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Faculty Perspectives on the Brown Writing Requirement

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Do you know that Brown has a writing requirement? Whereas most people know that part of Brown's uniqueness is its lack of distribution requirements, relatively fewer people are aware that Brown does have a writing requirement. The Brown Course Catalogue states, "Competence in reading and writing is required for all degrees. Beyond competence, Brown seeks to develop the quality of a student's writing in courses throughout the University."

As Director of Dean of the College Writing Programs, I have been studying the reality of the Brown faculty's attitude toward writing instruction. Composition studies theory indicates that the most effective way to deliver college-level writing instruction is to mainstream it, thereby making every instructor in the university responsible for being both a teacher of a discipline and a teacher of writing. How does this theory play out at Brown? I wondered. Since our information about how writing is taught at Brown is largely anecdotal at this point, I am writing this article to enlist faculty help in order to develop some grounded answers to the question.

The requirement states that students have to demonstrate "competence" in writing in order to graduate. But what does this word actually mean? It's a code word with a shifting definition, depending on one's area of concentration. Certainly it implies mechanical proficiency. But, beyond that, competence may imply a grade of C for some instructors, a grade of A for others. The more technical or scientific fields surely require a different kind of writing than, say, a thesis in the humanities might, and, so, while competence may imply an ability to sustain an argument in some disciplines, it may mean the ability to marshal facts in another. Leaving aside for the moment the issue of competence in reading, surely an integral part of writing competence, I am not aware that the faculty as a whole has addressed itself to defining exactly what is intended by the writing requirement.

At present, Brown has the following procedure in place: The Admissions Office reads the application essays of accepted students who score below a certain number on the verbal SATs during the spring before a student's matriculation. Admissions identifies

approximately seventy-five students whose writing does not seem to come up to Brown's standards, and who they suspect will have difficulty excelling in college courses because their writing is somehow deficient. Admissions, in a duty previously undertaken by the English Department, forwards these names to the Dean of the College, who writes a letter to these students during the summer. The Dean suggests that these students enroll in an English course in writing, and also informs them of the support services of the Writing Fellows Program and the Writing Center. He does not require them to take an English course; he only recommends it.

Once a student matriculates, the requirement states that students who "fail to maintain an appropriate level of competence in reading or writing, should be referred to the Dean for placement in a course offering the opportunity to improve their abilities." Faculty referral might occur by a phone call or email to the Dean of the College. More typically, it manifests as a check in the column marked "Writing Deficiency" on the grade sheet. Students who receive two writing deficiency checks are referred to a dean who follows up. And, if the student fails to complete such a course satisfactorily, he/she is "refused registration by the Committee on Academic Standing until he or she meets the responsibilities for the completion of the writing requirement."

How many faculty avail themselves of the Writing Deficiency column when they submit grades at the end of the semester? Very few. My conversations with colleagues who use the Writing Fellows Program over the years reveal that many are unaware that such an option exists; others are unsure how to judge writing deficient, especially if the student has mastered the course material. Should one give a student an A if he or she does an excellent job of understanding the content, but writes in a graceless and plodding fashion? And what resources are available to the dean who refers students to an "appropriate" course? If they receive the second deficiency check as Seniors, is a Freshman writing course the best use of their time? Alternately, how many visits to the Writing Center might be required of them? Can a Writing Fellows course fill the need?

To my knowledge, we have neither had a campus-wide conversation about what faculty actually do to work on writing with their students, nor what they'd like to do about it. I think the time has come to begin such a dialogue. In an attempt to gather some data and to raise awareness of writing at Brown, I'd like to ask for faculty responses to the following questions:

- 1. What is your impression of how students write at Brown?**
- 2. How has student writing changed since you began your teaching career?**
- 3. How much writing do you normally assign in each of your courses?**
- 4. What kinds of writing assignments do you give?**
- 5. What questions do you have about Brown's formulation of the writing requirement?**

Your responses will give us some much-needed data. A follow-up to this article, in the January issue of *The Teaching Exchange*, will summarize the results and help me ask further questions for our mutual edification. The goal, of course, is to improve writing instruction at Brown for all our students. With your feedback, we can begin the dialogue.

Please respond to me either in writing at Box 1962 or to the electronic version we will send to you early in the fall semester.

Dean of the College Writing Fellows Program

Survey: Faculty Perspectives on the Brown Writing Requirement

Please take a moment to fill in your responses to the following questions and return them to the Dean of the College Writing Fellows Program, Box 1962 (an electronic version will be sent out as well for those who prefer that medium):

1. What is your impression of how students write at Brown?

2. How has student writing changed since you began your teaching career?

3. How much writing do you normally assign in each of your courses?

4. What kinds of writing assignments do you give?

5. What questions do you have about Brown's formulation of the writing requirement?