

HSU's Graduation Writing Proficiency Requirement

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In one way or another, the Graduation Writing Proficiency Requirement will touch the lives of all future graduates of HSU. For most students fulfilling this requirement will mean spending a few hours on a Saturday morning writing two short essays. For others, it could also mean enrolling in an upper-division composition course learning to improve their writing skills. The only general exception to this statement is that students who fulfill the teaching credential writing requirement, either by successfully completing English 100 or a special examination, are granted certification.

By now most faculty and students are probably aware of the existence of the Graduation Writing Proficiency Requirement. It is less probable, however, that everyone is familiar with the reasons for the requirement, the development of the means of fulfilling the requirement at HSU, and especially with the present state of the requirement. Since this requirement will eventually affect virtually every graduate of HSU, regardless of major, it is important that the faculty understand its whys and wherefores. The pages of *Forum* should be an excellent vehicle for conveying this information.

The decline in student writing skills, as documented in various standardized tests and faculty surveys, became a matter of growing concern in the 1970's. Early in 1975, a CSUC Task Force on Student Writing Skills, made up predominantly of CSUC faculty, was appointed by the Chancellor to investigate the problem and recommend appropriate solutions. The major portion of the Task Force's recommendations, reviewed by the Educational Policies Committee and supported by the CSUC Academic Senate, was accepted by the Board of Trustees in 1976. The first major provision of the policy to be implemented was the English Placement Test (EPT, which went into effect in 1977. This examination, which must be taken by virtually all students enrolling at HSU or any other CSUC campus, consists of a four-part machine-scored test and an essay. The EPT is

administered and scored on a state-wide basis, with the results used, at the discretion of individual campuses, solely as a means of placing students in the proper writing course. HSU has made full use of the EPT, and has introduced a new course, English A, and a related Writing Lab to aid those students revealed by the EPT to be in need of assistance in developing their basic writing skills.

The second major aspect of the policy required the demonstration of writing proficiency at the upper-division level as a requirement for graduation from all campuses within the CSUC system. The resolution approved by the Board of Trustees at its May, 1976, meeting required that students demonstrate writing skills prior to graduation. Mandatory catalog copy has since stated that "All students subject to degree requirements of 1977-78 and subsequent general catalogs must demonstrate competency in writing skills as a requirement for graduation." Unlike the EPT, the graduation writing requirement, it was ultimately determined, would not be based on a statewide examination. Instead, it was left to the individual nineteen campuses to devise their own means for fulfilling this requirement. At HSU planning a program to satisfy this requirement began in the fall of 1978, with the expectation that the means of fulfilling the requirement would have to be in operation by the beginning of the 1979-80 academic year, when the first students who enrolled at HSU under the 1977-78 catalog would be due to graduate. No state funds were provided to support implementation of this requirement. Consequently, the initial plan would have operated essentially as a challenge examination, with the units so generated supporting both the reading of the essays and courses for those students who demonstrated by failing the examination that they required remedial instruction. No student fee was required. This plan received the appropriate local approval but was rejected by the Chancellor's Office in the spring of 1979.

As a result of this rejection, a five-member faculty committee (now known as the GWP Committee) was formed in the late spring of 1979 to devise another means of fulfilling the Trustees' mandate. The most important features of this Committee's recommendations were that prior to graduation all students at the junior or senior level would be required to take an examination consisting of two short essays, one on a personal experience topic and another on an analytical topic. Students who attained a satisfactory score on the examination would be granted the necessary certification. Classes would be provided for those students who failed the examination and needed assistance in improving their writing. The essays would be read in the "holistic" manner used for CSUC statewide writing examinations, principally the EPT. In this type of reading each essay is read and scored on a scale of one to six by at least two readers. No marks are made on the papers by the readers, and the readings are "blind." That is, scores are covered with an opaque label so that each reader does not know, and hence is not influenced by, the score assigned by another reader. If the scores assigned by the two readers are more than one number apart (e.g., a three and a four are acceptable, but not a two and a four) the paper is given to a third reader for resolution of the discrepancy. The final score is a combination of the scores assigned by the individual readers for each of the two essays. Since each reader assigns a score from one to six, the maximum score attainable is twenty-four. Because state funds remain unavailable to pay for the costs of administering and scoring this examination, it is necessary to charge each student a ten dollar fee.

