or oral communication rather than simply evaluation and grading of it.

A decentralized model for teaching communication has strong resource implications, both for the development and support of appropriate communication courses and for the redistribution of responsibilities between faculties for the teaching of communication. *The current financial climate of the University does not favour the ambitious proposal* set out in Appendix I. As such, the recommendations of the Committee cannot be implemented as envisioned at the moment, but the Committee recommends to Senate that the full proposal be implemented once the financial situation of the University is more



amenable. In the meantime, *individual faculties should be encouraged to work toward the goal as opportunities arise* and a series of recommendations to that end are presented for Senate's consideration.

DETAILED RESPONSE TO TERMS OF REFERENCE

Objectives of teaching writing and communication skills

One objective of teaching writing and communication skills is to encourage learners to join the academy, to become working members of the community of researchers in their chosen disciplines. Further, UBC's graduates should be equipped as educated citizens and so they need to learn to communicate outside their disciplines as well. Therefore, our students and faculty need to see that the University values the development of communication skills along with other key aspects of their education. Some UBC programs inherently excel in providing such experience. But for many students, in other programs, the curriculum emphasizes the mastery of disciplinary or interdisciplinary knowledge at the expense of explicit focus on the communicative practices by which such knowledge is shared, developed, and disseminated. For many years the only overt sign to students in a number of undergraduate programs that communication skills are valued has been a requirement to take first-year English courses. Although that practice is almost universal there is actually no University English Requirement. Degree programs are approved one by one by Senate but in the absence of a statement of principles on the teaching of writing and communication skills it has been difficult for a faculty to break from tradition.

To achieve the objectives outlined above, the Committee strongly believes that experiences in learning communication skills must be embedded throughout a student's undergraduate program. The current common practice of having students take a first-year English course emphasizing writing instruction and feedback can begin the process but such a course should not be expected, except in a limited way, to achieve the goal stated above of helping students connect in a meaningful way with the academic discourse that defines a research-intensive university. Alternative courses, embedded in specific disciplines (or selected groups of disciplines) should be available across the university and not only in first year, but throughout the undergraduate years.

The Committee developed a series of recommendations, in Appendix I, to reach the objectives. However, the Committee has been made aware of the financial constraints under which the University is currently operating and concluded that recommendations which involved significant expenditures or which would require shifting resources between faculties would not be widely implemented at the moment. The Committee has responded by developing an alternative set of recommendations which would both encourage and enable movement toward the goal and would have fewer financial implications. Those recommendations are presented below and the original recommendations are contained in Appendix I.



Centralized or decentralized approach

As stated above, the Committee believes that a decentralized model will serve the university better than the current reliance on first-year English courses. All students should develop facility in communicating knowledge to their peers, to experts in their field, and to the wider community. The foundation of that communication remains facility in writing in the English language but the teaching of communication is best taught in the context of the student's discipline. How else can students be drawn into the discourse of the academic disciplines which have different rhetorics, ways of expressing themselves and communicating ideas? This observation speaks strongly for a decentralized model for instruction in communication. In addition, students tell us that they are more motivated to master communication skills if they practice communicating in a way that helps them to better understand their disciplines.

The counter argument has been presented that first-year English courses provide one of the few opportunities for students from different disciplines to interact in an academic environment. That may be true, but the argument fails to acknowledge that the primary function of any communication course should be to teach communication. An argument that a decentralized model would enhance the primary function of such a course is much stronger than any argument concerning a secondary function played by the course. The University has been developing other activities to encourage interaction between students of different disciplines, such as the Multidisciplinary Undergraduate Research Conference. Also, most undergraduate programs have a breadth requirement to ensure that students benefit from the different perspectives of others outside their disciplines. Such intellectual exploration should not be constrained by imposing too many expectations on courses in a particular discipline.

Faculties and schools should have considerable freedom to emphasize modes of communication that are particularly appropriate for their disciplines. For example, in some disciplines effective oral communication in a clinical setting is the key to success, and some programs may therefore choose to emphasize this form of communication. Two current initiatives in the development of discipline-based writing courses will illustrate the potential for improving student learning.

