OUR UNDERACHIEVING COLLEGES

A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More

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Princeton University Press
Princeton and Oxford
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Almost everyone agrees on the need to communicate effectively. Curriculum committees regularly affirm the importance of expressing oneself with clarity, precision, and, if possible, style and grace. So do business executives, law partners, and other employers. Students, too, share this opinion. In Richard Light’s lengthy interviews with 1,600 undergraduates, respondents mentioned improving their writing three times as often as any other educational goal.¹

LEARNING TO WRITE

Freshmen have never arrived at college with impressive writing skills. Even in the 1890s, when only a tiny, privileged minority went to college, a distinguished visiting committee concluded that “about 25 percent of the students now admitted to Harvard are unable to write their mother-tongue with the ease and freedom absolutely necessary to enable them to proceed advantageously in any college course.”² Since then, the problem has become more serious, as larger percentages of young people have enrolled in college, many of them from mediocre high schools and families in which English is not the native language. Even students from stronger schools may get little help with writing from teachers preoccupied with prepping their classes for high-stakes standardized tests.

Recognizing these deficiencies, university presidents and their faculties have long acknowledged a responsibility to teach students to write well. Coursework in English composition was obligatory a century ago even in colleges with the most elective curricula, and it remains so to this day in the vast majority of American colleges. No other single course claims as large a share of the time and attention of undergraduates. And yet, when it comes to implementing the writing requirement, few institutions have managed to do what is necessary to achieve success.

While willing to force students to take freshman composition, senior faculty have long been reluctant to teach such a course themselves. Professors in the sciences and social sciences quickly referred the task to their colleagues in the English department. Thereafter, in one college after another, the work was gradually handed down to lower and lower levels of the academic hierarchy. By the early twentieth century, senior faculty were shifting the responsibility to their younger, untenured colleagues. By the 1940s, junior faculty were passing the baton to graduate students. As freshman enrollments rose rapidly during the decades after World War II, English departments turned increasingly for their staffing needs to part-time adjunct instructors (usually would-be writers in need of income or Ph.D.s without a permanent academic job). By the 1990s, more than 95 percent of all compulsory writing classes in Ph.D.-granting English departments were taught by adjuncts or by graduate students. Only in small liberal arts colleges was it common to find such courses taught by tenured professors.

Teaching writing is hard, time-consuming work. As the Conference on College Composition and Communication has observed:

The improvement of an individual student’s writing requires persistent and frequent contact between teacher and stu-
students both inside and outside the classroom. It requires assigning far more papers than are usually assigned in other college classrooms; it requires reading them and commenting on them not simply to justify a grade but to offer guidance and suggestions for improvement, and it requires spending a great deal of time with individual students, helping them not just to improve particular papers but to understand fundamental principles of effective writing that will enable them to continue learning throughout their lives.

Unlike professors in typical lecture courses, who know next to nothing about how individual students are progressing, writing instructors are supposed to take an interest in the difficulties encountered by each and every member of their classes. While some students are a joy to teach and some even have a flair for writing, many have serious problems, not only in expressing their thoughts but also in their basic attitude toward learning. More than most college courses, freshman composition forces undergraduates to think for themselves and adjust to higher intellectual standards than they faced in high school. The challenge can be trying not only for students but for their composition teachers as well. The following description of a not-atypical freshman in a well-known state university gives a taste of the difficulties involved.

[Darla] sat in the back of the classroom the first day and tried to keep her mouth shut. When I addressed a direct question, she looked at me with a fixed smile and shook her head, remaining silent... Her writing was tortured and convoluted, and it worked as a smokescreen against anything she personally might have to say. She always came to my office when I asked her to, but only then, and she would do her best there to resist my attempts to find out more about the interesting hints of her ideas that had gotten through her self-censoring mechanisms. "What am I supposed to write in my journal?" was one of her favorite questions. However, the answer, "what you think of the material, what strikes you, what questions do you have," left her confused. She wanted an assignment that had an answer she could look up in a book.

It is hardly surprising that professors in English departments have shunned this kind of teaching. They are not hired to wrestle with such problems; their professional success depends on publishing works of literary criticism, and their pedagogic interests lie not in teaching composition but in lecturing on literature. Presidents and deans see little reason to deny them their wish, since graduate students and adjunct instructors can be hired to do the job for much less money.