The second major feature of the Committee's report was the recommendation, following the view that attaining good student writing skills is an all-campus responsibility, that departments throughout the campus designate certain courses which have, or could be made to have, a substantial writing component, and that students who have failed the examination and need remedial assistance enroll in a designated course of their choice and also in an additional two-unit, small-enrollment adjunct course in which they would receive instruction in writing on topics provided by the designated course.

These recommendations seemed to the members of the Committee to be both reasonable and feasible. HSU had taken the EPT seriously, compiling one of the top records of student compliance in

the system and making full use of the test results, and it was felt that the graduation writing requirement should be similarly treated. This decision was supported by the knowledge, gained from SAT scores, EPT results, and other sources, that HSU student writing skills were generally higher than those of students at our sister campuses. The reasons are not far to seek. HSU is not primarily a commuter campus. Its enrollment is made up predominantly of non-local students who tend to come from backgrounds in which education is both considered important and better financed. In addition, fewer HSU students have the problems caused by English being their second language.

Furthermore, the teaching of writing skills had already been given some positive attention at HSU. In its 1976 report on student writing skills, the CSUC Committee on Educational Policy stated that student writing skills were an all-campus responsibility. The Trustees endorsed this view and the Chancellor supported it by funding a program for training faculty to teach writing skills. HSU participated in this program by instituting a new course for faculty, English 211, Seminar in Teaching College Writing, first offered fall quarter, 1977. A small group of faculty trained in the teaching of writing was thus already available. Some of these faculty had been called upon to serve as members of the planning Committee, and others could also be called upon to serve as essay readers.

The Committee's recommendations were approved, and at the start of the 1979-80 academic year the program was underway, with the first examination scheduled for November 17. In order to overcome initial student hesitation and insure that the examination got off to a good start, the administration granted the Committee's request that the first examination be subsidized to allow waiver of the fee. The Testing Center had agreed to carry out the actual administration of the examination to students, but there remained a plethora of preparations to complete. Student registration procedures had to be worked out, computer codes decided, rooms for the reading reserved, publicity prepared and distributed, examination booklets and registration forms printed, readers contacted and selected, consultation procedures for failing students devised, essay topics prepared and duplicated, and so on — not to mention devising procedures for the actual reading.

Student reaction to the announcement of the requirement was, as expected, not entirely favorable. Even though catalogs since 1977-78 had

stated the imminence of the requirement, few students were aware of it. Most students recognized the importance of good writing and the value of the certification, but a vocal minority objected with varying degrees of vigor to having to spend a Saturday morning writing essays. Some students were granted exemption when the grounds appeared reasonable, and most of the others accepted the situation after talking it over. It was hoped that at least 250 students, lured by the waiver of a ten dollar fee, would overcome their understandable reluctance to serve as "guinea pigs" and take the first examination. At the close of the registration period, however, only 213 students had registered, and on the day of the examination only 176 appeared to write the two essays. This meant there would be at least 704 readings – two essays for each student, with a minimum of two readings per essay. The number of additional readings which would be required was of course not known in advance.

Six readers, two table leaders, a director and two assistants assembled at one o'clock Saturday afternoon to begin the reading. After the introductions and necessary explanations, the readers and table leaders for each essay adjourned to separate rooms and set about the process of establishing a norm for scoring the essays as accurately and as consistently as possible. A prepared scoring guide for each essay was distributed and discussed. Copies of sample essays, selected by the table leaders as soon as the completed examinations had been delivered at eleven o'clock, were distributed, scored, and discussed, a procedure that would be repeated at intervals throughout the reading. In addition, the table leaders, both English faculty who had previously participated in several statewide "holistic" readings, periodically read essays scored by individual readers to make sure his or her scoring followed the established standards. In the meantime, the director and assistants were kept busy preparing the score report forms, applying and removing opaque labels, keeping track of large heaps of read and yet-to-be-read essays, and attending to a small host of minor tasks such as duplicating sample essays, repairing a balky typewriter, and so on.

