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An experimental, non-credit program of composition was introduced at Marist College in 1964. A description is given of this one-semester program in which the student writes six papers on topics assigned not by his composition advisor but by his course instructors in the six subjects he is studying that semester. The reasons for adopting this program, the method of advising the students, and the successes and failures of the program are discussed. (BN)

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MARIST COLLEGE EXPERIMENT IN INTERDEPARTMENTAL FRESHMAN COMPOSITION

In 1964, Marist College, a liberal arts institution of about twelve hundred students, introduced an experimental one-semester, non-credit program of composition for its three hundred freshmen—a program which has posed and still poses serious problems in its execution but which the faculty as a whole has strongly endorsed. The theory behind the program, we believe, is excellent, and we are confident that the major problems can be eliminated or substantially reduced. Student evaluation of their experience has helped to draw attention to weaknesses, but the overall response has been basically favorable: freshmen have welcomed an approach that does not repeat high-school patterns of teaching composition, that stresses independent study and individual responsibility and that is geared to the needs of the individual student. Because the ideas and values which gave rise to the program probably exist in one degree or another on most campuses and because the program does indeed show considerable promise, we believe an account of it will be of interest to colleges and departments concerned with Freshmen English. This description may also be of help to us: it may call forth from colleagues in the field the critical reactions that can help us judge our experiment with greater objectivity.

The English Department thinking which helped to shape the program can be summarized under five main points:

(1) We wanted all departments of the college to have a more active role and a more direct responsibility in the teaching of composition to freshmen. We wanted the entering freshman to know from the start that it was not his English teacher alone who was scrutinizing the quality of his writing.

(2) We wanted the freshman to realize in a most concrete way that writing skill has a bearing on success or failure in his other courses.

(3) We wanted a program that would offer more opportunities for individual instruction than the traditional course in freshman composition. Having committed ourselves as an educational institution to the importance of the individual, we wanted to bring creed and deed closer together in the area of composition.

(4) We wanted provision for advanced placement. Approaching each student as an individual meant that a freshman might already exhibit a level of writing competence which makes a course in composition less useful to him than some other course in the college. On the other hand, we were reluctant to exempt a student from composition on the basis of his high-school record, his college boards, or an entrance exam. We wanted him to demonstrate how well he could write in response to the intellectual demands of his freshman courses at Marist.

(5) We wanted a program that would be inspirational in character, one which would call forth and encourage writing ability wherever it existed, and one which would stimulate the less able student to make the improvement of his writing a matter that does not end when his course in composition ends.

Here, in brief, is how the program works. No freshman takes a formal course in composition during the first semester of freshman year. Instead he is assigned a composition advisor who is a member of the English Department and whose work grading papers and meeting individually with his advisees constitutes three credit hours of teaching. The freshman writes six papers of about 750 words each on topics assigned not by his advisor but by his various course instructors. The student writes one "composition" paper for each of his six courses. In most cases, a course instructor will assign more than one paper in his course; but through arrangement with the English Department, he designates one written assignment as simultaneously fulfilling both the composition requirement and his own course requirement. Staggered over a period of fourteen weeks, the freshman composition papers thus deal with matters of literature, history, economics, scripture, science, psychology, physical education, and so forth, depending on the student's program of courses. The course instructor seeks to challenge the student's analytical and critical powers and, wherever possible, to help him integrate his studies. Thus, an instructor of Scripture, aware that his students are studying the Greek epics in the freshman literature course, might ask his students to compare the treatment of the hero in *Genesis* and in *The Iliad* or perhaps to discuss some aspect of the idea of God in these works. The student's performance on his composition papers affects his grades in his various courses and determines whether or not he will be required to take a three-credit course in composition in the second semester.

When a freshman submits a composition paper according to the prearranged schedule, the course instructor evaluates it for substance and overall writing effectiveness, makes a written comment on the face of the paper and forwards it to the student's composition advisor. He, in turn, takes note of the instructor's statement, scrutinizes the paper more intensively in the areas of content, organization, diction, and mechanics, makes marginal notes and queries where necessary and adds his own written statement summarizing the paper's strengths and weaknesses. Since all freshmen are asked to own and independently to study Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, marginal notes often lead the student to relevant sections of this handbook. There will, of course, be students who fail to make use of such references and who do little or no independent study of the handbook; but indications are that a significant number are assuming responsibility in this area without the coercion of class meetings and course credit. And we have a sense—not illusory, we hope—that in a small way we are helping to prepare students for the years of self-motivated study that ideally should follow a formal education.

One might imagine that major discrepancies would arise in the evaluations of instructor and advisor, but these have generally been minor and have not constituted a problem. On the other hand, the interdepartmental nature of the program has posed some difficulties. Instructors have sometimes failed to adhere to the time schedule for forwarding papers to the composition advisors, with the unfortunate result that a freshman's next composition paper falls due before he has benefited from criticism of his previous one. A more serious problem has been the assigning of topics which neither stimulate the student to relate learning experiences nor encourage independence and originality. The results of such assignments have been mere reports, summaries, and, occasionally, plagiarized work. But periodic meetings of course instructors and composition advisors and the exercise of diplomacy on all sides have helped to reduce the above-mentioned problems. Fortunately, faculty goodwill, essential to the functioning of a program like ours, has been maintained at a high level.