The problem with this solution, of course, is that the quality of instruction often suffers. Most graduate students lack the experience to deal with the challenges of a basic composition course. Although they are more likely to receive some sort of training today than in years past, a week's orientation or, at best, a semester course on teaching composition is hardly preparation enough for the task of guiding freshmen coming from the overcrowded classrooms and indifferent instruction of many American high schools. Besides, graduate students have other concerns that matter to them more: finishing a thesis, mastering a specialty in English literature, finding a tenure-track job. Faculty advisors frequently warn them not to spend much time on their teaching lest they try too long before completing their degrees. Amid these competing pressures, freshmen in the writing course often lose out.

Adjunct lecturers bring problems of their own. Although some of them are accomplished writers and others have extensive teaching experience, many resent their low salaries...
and long hours and harbor little loyalty toward their employers. No wonder. They have little or no say in how their courses will be taught. Texts and syllabi are normally decided by others. They typically have no job security, no health benefits, no even an office in which to meet with students. They are the first to go when budgets must be cut. Often they are not even listed in college schedules by their own names but only by section numbers. Many of them—commonly known as "gypsies" or "freeway flyers"—can only make ends meet by holding down several part-time jobs at different universities, necessitating constant travel and causing even greater difficulties in giving individual attention to students. As one "freeway flyer" described her life in the early 1990s, "Typically, I taught sixteen hours per week—two semesters and the summer—averaging about $25,000 per year. I got incredibly burned out rushing from college to college, having to prepare anything up to five different courses per semester."

Day-to-day supervision over the freshman writing program is normally given to a full-time director. Directors may be specialists with Ph.D.s in composition, but most do not have tenured faculty positions and feel undervalued as a result. Their position is often anomalous, belonging neither to the faculty nor to the administration. Whatever their status, their job is not an easy one. Although they must recruit, monitor, and train a large teaching staff, ultimate control over the program is usually lodged not with them but with the chair of the English department or with a faculty committee. These professors often choose the texts and assign the graduate students to teach in the program, even though they do not teach composition themselves. Not surprisingly, this method of operation is keenly resented. As one director puts it: "The treatment of writing teachers in English departments has been a scandal for years, while the authority of composition directors has been consistently compromised to suit the interests of English graduate programs and faculty."

Chafing under such arrangements, some composition heads have managed to break away to form separate free-standing writing programs. But this arrangement is rarely a panacea; it often merely substitutes one set of unsympathetic authorities (the dean's office) for another (the English department). In either case, most directors have to cope with constant staff turnover, low morale, sudden, unpredictable fluctuations in student numbers, insufficient resources, and an abiding sense of being marginalized by the faculty and administration despite performing functions that are both demanding and essential.

No single course, however ably staffed and amply financed, can transform undergraduates into skilled writers. In this respect, the required composition course resembles a set of introductory golf lessons. Such instruction can help beginners acquire a basic competence, foster their enthusiasm for the sport, and give them the know-how and helpful advice that will allow them to keep on learning and improving. Real proficiency, however, requires sustained practice. Similarly, undergraduates will never learn to write with clarity, precision, and grace unless they have repeated opportunities to keep on writing and get prompt feedback from the faculty. This commonsense conclusion has been confirmed by Alexander Astin's massive study of student progress through college. After controlling for differences in intelligence and other factors, Astin found that seniors who reported substantial improvement in their writing had usually been given a chance to write numerous papers and essay exams and to receive ample feedback from instructors.