The reading adjourned for the day at five o'clock Saturday and resumed the next morning at nine. By that afternoon the end began to come into view. Essays had been read, re-read, and read again as necessary. Scores were recorded for the preliminary analysis which would determine the passing score. Finally, when the last essay had been

read and scored, everyone gathered for a short time to discuss and evaluate the experience of scoring the first HSU Graduation Writing Proficiency Examination. Afterwards, the readers were dismissed with thanks, and the results were analyzed to determine what the passing score would be. The Committee had earlier decided that an overall score which demonstrated a student's ability to write essays at a four or higher level would probably be the proper range. This estimate was borne out by the examination scores, so 14 and above was selected as the passing score. This meant that in order to pass the examination and receive certification in writing skills a student had to achieve, for example, a four or above on at least one essay. The results were encouraging. Over 82% of the students tested scored 14 or above, with the average score 15.85. The scores ranged from 7 to 23, distributed as follows (the score is given first, followed by the number of students achieving that score): 7-1, 8-1, 9-2, 10-1, 11-5, 12-10, 13-11, 14-24, 15-29, 16-16, 17-26, 18-24, 19-9, 20-6, 21-6, 22-4, 23-1. The results of the examination were finally all recorded by eight o'clock Sunday evening. The coded results, along with an explanation of their meaning and directions on whom to contact regarding questions, were ready for posting in the kiosk next morning for the students to see, and the other forms were ready for official recording.

Student reaction to the results was predictable. Over the next week a few students who had passed actually stopped by to ask a question or make a comment, but for the most part the students who failed were the ones to appear. Most expressed acceptance and asked what to do next, while others voiced a mixture of amazement and disbelief that they could possibly have failed. Still others were downright hostile and angry at practically everyone from the Governor on down to their kindergarten teacher. It was not a pleasant week but one that probably every professor has experienced at one time or another.

The second administration of the examination, given February 9, generally duplicated the first except that the ten dollar student fee was in effect and provided those students who were so inclined with fresh cause for complaint. Procedures for collecting the fee had to be devised, and a special account for handling the funds established. A total of 173 students registered for the second examination, with 168 actually appearing on Saturday. This response was somewhat below the expected number, but at least the no-shows were reduced,

no doubt because of the ten dollars invested by each student. Faculty from seven different academic departments participated in the second reading. A score of 14 and above was again used as the passing mark. However, the pass rate was down to slightly below 73% this time, with the average score down to 14.72. The score range was 8 to 23, distributed as follows (the score is again given first, followed by the number of students attaining that score): 8-4, 9-5, 10-9, 11-7, 12-11, 13-7, 14-28, 15-27, 16-18, 17-15, 18-14, 19-8, 20-1, 21-2, 22-2, 23-1. The lower percentage of passing grades, as well as the fact that more students who took the February examination were closer to graduation, were additional concerns for a number of the students who came in the following week to discuss the examination. Since a number of variables are present – principally different essay topics, different students, some new readers – no clear explanation is possible. Suspicions that a significant number of the best students, those most confident of their writing ability, would take the first examination, while those less able and less confident would delay taking the examination as long as possible may have been supported if not confirmed by the results of the two examinations. Analysis of the students' expected dates of graduation, while by no means conclusive due to the limited sample, suggests that the closer the date of graduation the higher the failure rate, while the farther away the date of graduation, the lower the failure rate. Only additional data from future examinations will confirm or deny the validity of this observation, however.

