Faculty Senate Working Group Report on Writing and Communication in the Curriculum

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report details the urgent need for a coherent approach to teaching communication, including expository and other forms of writing, oral presentation, and effective visual communication, in the undergraduate and graduate curriculum at Rice. The increasing numbers of freshmen who score low on the composition exam plus the growth in international students in both graduate and undergraduate programs result in increased need for curricular resources to ensure that our students are able “to speak, write, and present clearly, cogently, and persuasively in different contexts to a variety of audiences” (V2C). Rice lags far behind peer institutions in the resources it provides; appendices detail the resources at 16 institutions and those at Rice. This report recommends that Rice institute a Writing and Communication Program tailored specifically to our needs that matches or exceeds those at our peer institutions. It recommends a process for creating this program that begins with consultation with nationally recognized writing and communication experts, working with a faculty committee and the goals set forth in this report as guides. An important aspect of the process is the oversight of all aspects of the writing and communication program by faculty.

I. WRITING AND COMMUNICATION IN THE RICE CURRICULUM

For much of the twentieth century Rice (Institute and) University students were required to take a course in writing. When the requirement changed to exempt students who passed a Writing Competence exam (administered by the English Department), writing was still strongly recommended even for those who had passed. The University guaranteed two tiers of writing classes for all students who wanted or needed them; until recently it also offered a Writing Lab with trained student tutors available to every student on campus. Once the English Department stopped administering the Exam, the Provost and the Dean of Undergraduates took responsibility (1) for funding and organizing courses by English faculty who specialized in writing, and (2) for setting up a separate Communication Program (2006). The Writing Lab is now devoted primarily to COMM 103 students and, with limited resources, is not widely available. Meanwhile the Cain Project (1998-2008), which had provided innovative communication instruction, has been terminated. This Project, launched and directed by Linda Driskill for Engineering and Natural Science students, provided communication experts to work with both faculty and students on specialized communication instruction for individual courses. It was extraordinarily successful, but funds ran out. It leaves behind two full and two part-time communication faculty in Engineering and Science, as well as a number of instructional materials on Connexions and OWL-Space; but these remaining faculty are overwhelmed by demand, and the materials are hard to find and difficult to navigate without professional guidance.

Today 33% percent of matriculating Rice students fail the required composition examination; another 42% receive grades of “low pass” (See Appendix A for details.) Although graduation requires that students either pass the exam or successfully complete Communication 103 (a general introduction to “Academic Writing and Argumentation”) that course depends on soft money. It barely accommodates entering students who are required to take it and has little room for others

Apart from COMM 103, there are some courses in communication, often located in major departments and dedicated to field-specific skills--oral presentations, group work, visual formatting, internet presence. But
although many of these are truly excellent, they are scattered in separate parts of the university and their efforts are uncoordinated (See Appendix B). In exit surveys, graduating seniors cite writing and communication courses as the ones they most want added to a Rice education. Communication courses for graduate students are even more limited, and we have few resources devoted to an increasingly international student body for whom English is a second language.

Rice lags far behind our peer universities in providing the skills called for by President Leebron’s Vision for the Second Century: “Our students must be able . . . to speak, write, and present clearly, cogently, and persuasively in different contexts to a variety of audiences, and across cultures.” However, because no campus-wide structure yet exists, we are also uniquely situated to start fresh and develop a program that not only builds writing skills but also takes advantage of the latest technologies to introduce students to 21st century modes of communication. If we fund a nation-wide recruitment for the very best teachers in such a program, it could be the best in the country.

II. WRITING AND COMMUNICATION AT PEER INSTITUTIONS

Deborah Barrett and committee members reviewed writing and communication programs at 16 peer universities (See summary table, below, and Appendix C for specific information on each school). The review yielded the following information:

A. All peer schools support a permanent Writing Center and staff. Most rely on undergraduate peer tutoring for undergraduates, and on graduate or post-doc staffing for more structured activities (workshops, writing TA’s for writing-intensive courses). Two peer institutions (Yale, MIT) employ professional writers/journal editors. Many provide a variety of programs for graduate students (e.g., dissertation bootcamps, advanced writing for graduate students).