In recognition of these needs, many colleges in the 1970s began a new initiative called "Writing Across the Curricu-
By exposing them to the work of well-graded writing across the curriculum still exist in little more than one-third of all colleges. It is difficult to know what effect the teaching of composition—or the entire undergraduate experience—has had on the writing of college students. As veteran writing director Edward White acknowledges, "convincing empirical evidence of student improvement from composition instruction remains exceedingly rare." Some early studies in individual universities found no improvement at all, but these investigations used crude and now-discredited methods of measurement, such as counting the number of errors in student essays according to standard rules of grammar and syntax. Arriving at generally accepted measures of progress is difficult, since composition teachers often disagree fundamentally on what they should be trying to achieve. An instructor trying to teach poorly educated students how to compose business letters in grammatical English will measure progress far differently than a teacher in an elite liberal arts college hoping to help freshmen write with style and flair by exposing them to the work of great essayists.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, a few researchers have tried to estimate the effects on writing of the entire undergraduate experience, using evaluations that purport to measure the organization, clarity, and persuasiveness of student essays. Pascarella and Terenzini estimate that writing skills improve on average by 19 percentile points during college. (That is, seniors who entered with a proficiency in writing at the 50th percentile of their freshman cohort will reach a level equivalent to the 69th percentile of that cohort by the time they graduate.) It is not clear on what body of evidence this conclusion rests. One study, however, involving almost 3,000 students from 10 different colleges, compared the written and oral expressions of seniors and freshmen. Seniors scored moderately higher than freshmen, recording gains of 19 percentile points above the average for entering students. Another study by Dean Whitla compared seniors with freshmen at a community college, a liberal arts college, and a major research university. In all three institutions, after controlling for test scores and high school rank in class, seniors "composed more forceful and logical essays and made fewer syntactical mistakes than did freshmen." Interestingly, however, when Whitla broke down the results for the research university, he found that progress in writing was distributed most unevenly. Humanities majors made great progress, social science majors improved moderately, but students concentrating in science failed to improve or actually regressed.

Nancy Sommers has cast further light on the subject by studying the writings of some 400 Harvard undergraduates from their freshman through their senior years. In keeping with Whitla's earlier observations, some students improved much more than others. By and large, progress seemed to depend most of all on how much writing students did, how much specific feedback they received, whether they wrote about something that they knew a lot about, and whether their subject let them bring their own intellectual interests into their compositions. A remarkable 86 percent of the
seniors felt that completing a thesis in their major was the most important single experience in improving their writing. More than 80 percent agreed that giving more feedback was the most effective way to help students become better writers.

These findings help to explain why students in the humanities appear to make greater progress than science majors. At most colleges, humanities concentrators complete many more papers than their classmates majoring in the sciences. As undergraduates themselves confirm, nothing improves writing more than constant practice.

Studies such as those just described are open to dispute because of differences of opinion about the criteria used to measure proficiency. To avoid this difficulty, some researchers have simply asked recent graduates to give their own estimates of how much they have improved. In a study of more than 30,000 graduates of 26 selective colleges (both public and private as well as liberal arts colleges and research universities), William Bowen and I asked respondents to estimate the effects of college on a long list of capabilities. According to this survey (which was used for a study of race-sensitive admissions), 48 percent of black graduates and 40 percent of their white classmates felt that college had contributed "a great deal" to their "ability to write clearly and effectively." In another study, covering 24,000 students from a more broadly representative sample of American colleges, only 27.6 percent of the respondents in their senior year felt that their writing skills were "much stronger" as a result of their undergraduate experience. These results tend to confirm the observation that college helps some but by no means all students to improve their writing substantially.

However one chooses to interpret these findings, there is clearly much room for improvement. Employers grumble incessantly about the poor writing of the college graduates they hire, and "better communication skills" regularly tops the list of improvements firms would like to see among their new employees. Entire companies have been formed to serve large corporations by improving the writing of the recent college graduates they employ.

If writing is so important, why don't universities take greater pains to see that all students are well taught by competent, properly trained instructors? There are practical reasons, of course. Regular faculty have no professional interest in teaching composition courses and look upon them chiefly as a means to support their graduate students; presidents and deans save lots of money by using low-cost instructors; and freshmen are too new to the university to complain. These reasons tell part of the story. Nevertheless, the explanation is a bit too cynical. Surely faculty and administration must have some basis for thinking that the staffing policies they have adopted are reasonable.

The most likely explanation is that campus officials and even English departments think of teaching introductory composition as a relatively simple task to show students how to eliminate errors and careless habits so that they acquire sufficient competence to perform college-level work. If writing is merely a mechanical process of putting one's thoughts on paper, and if teaching composition is simply a matter of "purging students of bad habits," why not assign the task to graduate students and part-time adjuncts?