First, the BASC (Engineering) degree, in common with several other undergraduate programs, currently requires one first-year ENGL course, but unlike most programs it also requires APSC 201 (Technical Communication), a course developed by discipline-based communication specialists in the faculty's Centre for Professional Skills Development. To further assist students in developing strong written communication skills, the Faculty of Applied Science received Senate's approval in March to use a combination of the Engineering Communication Competency Test and a course in grammar and technical writing developed by the UBC Writing Centre for engineering students to ensure that students are prepared for APSC 201. The faculty has identified a need for more discipline-based writing instruction and has proposed an alternative to the first-year ENGL requirement, the new first-year course APSC 176. The new course is operating in the parallel engineering program at UBC Okanagan and this committee looks



on the proposal sympathetically as a natural step in the development of the faculty's capacity to provide students with an education in communication skills appropriate to the discipline. Funding such a new course, even on a pilot basis, is a challenge best left to the Dean.

Second, in the Faculty of Arts there is recognition of a need to rethink the teaching of writing and research skills; hence a new course, ASTU 150 (Arts Studies in Writing), has been proposed, which, in its first offering, would focus on modes of writing and research appropriate for the humanities and social sciences. Further, several writing-intensive courses will be piloted at the second- or third-year levels that would meet the criteria set out in Appendix I (Recommendation C). The Committee encourages that faculty to pilot the new courses and to share the lessons it learns.

Other programs that assume that first-year, literature-focused English courses will facilitate the development of their students as scholars in their disciplines should see the initiatives in the Faculty of Applied Science and the Faculty of Arts as an opportunity for critical reflection on their curriculum. For many students, learning to communicate effectively in their discipline, whether it be Agroecology, Biology, Commerce, Engineering, History or Pharmacy, could be facilitated through courses offered in their own departments or faculties where communication in context could be emphasized.

If the full set of recommendations (Appendix I) cannot be implemented at this time then faculties and schools that cannot put resources into new courses can still take important initial steps. The Committee encourages every degree program to produce a statement of the nature of communication in the discipline and the value to students of the acquisition of advanced skills. Further, they should produce a list of the existing courses that do provide some experience in communicating ideas so that the opportunities for interested students will be made clear. By undertaking those tasks, faculties and schools would raise awareness and validate the efforts of instructors who already embed learning to communicate ideas in their course objectives.

Resource implications

To meet the goals described in the recommendations in Appendix I will require that resources be devoted to the review of learning outcomes of both existing programs and individual courses, to the development of new courses with appropriate pedagogy, and to the staffing of courses with suitably trained instructors of various kinds and with sufficiently low student to instructor ratios to ensure effective learning. Specifically, to assess skills in writing and other modes of communication requires that courses be resourced well enough that effective instruction and both formative and summative feedback take place. To achieve the goals will require academic leaders to examine how they set priorities for the allocation of resources both across the university and within units.

Some undergraduate degree programs have a core curriculum which may already be providing students with the needed learning experiences; in those cases, both students



and faculty would benefit if the program articulated the value of communication skills and linked particular courses to the acquisition of those skills (as proposed above). The courses themselves may not require much change. In other degree programs, existing course offerings will require significant revising; new courses will be needed in order to meet the new goals and resources already supporting other activities will have to be directed to these new areas.

A decentralized model for teaching communication also implies that there is a mechanism for the redistribution of resources when faculties assume new responsibilities for teaching. The University's budget model does not facilitate such changes although deans can always seek to cooperate. Perhaps the discussions underway through the Steering Committee for Academic Planning Process (SCAPP) will produce helpful new mechanisms. Further, the overall financial climate of the University does not favour the assumption of new responsibilities either centrally or in the faculties. Therefore, the recommendations of the Committee (Appendix I) cannot be implemented as envisioned at the moment. The Committee challenges the university to make the required changes to allow the full recommendations to be implemented once the financial situation of the University is more conducive. Rather than wait passively, individual faculties should be encouraged to work toward that end as opportunities arise.

TOWARD A NEW EMPHASIS ON WRITING AND COMMUNICATION

The recommendations to follow, both the original ones (Appendix I) and the final ones, are derived from the principles expounded above. While the financial constraints are understandable, and while they preclude mandating a university-wide Writing & Communication Requirement at this time, they do not preclude the Committee from encouraging faculties and schools to adopt such a requirement. We are mindful that to achieve the overall goals will require a considerable investment but the budgetary impacts of our recommendations would be minor in the first year and extend over several years as the changes were phased in. Managing the budgetary impacts would be largely at the discretion of the deans as they reallocate resources within their faculties and/or place a priority on their future requests for new or reallocated funds. Therefore, we continue to espouse a Writing & Communication requirement, but suggest that faculties and schools offering undergraduate programs be encouraged to move in this direction, rather than this becoming a firm requirement imposed on all programs.