Whatever their date of graduation, students who fail the examination have the option of repeating it or enrolling in an upper-division composition course and attaining certification through its successful completion. At present, English 100, Expository Writing, and similar advanced composition courses are being used to provide aid to students who have failed the examination. The designated and adjunct courses recommended by the Committee are not yet in operation, though it is hoped that by next year such courses will begin to be offered. These courses would have the dual advantage of creating a more campus-wide involvement in student writing and of offering students the incentive to improve their writing abilities by working within their major or in a closely-related field. Guidelines for starting such a course have been prepared and are available to interested faculty. Although the figures available are as yet

too scant to permit the definite identification of statistical trends, the following combined totals for the first two examinations showing the pass-fail rates by department are of interest and provide some indication of student performance by major.

	Pass	Fail
Anthropology	5	0
Art	6	2
Biology	18	6
Botany	3	0
Business Administration	25	4
Chemistry	1	0
Child Development	2	0
Economics	1	0
Engineering	3	1
English	6	0
Environ. Engineering	4	3
Fisheries	10	4
Forestry	32	11
Geography	7	2
Geology	5	2
German	3	0
History	0	1
Industrial Arts	5	3
Journalism	10	1
Mathematics	2	0
Music	3	1
N.R.P.I.	13	6
Nursing	7	0
Oceanography	6	0
Phys. Educ. – Women	1	0
Political Science	5	0
Psychology	11	5
Range Management	3	1
Recreation Admin.	3	2
Social Science	5	2
Social Welfare	8	6
Sociology	3	1
Spanish	1	0
Special Major	4	1
Speech Communication	1	1
Speech Pathology	7	4
Theater Arts	0	2
Wildlife Management	19	2
Zoology	13	2

Faculty participation in the readings by department has not yet matched the spectrum of student majors taking the examination. The Schools of Business and Economics, Natural Resources, and Science, and the Divisions of Health and Physical Education and Interdisciplinary Studies have not yet been represented at the readings, nor have many faculty from these academic areas enrolled in English 211, the prerequisite to serving as a reader. Otherwise faculty response has been good, and the use of readers from throughout the campus has proven successful. Twelve faculty participated in the first two readings, with a total of eight different departments represented: Art, English, History, Philosophy, Psychology, Social Welfare, Speech Communication, and Theatre Arts.

The discrepancy rate in the scoring of essays – i.e., the number of times essays must be read more than twice because of a spread of more than one point in the two scores – has in some instances been higher than is desirable, and some essays have been given an additional review. The overall discrepancy rate in November was 29.55%, with the rate for the personal experience essay .6.25% and for the analytical essay 23.30%. The overall discrepancy rate in February was somewhat lower, 28.30%, with a surprising reversal in the discrepancy rate for the individual essays. The personal experience essay rate was 21.38%, while the analytical essay rate was 6.92%. Again, it is not yet possible to identify the cause of either this reversal or of the considerable percentage gap that appeared between essays each time. Fortunately, these discrepancies have only a minimal effect on the overall accuracy of the scoring due to the safeguard of repeated readings which forms the basis of this method of reading. A drop in the discrepancy rate can be expected in the future as the experience of the readers increases from reading to reading and a pool of skilled readers eventually becomes available. Even then, however, some new readers will be introduced into each reading as they become available.

Faculty response to the readings has been without exception very positive. Once the mysterious-sounding “holistic” reading is recognized as simply a systematic method of reading large numbers of essays quickly in a consistent and accurate manner, the readers settle easily into the task. Nearly all the participants have found, somewhat to their surprise, that reading the essays provides interesting insights into what HSU students are thinking and feeling. The readers have

also agreed that the opportunity to meet colleagues from other departments and work together for a common academic purpose was stimulating and rewarding.

Information on how our sister CSUC campuses have responded to the Trustees’ mandate for certification of writing skills is to date scanty. At least some of the campuses have instituted programs similar to HSU’s, including examinations financed by student fees. Reports indicate that failure rates on these examinations have run as high as 50%, perhaps bearing out the view expressed above that in comparison with other students in the CSUC system HSU students are better writers. HSU’s program has not been entirely free of problems and errors, but on the whole it has run smoothly during its first year of operation. At present the program’s greatest need is for the establishment of some designated and adjunct courses. Then, as the number of students requiring certification increases to an expected level of some five hundred per quarter, the program should be able to bear the load.