It is hardly surprising that deans and faculties think of composition in this way. Full-time composition specialists did much the same for many decades. Until the 1960s and 1970s, the dominant method for teaching writing focused on correcting mistakes. Such research as there was on composition preoccupied itself almost entirely with searching for a truly objective, mechanical method for grading writing
based on errors of spelling, grammar, sentence construction, and the like.

In recent decades, however, composition specialists have come to take a far different view of how writing should be taught. Researchers find that simply emphasizing the correction of errors has no effect on improving writing and may even inhibit creativity and keep students from developing an authentic style. Writing professionals no longer view composition as a mechanical process of turning previously formed ideas into suitable prose but as something inseparable from thinking itself. Undergraduates tend to agree, often looking upon their writing as a uniquely important stimulus to thought. As Marilyn Sternglass describes it: "Repeatedly, students [report] that writing alone or listening to lectures did not engage them deeply enough for them to remember facts and ideas nor to analyze them. Only through writing, perhaps through the condensation and analysis of classroom notes or through the writing of drafts of papers that required them to integrate theory with evidence, did they achieve the insights that moved them to complex reasoning about the topic under consideration." Nancy Sommers’s study of undergraduates confirms and amplifies these observations. More than 70 percent of the seniors in her survey felt that writing had been either “important” or “very important” in helping them to synthesize ideas and information, to think critically, to gain in-depth knowledge of a field, and, of course, to express ideas effectively.

As professional compositionists began to regard thinking and writing as closely intertwined, they came to view teaching composition as a much more difficult task, especially with those students whose prior instruction was least adequate. No one described the challenge more eloquently than Mina Shaughnessy, drawing on many years of teaching writing to students, at City College of New York. Far from a simple, mechanical process of eliminating errors, Shaughnessy found "such a complexity of problems and possible solutions (and such large territories of pedagogical ignorance) that a search for the answer begins to seem an inefficient way to start thinking about a course (or courses) in basic writing. . . . Here the teacher, confronted by what at first appears to be a hopeless tangle of errors and inadequacies, must learn to see below the surface of these failures the intelligence and linguistic aptitudes of his students." In trying to do so, instructors must constantly grapple with “the reluctant, subtle phenomenon of the written language itself, which frequently evades our strictures, slips between our strategies, or grows in spite of them, defying us to explain precisely why a student fails or succeeds.”

Despite these difficulties, Shaughnessy insisted that there were patterns underlying student errors, patterns that could be analyzed and ultimately overcome. Her work gave impetus to researchers and thoughtful teachers and helped to professionalize the field. Soon books and articles on the teaching of writing proliferated, spurred by the appearance of graduate programs of communication and the accompanying growth of Ph.D.s in rhetoric and composition. Full-time specialists emerged and began to explore the “complexity of problems and possible solutions.” Today the process of teaching composition is a topic bristling with controversy and debate, making the subject seem vastly more complicated and contested than it was only 30 years ago.

For decades, writing programs were split between those who conceived of writing as a practical skill for use in business and humanities who felt that students should learn to write by studying great works of literature. In the 1970s, however, new strategies began to appear. Chief among them was a shift from emphasizing “product” (i.e., finished papers) to
encouraging “process”—the sequence of steps leading from first conceiving of a subject to developing it through a series of drafts to eventual completion. Under the new approach, the writing teacher became less of a critic and proofreader and more of a coach or facilitator. Authenticity and invention took precedence over adherence to formal rules of discourse. Revision and more revision became the recommended path to a finished essay.

The emphasis on process opened the door to a flock of new theories drawing on cognitive psychology, cultural studies, anthropology, linguistics, and other disciplines. Various teaching methods were proposed. Some compositionists thought instructors should assign paper topics; others believed that students should choose their own. Some favored exercises in “free writing”—overcoming inhibitions by putting down anything that came into one’s head. Others experimented with group exercises in which students critiqued each other’s work.

Disagreements also arose over the proper goals of writing courses. Instructors continued to argue whether the aim should be to teach students to express themselves with grace and style or to help them learn to write business letters and other communications of a practical, vocational nature. Some urged that teachers emphasize argumentation and persuasion; others preferred having students learn to write for different academic disciplines. Some taught only writing, while others felt that composition courses should also cultivate the arts of oral expression and even listening.