FOR APPROVAL COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

Therefore, building on curricular strengths where they exist and anticipating innovation on the part of academic leaders, *the Committee makes the following recommendations:*

1. That all undergraduate degree programs submit to the Senate Curriculum Committee - in time for consideration for publication in the 2009-2010 print version of the UBC Vancouver Calendar - a statement (of 200-300 words) of the nature of communication in the discipline, the value of acquiring general and discipline-specific communication skills, and the characteristics of courses that would provide opportunities for the acquisition of those communication skills, i.e., courses with appropriate learning outcomes and instructional practices that include feedback before summative evaluation of communication abilities occurs;
2. That all undergraduate degree programs audit their course offerings with the aim of identifying “communication courses” that support the development of communication skills as defined in that program’s new Calendar statement; that each program submits to the Senate Curriculum Committee a list of such communication courses; that the Senate Curriculum Committee recommend to Senate for inclusion in the program’s Calendar entry the list of those courses that meet with their approval; and that said process be completed in time for production of the 2009-2010 print version of the UBC Vancouver Calendar;
3. That the Senate Curriculum Committee be directed to report to Senate on the participation of undergraduate degree programs in recommendations 1 and 2 at least annually;
4. That the Faculty of Arts continue to offer a first-year course accessible to students across the University that provides instruction in writing suitable for university studies and that other faculties and schools be encouraged to collaborate with the Faculty of Arts on the design of the curriculum in that course to better suit the needs of students in their programs;
5. That the Faculty of Arts be encouraged to pilot ASTU 150 and writing-intensive courses at second-year and above and that the Faculty of Applied Science be encouraged to pilot APSC 176 and that both faculties provide Senate with a report by March 2010 including data that can inform future budget allocation decisions at the level of the faculty and the university. Other faculties are also encouraged to initiate changes consistent with the recommendations in Appendix I as opportunities arise and to provide Senate with reports;
6. That faculties and schools be encouraged to use resources such as the Teaching & Learning Enhancement Fund and the Teaching & Academic Growth unit to improve the effectiveness of instruction in communication; and that the Provost be encouraged to put priority on the allocation of discretionary funds to this effort;



7. That the Vancouver sub-committee of the Council of Senates Budget Committee be asked to take up the issue of decision-making and priority-setting with regard to campus-wide academic initiatives in general as well as this initiative specifically;
8. That Senate request the Provost to put priority on funding for a Writing and Communication Requirement in future budget discussions with the goal of implementing the proposal for a Writing and Communication Requirement as detailed in Recommendations A through I (Appendix I), and that the Provost report to Senate annually regarding progress towards implementing these Recommendations; and
9. That, having completed its responsibilities to the best of its abilities given the realities of financial constraint, the Ad Hoc Committee on Writing and Communication Skills be discharged.



APPENDIX I

FOR INFORMATION

RECOMMENDATION FOR A WRITING AND COMMUNICATION REQUIREMENT (ASSUMING THAT RESOURCES WERE AVAILABLE):

- A. That the University institute a University-wide, faculty- or school-centred Writing & Communication Requirement for all undergraduate degree programs to replace the current English Requirement where it exists;
- B. That the Writing & Communication Requirement consist of at least one three-credit course in writing in the English language, normally taken in the first year of the degree program, followed by an additional equivalent of six credits of instruction in communication. The additional credits could be within dedicated communication courses or integrated within courses having a larger purpose. The courses taken to fulfill the Writing & Communication Requirement will be available throughout the degree program to provide ongoing instruction and reinforcement of communication skills;
- C. That the faculties and schools submit to the Senate Curriculum Committee for consideration all courses designated as fulfilling a part of the Writing & Communication Requirement and that the Senate Curriculum Committee recommend to Senate those courses that meet with their approval. In that process, two principles should be paramount. First, a “communication” course must provide formative feedback before any summative evaluation of communication abilities occurs: that is, it must emphasize constructive, collegial response to student writing or oral communication rather than simply evaluation and grading of it. Second, the courses available should provide students with the ability to communicate not only within the discipline but also in broader contexts;
- D. That the Senate Curriculum Committee set up a process whereby all faculties offering undergraduate degree programs will report on progress made toward implementing this policy, and that the Senate Curriculum Committee report the outcomes to Senate by February 2009 and February 2010;
- E. That the Writing & Communication Requirement take effect for all students who first enter an undergraduate degree program at the University starting in or after September 2011;
- F. That each faculty and school offering an undergraduate program institute an evaluation program to assess the communication skills of its graduating class and report the results of the evaluations to Senate through the Teaching and Learning Committee. The first report will be expected four years after Senate adopts the new Writing & Communication Requirement and biennial reports will be expected thereafter;
- G. That the Faculty of Graduate Studies review the ways that the acquisition of advanced communication skills are addressed in its programs and be encouraged



to institute a Writing & Communication Requirement in a way that is appropriate for its students;

