

February 14, 2010

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## EPC Holds Writing Seminar Symposium

**By Andrew Thompson**

This weekend, the Educational Policy Committee (EPC) flew in eight experts in college writing programs, from seven different institutions, to discuss with Haverford faculty and staff plans to improve Haverford's first-year freshman writing seminar requirement, as well as the Writing Center.

On Thursday, all eight college writing experts, representing Yale, Pomona, Bryn Mawr, the University of Tennessee - Knoxville, Amherst, Occidental, and Duke, met in Sharpless Auditorium for a discussion panel that was open to students. The rest of the symposium's weekend events were limited to EPC only.

Each of the experts described their institution's writing program, and then fielded questions from Haverford faculty and students.

Alfred Guy, from Yale, said that their program offered 200 courses, taught with regular faculty from different departments, from which students had to take two.

"For 12 years I worked at places where there was a separate faculty that taught writing. They were very good at it, but all the students forgot half of what they learned in the writing program the next semester, because they weren't their real faculty members," said Guy.

"[At Yale,] the people who teach writing are not quite as well trained and don't have quite as much experience teaching writing, but they are 'the faculty,' and what students learn they really hold on to."

Gail Hemmeter, from Bryn Mawr, said that most schools shared a problem with keeping track of students over their four years.

"Students get a lot of attention paid to writing in the first year, and they get a lot of attention paid in their last semester, writing their thesis," Hemmeter said. "What happens in the middle is a bit murky, honestly."

Jyl Gentzler, from Amherst College, pointed out difficulties with student-led writing centers. "Students [are] uncomfortable talking to other students about their writing," she said. While there are advantages to faculty-staffed writing centers, small colleges often have staffing and resource issues with hiring separate faculty.

Cary Moskovitz, from Duke, said that Duke's writing program was very heavily focused on writing across the disciplines.

"For the last 100 or so years, teaching writing in America has been owned by English. And a lot of the sensibilities of English scholars and literary critics have driven the way writing has been taught and assumed to be done in higher education," Moskovitz said.

"There's a very intentional move to move the writing program out of the English department as a standalone program, and to staff the program with people with Ph.D's from a wide variety of fields," he continued.

Dara Regaignon, from Pomona, said that their program was also discipline-focused.

With writing seminars in a variety of specific fields, “over the course of the semester, the students can gain enough expertise to be writing as experts, rather than as novices pitching an idea to someone who already knows everything. No one can write anything worthwhile if the person already knows all the answers,” Regaignon said.

Student Representative to EPC David Thorstad '12 said that this was the running debate in the writing field, whether to teach writing to specific disciplines.

“The more traditional approach is that learning to write is learning to write period, and you can do that in the English department, or anywhere that you’re writing critical essays,” said Thorstad.

However, Thorstad appreciated Moskowitz’s program at Duke. “[He] stressed that the teaching of writing is just teaching how to communicate effectively. Their program stresses that anyone can teach a writing class, and I’d like to see more of that here.”

Students’ Council Co-President Will Harrison '10 asked the panel about how to incorporate more standardization among writing seminars.

Moskovitz responded that the problem was not so much that standardization was needed, but more that best practices needed to be disseminated.

“One of which, I’d like to see us do away with ‘school writing.’ Write an essay on X, do a report on something. An essay looks very different across fields. Let’s get faculty to assign writing that shows what that kind of writing is supposed to do in the world. Who reads it, why, what’s their agenda?” said Moskowitz.

Students’ Council Co-President Harrison Haas '10 liked Duke’s program. “If you got a cities professor and a biology professor and an English professor all teaching writing at an excellent level, I think that would be very good for students.”

Will Harrison also agreed with Gentzler’s point about student-led writing centers.

“How [do we] de-stigmatize the Writing Center? Especially at schools like Haverford, where most of the students were the best growing up, and aren’t accustomed to asking for help,” he said.

Jenn Fishman, from the University of Tennessee, emphasized helping students that might be cautious to ask for it. “Students at different points max out, and hit a wall of sorts. Some students don’t do that until their senior thesis,” Fishman said.

Harrison Haas said that he was disappointed that writing centers tend to focus on content rather than writing mechanics. Thorstad explained the experts’ reasoning behind that focus.

“[The writing center directors emphasized] their job is not to make your individual paper better, but to make you a better writer. They’d much rather have you turn in a paper with a billion comma errors, but one that’s going to help you grow as a writer,” said Thorstad.

Provost Linda Bell said that efforts to reform the writing program at Haverford have been ongoing for many years, and the symposium was a major step forward.

“EPC hopes to immediately turn around the input from the symposium into a proposal for the April faculty meeting,” said Bell.

When asked if it was possible for changes and improvements to the writing program to be implemented for next year, Bell said, “It’s slight. In the following academic year? Definitely, that’s the goal.”

Thorstad stated that the biggest long-term challenge to improvement of the writing program was faculty support.

“All faculty have to be involved in writing. We can’t just send people to the writing center,” Thorstad said. “One of the senses we got from the symposium is its really important to slowly but steadily build faculty support behind the writing

program, and that's something that's just going to take time to do. I wouldn't rule out changes for next year, but I think it's going to be a long-term process."

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