As time went on, compositionists steeped in postmodern literary theory proposed even more ambitious goals. Feminist scholars spoke of developing an écriture féminine as a needed antidote to “patriarchal and phallocentric” prose. Theorists on the left saw in the required composition course an opportunity to educate students to be active, critical citizens by teaching them to recognize and resist the subtle efforts of the power structure to use language to make the public accept the oppression of women, minorities, poor people, and other exploited groups. As one such instructor put it, teaching writing should be “an active means to transform the existing social inequities of commodity capitalism.”

Unfortunately the proliferation of rival theories has not been accompanied by a corresponding effort to test how well the different methods work, nor do the theorists seem much interested in empirical work of this sort. Protesting this tendency, veteran compositionists Ray and Susan Wallace complain: “We have too many competing theories and not enough people sufficiently trained in research design actually trying to test these theories’ hypotheses.” As a result, the authors claim, “the chilling truth is that we are no closer to knowing how to teach writing than we were at the beginning of the process movement.”

What can one make of all the debate about teaching and administering college writing programs? It is easy to be distracted by the inflated rhetoric from some participants in the discussion, especially the postmodern theorists. Yet such writings seem to have little practical effect on the daily

*For example, James Berlin characterizes the postmodern composition teacher as “a transformative intellectual . . . a force for progressive change everywhere in society”; *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures* (1996), pp. 112–13. Patricia Bizzell adds that “our teaching task is not only to convey information but also to transform students’ whole world view”; quoted in Elizabeth Sommers, “Political Impediments to Virtual Reality,” in Gail E. Hawisher and Paul LeBlanc (eds.), *Reimagining Computers and Composition: Teaching and Research in the Virtual Age* (1992), pp. 5–4. To Susan Miller, the composition classroom is “an active existing site for dismantling particularly troublesome versions of hegemonic ‘common sense’—particularly exclusivity, humiliation, repression, and injustice*;
realities of classroom instruction around the country. Many writing teachers are probably unaware of the controversies that swirl around composition theory. Rather than take sides in the debate over emphasizing process or concentrating on the product, most instructors appear to do both. Some even continue stressing rules of spelling, grammar, and punctuation, even though this method has been widely discredited by researchers.

A more serious problem arises from the gulf that divides composition professionals, on the one hand, who see writing as a formidable pedagogical challenge involving “a critical substantive act of thinking and invention central to all fields,” and those administrators and professors, on the other, who still tend to regard writing instruction as “a narrowly defined concern with punctuation, spelling, rules of grammar and mechanics.” Most people who have actually tried to teach writing skills to undergraduates would probably sympathize with the first formulation. Nevertheless, so long as the latter view remains, buoyed by its practical advantages both for administrators and for English departments, writing courses are unlikely to receive the support they need to contribute fully to a proper undergraduate education. Moreover, if most colleges do little to encourage good writing beyond the required, introductory course, large numbers of students will continue to graduate without being able to write much better than they did when they arrived as freshmen.

How can colleges improve their writing programs? A logical way to begin is to define as clearly as possible what the college seeks to achieve. Although this point may seem too obvious to bear repeating, longtime composition professionals report that “most writing classes— even entire writing programs— rarely state clearly the outcomes for the course and then match course structure, assignment, and texts for the achievement of those outcomes.”

Defining goals is not as simple a matter as it might appear. As the previous discussion bears out, the differences of opinion on the subject are surprisingly wide. Objectives range from eliminating grammatical errors to inoculating students against the propaganda of an oppressive state. Choosing among these competing aims is not a task to be left to individual instructors, nor to writing program administrators, nor even to the English department. The entire college is responsible for the writing of its graduates, and every department has a stake in the results. Discussing the subject in a facultywide forum should curb the tendency of some instructors to adopt purposes of their own that almost certainly do not reflect the wishes of the faculty as a whole. It may also help professors and administrators to appreciate the difficulties involved in teaching undergraduates to write and thereby muster support for doing more to strengthen the quality of the composition program.

