

**UVa-Wise QEP: Writing at Wise**  
**Report to the College Advisory Board, 10/17/14**  
**Tom Costa, Chair, UVa-Wise QEP Committee**

The Quality Enhancement Plan, or QEP, is a part of the SACSCOC re-accreditation process. The purpose of the QEP is to allow a college undergoing its SACS review to develop a plan to improve instruction or augment instructional support. During a year-long discussion with members of the college community, the college's QEP committee has decided to focus on improving student writing as our QEP.

Chancellor Donna Henry appointed the QEP Committee in the fall 2013. Chair is Tom Costa, Chair of the Department of History and Philosophy. Members include faculty from the Natural Sciences, Visual and Performing Arts, Language and Literature as well as staff from Student Support Services, Financial Aid, and members of the Student Government Association. In its initial approach to developing a QEP, the committee focused on five "high-impact" areas:

- Undergraduate research
- Global studies
- Writing
- Collaborative learning
- Service learning

The committee developed a survey of faculty and a separate survey of students. The faculty survey indicated that of the five themes, writing received the most support. Results of the student survey indicated that while collaborative learning was the most popular by a narrow margin, student respondents indicated high levels of support for the other areas, including writing. Follow-up formal and informal discussions with students and faculty during the fall of 2013 and spring of 2014 also indicated a wide support for a QEP that addressed student writing problems.

There is an abundance of research and literature supporting the importance of teaching writing in undergraduate liberal arts education. Surveys and data have shown that employers desire students who can communicate effectively in writing. Writing is an important part of a liberal arts education with its emphasis on developing a broad range of skills rather than a narrow professional education. As one UVa-Wise faculty member put it, "it's the single most important thing that a college can do." An article on a recent meeting of higher education officials in Tennessee stressed support for a curriculum that addressed the "soft skills" of critical thinking and communication, including written communication.

Once the committee had decided to focus on writing, additional members were brought in to help develop the plan itself. Experts in teaching writing from the Language and Literature, Communications and History departments joined the committee in fall 2014.

In its outline the UVa-Wise writing QEP comprises:

- A Program director and writing committee
- Caps in composition classes (17)
- Supplemental instruction (workshops and labs) for writing classes
- Training faculty to develop writing-intensive classes in the majors
- Enlarging the college's Writing Center as a center for tutoring and supplemental instruction in writing
- A portfolio system to allow student writing to be assessed and showcased

A review of the literature shows the importance of and strategies for the improvement of students' writing at the composition level, continuing the assessment of and addressing students' writing at the upper-level, the importance of faculty involvement at all levels, and the efficacy of a strong college writing center with its use of peer writing tutors/mentors to help students learn to write effectively. There is also strong support for an overall director for a plan to address writing college-wide at all levels.

During the first year of the plan, faculty across the college in all disciplines will participate in discussions on the subject of bridging the gap between composition-level writing and writing in the majors. Through workshops and small group discussions, and the use of expert consultants internal or external to the college faculty outside of the Language and Literature Department will learn what is taught in composition classes and how the foundation for good writing taught in the composition classes can be built upon in the upper-level courses. During the initial year the college will also conduct a national search for a writing specialist to direct the program, and a writing committee of at least three faculty will be formed. The college's writing center will be relocated and its staff and student tutors will be increased and trained to help provide a tangible focus and central location for the program. While the basic outline for subsequent years of the plan has been sketched out below, specific details will ultimately rest with the program director and writing committee.

Building on the initial discussions of Year 1, and with a director in place, second-year activities will address improving student writing at two levels: 1) basic writing skills taught in the general education composition courses required of all students, and 2) more advanced writing skills required in the college's major programs.

At the composition level, the plan will initiate several changes: enrollments in composition classes will be capped at 17 students. The Conference on College Composition and Communication recommends that writing classes should not contain more than 20 students and ideally, should be capped at 15. Early in the semester, composition instructors will identify students who are having trouble. Supplemental instruction in the form of writing workshops for at-risk students will furnish additional help in improving their writing. Entering their sophomore

year, students who do not achieve certain levels of writing competency at the general education level will receive additional instructional help in the form of workshops and/or writing labs.

Moving from the general education level to the major level students will enroll in specific writing intensive courses in each discipline. Working with a committee of faculty, the program director will develop workshops to train one or more faculty members from each department in developing courses and/or modifying existing courses within each major to include a writing-intensive approach. This strategy builds upon and moves beyond the composition experience by helping students learn the more advanced skills required of writing in the discipline. Over the four-year life of the plan, upper-level writing-intensive courses will be phased in department by department.

As in the composition classes, enrollment in each writing-intensive class at the upper level will be capped at 17 students. Faculty will be encouraged to identify early on students with difficulties in mastering the upper-level skills, and supplemental instruction in the form of workshops or labs attached to the classes will help improve their performance.

Students will enter examples of their writing from all levels into a portfolio system. The faculty writing committee, working with the program director, will assess the writing samples to determine the effectiveness of the plan. Beyond the improvements to student writing envisioned in the five-year writing QEP, it is the intent that the changes developed as part of the plan become a permanent part of the way that the college teaches and assesses writing.