B. Apart from Brown, all peer schools, including Cal Tech and MIT, require a first-year writing course. Of these schools,

Ten require a general writing course (i.e., expository writing is the main focus), which is usually taught by trained graduate students. Among these schools, only Dartmouth allows exemptions for students who pass an exam, thus, like Rice, structuring the writing requirement as primarily remedial. At Cal Tech, students receiving an unsatisfactory grade on the writing exam must take a remedial pre-course before enrolling in the required writing courses.

Five require writing-intensive courses, which combine the teaching of writing with the teaching of content in major fields. Such courses are taught by the existing departmental faculty.

C. Seven of the 16 peer schools also had upper level, advanced, field-specific communication requirements. These are commonly Writing- or Communication-Intensive courses located in individual departments

D. Few of our peer schools include oral, visual or other communication skills in their requirements or offer a range of elective courses, although Stanford and MIT stand out for their thoughtful programs in this regard.
### III. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Working Group strongly recommends that Rice institute a Writing and Communication Program tailored specifically to our needs. It should make use of what has worked well here and at the best of our peer schools but also move beyond them.

Specific recommendations follow:

A. The Provost, in consultation with the Working Group, should invite a consultation team of 2-3 nationally recognized writing and communication experts to advise Rice on the formation of a campus-wide Program (We can suggest names of leaders of the best existing programs). The consultants’ visit should be modeled on those of departmental external review committees and be carried out as soon as possible.

B. The current Working Group should form the core of a committee that will work with the consultants. The committee should be expanded to include one representative each from the Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, and professional schools (Music and Architecture).

C. As a starting point for the consultants, the Working Group should provide a list of eight goals drawn up as a result of our research. All but the first of these will be starting points only, and they will be negotiable and open to discussion, pending the consultants’ advice.

1. Install a rotating Faculty Advisory Board. Writing and communication are critical components of the curriculum. Programs and course requirements in these areas, as in other curricular areas, should be established by a faculty-led process. The Faculty Advisory Board would begin by overseeing the creation of the new program and participating in the hiring decisions for new faculty associated with it. Such an advisory body would ensure ongoing responsiveness to needs across the campus, avoid
duplication of resources, and allow collaboration.

2. Conduct a national search for an experienced Ph. D. to serve as Director of all campus communication programs—in written, oral, visual and cross-cultural communication—and to oversee their implementation and periodic assessment.

3. With the Director, hire and support a first-rate staff trained in teaching communication. Any graduate student staff would be trained by the professionals before teaching.

4. Assess the skills of entering undergraduate and graduate students so that they may be directed to appropriate courses.

5. Provide undergraduates with at least a 2-tier program:
   a. A general writing and communication course for freshmen (who would be channeled into either remedial or university-level sections depending on the results of assessment),
   b. Upper-level specialized courses tailored to individual fields and taught by communication experts trained also in the relevant subject areas (e.g., Science Communication; Engineering Communication; Communicating in the Professions (Law, Psychology, Medicine); Technical Writing; Research and Writing in [Discipline]). These will be tailored to area-specific practices: posters, presentations, group project presentations, lab reports, field journals, and so on.

6. Provide graduate students with guidance in creating dissertations and papers for publication and presentations. Tailor the guidance to individual fields, whether in the form of courses, workshops, or ongoing coaching.

7. Establish a Communication Center location and staff to (a) coach Rice students at all levels, (b) coach faculty, departments, and divisions to set up specialized communication modules and/or programs in their major areas, and (c) search out and make available the newest communication technology.

8. Help international students, undergraduate and graduate, with writing and oral skills.

IV. POTENTIAL CHALLENGES

Finding adequate resources.

Accommodating the rapidly increasing percentage of international students at Rice.

Combining the writing and communication requirements with existing course requirements.

Encouraging existing faculty to learn how to (1) teach writing and communication skills necessary in their fields, and then (2) incorporate writing into their existing courses.