Once the goals are clearly defined, the next essential step is to assemble a competent staff of instructors for the basic course. Success does not necessarily require enlisting regular faculty members for the purpose. Professors of English are not trained to teach composition and would rarely throw themselves enthusiastically into the work even if they could be persuaded to take it on. Rather than trying to force reluctant scholars to accept responsibility, colleges can attempt to recruit first-rate, well-paid professional compositionists or experienced writers and intellectuals with a demonstrable ability to teach.

Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition (1991), p. 187. Andrea Lunsford concludes by observing that compositionists “are dangerous precisely because we threaten the equilibrium, the status quo”; quoted in Sommers, p. 44.
Ideally all teachers of basic writing would be full-time professionals. Because the course requires so many instructors, however, such a goal may be beyond the financial reach of many institutions, at least in the short run. Nevertheless every college can try to assemble a central core of experienced, properly compensated, full-time teachers to provide continuity and accumulate insight and skill that they can convey to the graduate students and adjunct professors recruited to the program. Whomever the college employs, teaching loads must be reasonable enough to allow sufficient time for meeting individually with students. In addition, all new instructors will need prior training in the objectives of the program, the methods and materials used to achieve these goals, and the pedagogical challenges involved. Once classes are under way, those in charge of the course can evaluate every section and weed out ineffective teachers, at least until they receive further training and improve enough to warrant another trial.

As previously mentioned, good writing—like critical thinking—will never be a skill that students can achieve or retain through a single course. However successful the basic program may become, sustained improvement will require repeated practice. Fortunately, for many students in the humanities—and often in the social sciences as well—practice is not a problem; they already have to write a number of essays and term papers. The same is not true for students in the sciences, however, who often find that good writing is not valued and that even expressing themselves in complete sentences wastes time that could be spent more profitably figuring out the answers to assigned problems. Insufficient practice is undoubtedly a major reason why undergraduates, especially in the sciences, often fail to improve their writing during their college years.

Even students who have many papers to write may make limited progress unless their instructors give them ample, timely feedback, not only on the substance of the papers but also on the quality of the writing. In an ideal world, professors would provide such comments as a matter of course. In reality, however, many professors do not pay close attention to student writing, nor are they necessarily trained to attend to the subtler problems of composition. Often they do not even read student papers themselves but leave the task to teaching assistants who are typically less qualified than they to evaluate student writing.

Adequate feedback will rarely come about through exhortation from on high; more substantial efforts are needed to engage faculty members from a variety of disciplines in reading and critiquing student papers. As a practical matter, few professors will accept this added responsibility for very long or perform it conscientiously and well unless they have adequate training and receive appropriate rewards in the form of extra salary or added teaching credit. Since competent writing is so important, the investment seems well worth the cost.

Efforts to improve student writing are unlikely to make sustained progress unless campus officials can evaluate the

*Regardless of the success achieved by introductory courses and whatever the supplementary teaching received from other faculty members, some students will continue to experience writing problems. Thus a further step in constructing a proper program is the creation of a special office, or writing center, to which such students can report to obtain individual assistance. No one should underestimate the difficulty of the work assigned to such centers. Diagnosing a student's problems and figuring out how to overcome them are functions that demand considerable insight, experience, and skill. They are tasks requiring well-trained specialists rather than graduate students in need of extra income or staff members with other responsibilities. Once again, the importance of effective writing justifies the necessary cost.
results on a regular basis. At present, few colleges know whether the instruction they provide actually changes student writing for the better. Few even know how much students write, department by department, throughout their undergraduate careers. Rather than remain in this state, faculties could determine how much writing students in different departments actually do, what sort of feedback they receive, and how much they improve during their four years of college. Having agreed on the goals they are trying to achieve, faculties could also start to evaluate the effects of different teaching methods. Already researchers have discovered that many writing instructors still teach in ways that have long since been shown to be less effective than other well-known methods. Rather than let outdated practices continue, faculties could initiate a process of enlightened trial and error to test different methods on comparable groups of students in order to encourage those that work best and weed out those that are demonstrably ineffective.

