

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY WRITING AND TESTING PROGRAM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH ALABAMA

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In 1979, the University of South Alabama formed a twelve-member college committee on writing. This committee recognized three things: (1) that writing skills improve by practice at all age and class levels, (2) that writing enhances learning in all disciplines, and (3) that each discipline should be responsible for language training and preparation for placement testing. The university committee saw a need for extending writing courses beyond the freshman year and beyond the department of English, and their proposals for addressing these needs are as follows: (1) initiating a cross-curricular writing program operated by at least one representative from each department, (2) implementing a skills test for placing transfer students either into the upper division writing courses or into remediation, and (3) forming a university-wide committee for developing the upper level writing program.

Two basic problems confronted the committee in developing and activating the new writing program, but along with these were several positive results. The major opponent to cross-curricular writing was fear, a by-product of the non-English teacher's lack of confidence as a writing instructor. To overcome this problem, the university held several workshops for training teachers in writing assignment and assessment, the results of which were teachers from all dis-

ciplines who were confident and competent instructors of writing, and who (some for the first time) learned to see writing not only as reporting or recording, but as discovery and experimentation as well. These workshops, along with subsequent ones, helped each teacher develop spiralling and sequential assignments which facilitated learning and anticipated future applications of the subject matter involved.

The other major problem was establishing the transfer student testing procedure: a way of compensating for the fact that such a student may not have had the same freshman and sophomore writing experience as had the four-year University of South Alabama student. Great effort was made to place the transfer student testing into the hands of a "stratified" group of teacher-graders, and to consider a wide range of writing quality (styles being necessarily different, depending on the writer's discipline). The students were given a test similar to that of the placement test for freshmen. If they received a grade of U rather than S, they were placed into a semester of remedial instruction, then allowed to repeat the placement test.

The University developed a writing lab so that the content area teachers would be able to avoid remedial teaching. Also, these content area teachers could maintain high standards as writing instructors, thanks to the writing lab, because their "failing" a student simply meant referral to more (and more specialized) help rather than outright rejection or demoralization. The lab, staffed with experts in remedial writing, English as a Second Language, foreign languages, and with graduate students in English, is now open forty hours a week, serving 40 to 50 students a week.