

Project Title

Preliminary planning and funding research for the implementation of writing-intensive courses across the undergraduate curriculum at Montana State University

Conducted By

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Brief Project Description

The objectives of the project were two:

1. To research a specific option for implementing the Board of Regents' recently-mandated policy of writing proficiency graduation standards in the Montana University System. The target option was the establishment of a program of writing-intensive (WI) courses across the MSU curriculum. Prior to campus committee work on implementation of the Regents' charge, it would be necessary to establish an information data base useful to committees in exploring implementation options. The focus of the first objective was to establish this data base.
2. To research funding opportunities for development of the program and faculty support and for a longitudinal assessment study of the effectiveness of the program.

Report on Objective 1

Research was conducted into the structure, content, administration, and staffing of WI programs at selected colleges and universities which require additional writing credits for graduation beyond first-year composition. The institutions researched were:

Dartmouth College
East Carolina University
Ferris State University
Francis Marion University
Georgia State University
Idaho State University
Indiana University of Pennsylvania
Longwood College
Meredith College
Oregon State University
Portland State University
Rensselaer Polytechnic University

Tufts University
University of Massachusetts-Amherst
University of Minnesota
University of New Hampshire
University of Texas-Austin
University of Washington
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Utah State University
Virginia Commonwealth University
Virginia Polytechnic Institute
Washington State University

Comparison of programs showed:

1. Significant variation in the number of writing credits required for graduation.
2. Essential similarity of philosophy, strategy, and goals for the program.
3. Comparable guidelines for the implementation, content, and maintenance of the courses in the program.
4. A variety of models for the relationship of the program to university administration.
5. Substantial similarity in standards for faculty development and faculty accountability.

All programs emphasize expository/academic writing as the mode of discourse for WI courses. In virtually all cases, WI courses are limited to the upper undergraduate division and are offered by departments in the student's major, in keeping with a Writing-Across-the-Curriculum or Writing-in-the-Disciplines approach. In other words, the responsibility for the development, implementation, and maintenance of WI courses rests with individual departments or colleges (often under the supervision of a university-wide steering committee) rather than with the English department. Other findings indicate that designation of a course as WI tends to be granted only after fairly rigid standards of content and organization are met. In many cases, approval for such designation must be granted by the university-wide committee.

It was determined that the quality and structure of the program at Washington State University merits further investigation into considering it as a base-level model for implementation of a WI program at MSU should the university decide to fulfill the Regents' mandate through the institution of WI courses.

Report on Objective 2

In the vast majority of cases, funding agencies which historically provide support for research and program implementation at universities specifically exclude curriculum development from their range of suitable applications. A notable exception is the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE). FIPSE targets curriculum development as one of their priorities and, for this reason, appears to be an appropriate source for funding of the program at MSU. One of FIPSE's important expectations for funding applicants is that the proposed program incorporate a substantial innovative

component. If the WI approach is adopted at MSU, FIPSE funding would most likely be contingent upon some form of innovative development in the program, an aspect which is generally not represented in the existing programs researched. As proposed in the original Teaching and Learning Committee grant application, a longitudinal assessment study of the effectiveness of the program might qualify it as innovative.