The fact that so few faculties have taken the basic steps just described underscores the troubled state of student writing in America’s colleges. While some programs are outstanding and some instructors work hard to help their students progress, the field as a whole suffers from widespread neglect. In the words of Edward White, “Responsible administration of a university writing program is a test of the institution’s integrity, a test few institutions can pass at the minimum competency level.”29 Most deans, English departments, and senior faculties continue to underestimate the difficulty of teaching composition. As a result, they have consigned the task to graduate students and part-time teachers and let them function without clear goals, without adequate funding or proper training, and without determining whether their efforts are producing tangible results. In doing so, they illustrate the all-too-frequent tendency to pronounce a goal important enough to justify a required course without devoting the effort or the resources needed to make the enterprise a success.

ORAL COMMUNICATION

Rhetoric—the art of speaking effectively—has roots that extend even further back in history than writing. Oratory in ancient Greece was a vital part of civic life, and one that aspiring leaders had to master. Conceiving of public speaking chiefly as a means of persuasion, Aristotle codified the subject into a set of basic principles that still command attention today. The rhetorical tradition continued in Rome, where its definition was broadened beyond persuasion to become “the art of speaking well.” With its stature burnished by noted orators, such as Cicero, Seneca, and Quintilian, rhetoric came to be included among the seven essential subjects of education (the “trivium” and “quadrivium”). The Renaissance brought renewed interest not merely in public speaking but in more intimate forms of conversation as well. Machiavelli wrote of the verbal tactics by which aspiring rulers might acquire and maintain power.30 As time went on, other writers discussed the proper forms of communication at court, in the salon, and even at the banquet table. Still others explored the art of elocution, the “just and graceful management of the voice, countenance and gesture in speaking.”31

Speaking in public was also central to undergraduate education in colonial America. Its importance came naturally to the earliest colleges that were founded with the express intent of supplying their surrounding communities with “teachers and preachers.” In fact, undergraduates in the eighteenth century had much more practice speaking pub-
licly than most college students today. Through repeated classroom recitations and disputations under the scrutiny of instructors, students in those early days grew accustomed to expressing and defending their ideas in front of others. Debating clubs and literary societies were also popular on many campuses, giving undergraduates added opportunities to hone their forensic skills.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, public speaking received fresh intellectual energy from psychologists interested in using scientific methods to explore the impact of the spoken word on listening audiences. Researchers inspired by behaviorism began to study such questions as the effect on listeners of making threats and arousing fear or the degree to which the persuasiveness of speech might vary according to the order in which arguments were presented.

Shortly before World War I, seventeen teachers of public speaking broke off from the national association of English professors to form their own separate professional group. From this modest beginning, the field of oral communication gradually grew to embrace all manner of other subjects connected with speech. In some universities, entire schools of communication emerged to serve a wide variety of speech-related occupations, including radio, television, dramatic acting, even political consulting. As Brian Spitzberg and William Cupach declared triumphantly, "the relevant domain has extended from the traditional conception of persuasion to such divergent areas as mental disorder, problem-solving, relationship maintenance, and identity management."32

In the past 25 years, undergraduate enrollments in public speaking courses have enjoyed rapid growth, much of it in response to pressures from alumni and complaints from employers about the poor communication skills of many college graduates. In one survey of several hundred liberal arts institutions, 86 percent claimed to offer some form of communications studies.33 The percentage of private four-year colleges requiring such instruction rose from 25 percent in 1975 to 46 percent in 2000.34 One accrediting body, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, has made competence in speaking a requirement for all its member colleges.35

Notwithstanding its recent success, oral communication has not yet gained as prominent a place in the curriculum as writing has enjoyed. While the vast majority of colleges require at least a basic composition course, instruction in speech is still mandatory in fewer than half of all undergraduate institutions. It is not altogether clear why this should be so, since proficiency in oral discourse would seem to be as important to life and work as good writing, the more so now that speech is commonly defined to include interpersonal and small-group communication as well as public speaking. Perhaps the teaching of writing is accorded special importance in universities because students are graded on the basis of written papers and exams and rarely on their contributions in class. It is even more likely that writing takes precedence because it tends more than speech to require careful, probing thought, the process that always commands pride of place in the modern university.