When a student does poorly on his paper, his advisor will arrange to see him at a conference, at which time he will help the student to recognize major weaknesses and to discover ways in which his paper can be improved. Occasionally, he may motivate the student to rewrite the paper or to submit a first draft of his next paper for discussion. Though a large portion of an advisor's conference time now goes to students having serious writing problems, he makes a concerted effort to confer also

with students whose work is of average and superior quality. A major challenge confronting the advisor is to stimulate the student who writes satisfactory but undistinguished papers to aim at excellence and to be dissatisfied with mere adequacy. Unfortunately the student in this category has not received as much individual attention as we had hoped, mainly because of an advisee load of approximately forty freshmen—at least fifteen too many. It is also a sad irony that it is this poorly motivated student who most often fails to appear for a conference when one is scheduled. Conferences with students of superior ability have been an important and rewarding part of the program. The advisor helps the talented freshman to develop his strengths further and encourages him to undertake, in addition to his required composition papers, an independent writing project for purposes of self-development and self-expression. The student confers with his advisor at different stages of his project and has the opportunity of expanding his awareness of the potentialities of language, broadening his knowledge of a field of special interest, and (if he is fortunate) enlarging his knowledge of himself. A yearly freshman publication of fiction, poetry and the essay has been an exciting by-product of work with the talented, though the magazine is open to contributions from all freshmen.

An advisor spends four hours each week in conferences and sees from twelve to fifteen students. In spite of the frustration of an excessive number of advisees, he has generally found work with individual students productive and highly gratifying. Often, he has extended his conference time beyond what is required of him. The reduction of the advisee load is the most urgent need of the program at this time.

After the advisor has evaluated a set of compositions and has met with particular individuals in conferences, he returns the papers to the course instructor who now assigns a grade to each paper—one which is based both on his own evaluation and that of the advisor. The freshman knows from the outset that his grade for a composition will be a composite of the two evaluations. This and other details of the functioning of the program he learns at the beginning of the semester when his advisor holds a group orientation meeting with his advisees.

When the freshman has written all six papers, his advisor evaluates his overall performance. If his writing falls in the range of poor to barely adequate (F to C— in conventional grading) he is required to take a formal three-credit composition course in the second semester of freshman year. Remedial in emphasis, this course continues to stress individual instruction and makes student writing relevant to the subjects studied in other classes. Wherever possible, the student's composition teacher is his first-semester composition advisor who is already familiar with his particular problems. The student whose work falls in the range of satisfactory to excellent (C to A) is exempted from the second-semester composition course and has three additional credits to apply to his elective program. It is important to mention that each year freshmen whose performance during the first semester has been only satisfactory have voluntarily requested admission to the second-semester composition course in order to improve their skills. For these students self-improvement has taken precedence over an elective course and the prestige and convenience of exemption. Other exempted freshmen have chosen to apply their three elective credits to a course in Advanced Composition or creative writing. We like to think that the advisory system has had an effect on these decisions.

In exempting the more able freshman from a required course in composition, the program provides a form of advance placement, the difference being that the exempted student has had to prove his writing ability in his college courses. He has also had the advantage of careful criticism of his writing and individual guidance. During the first two years of the program, approximately one-third of the freshmen required the second-semester course. Last year, refinements in the program and the raising of admission standards reduced this figure.

The difficulties we have encountered—unchallenging assignments, faculty delinquency in meeting schedules, the complications of circulating papers among instructors, advisors and students, insufficient

attention to the often-neglected average student, large advisee loads—these difficulties, though less serious now than three years ago, have not been altogether eliminated. In the light of these problems, it may seem strange that we have retained the program. Actually, we have regarded the experiment as fundamentally successful, the advantages, we believe, significantly outweighing the shortcomings and the latter, we are hopeful, capable of being remedied. More than a screening process for identifying students in need of intensive consideration and more than a method of advanced placement, the program is accomplishing several things that are of vital importance at Marist College. Through the conference method it is adapting instruction to the needs of individual students. It is giving concrete expression to our belief that student writing ought to be the concern of the total faculty and not of the English Department alone. Indeed there are signs that faculty attention to writing competence is carrying over into non-freshman courses. The program is stimulating within the English Department a more vital and more sustained exchange of ideas concerning the teaching of composition than existed formerly, while the interdepartmental nature of the program is certainly broadening our communication with other departments. Finally, the program is exposing the freshman in a direct way to values, educational and human, which are basic to any liberal arts college—the importance of integrating knowledge gained from various disciplines, the ideal of self-improvement and creative self-development the pursuit of excellence rather than adequacy, and the importance of the individual especially in our age of bigness and impersonality.

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