- H. That the University attract and retain more tenure-track scholars with professional interests and pedagogical skills in communication; and
- I. That, having completed its responsibilities, the Ad-hoc Committee on Writing and Communication Skills be discharged.



APPENDIX II.

(RECENT) PREVIOUS REPORTS, DISCUSSION PAPERS, AND COMMITTEES ON THE TOPIC OF ENGLISH AND WRITING:

- Senate Ad hoc Committee on Standards in English: dealt with standards for writing skills of incoming first-year students; saw many issues transfer to the jurisdiction of the Senate Admissions Committee; struck in 1975, finally disbanded in 1987.
- English Requirement Committee, struck by the Committee of Deans in 2000. Produced “Advancing Literacy: A Discussion Paper on the UBC Undergraduate English Requirement”, November 2000 and “Write, Write, and Rewrite: A Proposal to Reform the Undergraduate English Requirement”, presented to Senate in May 2001.
- The most recent Senate Ad hoc Committee on New Writing Requirements struck in 2001, had as additional information, “Write About It! A Supplement to ‘Write, Write, and Rewrite: A Proposal to Reform the Undergraduate English Requirement’” by Janet Giltrow and Paul Yachnin, English Department; August 2001. The Committee did not report out to Senate but was discharged in May 2007 when the Ad hoc Committee on Writing and Communication Skills was established.



APPENDIX III

WHICH PROGRAMS ARE “UNDERGRADUATE”?

An easy way to define “undergraduate” programs is by the numbers assigned to the courses it offers: courses numbered 100-499 define undergraduate programs. That, however, is not a widely used definition. One might assume that “bachelor” and “undergraduate” are synonymous but UBC’s bachelor degree programs vary in many respects and there is no simple way to classify programs on the basis of their academic goals, their length, or the educational history of entering students. Further confusion arises because several degree programs are characterized as “professional programs” by virtue of their role in preparing students for specific careers and the close relationships with professional communities that are fostered by the faculties or schools. Among such programs are:

- a) Those that admit students directly from high school: e.g., the B.A.Sc. (Bachelor of Applied Science), B.Com., B.S.F. (Bachelor of Science in Forestry), B.M.W. (Bachelor of Midwifery),
- b) Those that require one or two years of prior post-secondary study: e.g., the B.En.D. (Bachelor of Environmental Design), B.M.L.Sc. (Bachelor of Medical Laboratory Science), B.Sc. (Pharm.), B.S.N. (Bachelor of Science in Nursing), and B.S.W. (Bachelor of Social Work),
- c) Those that, because of competition for limited spaces, often admit students with a prior degree but which formally require only three years of post-secondary study prior to admission: e.g., the B.Ed. (Elementary), LL.B. (soon to be renamed the J.D. (Juris Doctor)), M.D. and D.M.D., and
- d) Three true *post*-baccalaureate undergraduate programs, defined as those that require completion of a bachelor’s degree prior to admission: viz, the B.Ed. (Middle Years), B.Ed. (Secondary), and B.C.S. (Bachelor of Computer Science) programs.

The other undergraduate programs include the B.A., B.F.A., and B.Mus. in Arts; the B.Sc. (Forest Sciences), B.Sc.(Natural Resource Conservation), and B.Sc. (Wood Products) in Forestry; the B.H.K. (Human Kinetics) in Education; the B.Sc. (Agroecology), B.Sc. (Food, Nutrition and Health), and B.Sc. (Global Resources) in Land and Food Systems; and B.Sc. in Science. All of this latter group can admit students from high school or with up to two years of prior post-secondary study (i.e., on transfer). Arguments could be made for more than one of those programs that it, too, prepares graduates for a profession. Finally, any of the programs listed above, whether considered as “professional” or not, can be entered by a student who has a previous degree. It is the opinion of the Ad Hoc Committee on Writing and Communication that every bachelor program should provide its students with the opportunity to learn to communicate in ways that characterize the discipline.