Although the teaching of speech and writing would appear to have much in common, the two fields have developed in very different ways. Writing instructors emphasize the process of expressing one's thoughts and feelings in a clear, engaging, and authentic manner. Much emphasis is placed on conceiving what one wants to say and polishing the expression of these thoughts through the preparation of successive drafts. In contrast, since the early days of rhetoric in ancient Greece, instructors of speech have been much
more concerned with the role of listeners and the way in which they react to various forms of oral expression. To a greater extent than writing, therefore, speech has been conceived of as an interactive process requiring not only clarity and eloquence but also sensitivity to one's audience, attentive listening, and continuous adaptation to verbal and nonverbal cues from those to whom one speaks. Thus, while teachers of written and oral communication have both come to regard their subject as a process, the former conceive it as a subjective process through which individuals develop their thoughts and convert them into writing while the latter view process as the interaction of the speaker with other people.

By emphasizing the relation between speakers and their audience, the study of speech has expanded its scope more widely than the field of writing. Since words enter into all manner of human encounters, almost anything in the realm of interpersonal relations can be included: racial problems, conflict resolution, negotiation, counseling, marital relations, and more. Gestures, facial expressions, and other forms of nonverbal expression have come to be legitimate subjects of study along with the spoken word. The use of social science methods to explore the effects of speech has added a further dimension to the field, giving it an empirical base for which there is no real counterpart in the typical writing program.

There is much variety in the role assigned to oral communication in college curricula. As Sherwyn Morreale and Philip Backlund have observed, "were you to ask a random sample of [communications] experts for a description of the ideal curriculum, you likely would get as many different responses as responses in your sample." While many institutions require all students to take a basic course in the subject, others do not or require it only of communications majors. Some introductory courses focus almost entirely on public speaking, while others include interpersonal relations and attentive listening as well. As has been true of writing, a number of colleges have launched programs of "speaking across the curriculum," recognizing that the basic course needs reinforcement in other classes if its teachings are to take root and have lasting effect. In contrast to writing, however, some of these colleges have conceived of speaking across the curriculum not as a supplement to the basic course but as a substitute. This approach has understandably brought howls of protest from professors of communication, who point out that their subject requires highly qualified instructors and that no college would ever dream of instituting "chemistry across the curriculum" in place of courses taught by trained chemists.

Instructors vary greatly in the ways in which they teach basic courses in speech. Some emphasize skills training, with much opportunity for practice and heavy use of audioand videotaping; others treat the course as a study of rhetorical theory and research on the effects of various kinds of speech on listeners. Those with a more positivist bent approach the subject as a science, emphasizing the work of empirical researchers, while others from the rhetorical wing treat speaking humanistically, regarding it more as an art. Some believe in teaching public speaking "holistically," while others begin by breaking the process down into its constituent parts before trying to put them all together. Amid these differences, however, most basic courses in oral communication share one troubling feature with required courses in writing. In both cases, the bulk of instruction is carried out not by tenured professors but by graduate student assistants or by junior faculty.

The effects of speech instruction are hard to gauge. Colleges and educational researchers have made even fewer
efforts to measure the progress students make in public speaking than in assessing improvements in writing, perhaps because arriving at a convincing, objective test of speaking competence would be a formidable undertaking in itself. The most comprehensive study used the ACT College Outcome Measures Program to compare the speaking of 1,389 freshmen and 1,366 seniors at 10 different colleges. This study revealed a gain of 24.5 percentile points in speaking ability (i.e., an average senior will have raised his performance from the 50th to the 75th percentile of the entering freshman cohort). 59 A more subjective evaluation is contained in the finding by Alexander Astin and his colleagues comparing student surveys from the late 1980s and the late 1990s on how much seniors think they have changed during their college years. The results showed that 24.6 percent of the students reported substantial improvement in their public speaking ability and that the percentage rose more from the 1980s to the 1990s than for almost any other competence. 60 As far as one can tell, this surge reflected the rapid growth of enrollment in public speaking courses more than any dramatic improvement in the teaching methods used.

Despite its recent enrollment gains, the field of oral communication, like its sister program in writing, continues to occupy a lowly status on most university campuses. Why this should be so merits some explanation. After all, speaking articulately and persuasively has obvious value to students. One Wall Street Journal poll of large companies revealed that communication was the most important of all competencies to employers, who frequently complain about the inarticulateness of the college graduates they hire. 61 Surveys also reveal that fear of speaking in front of others is the single most prevalent form of anxiety among adults. 62 Since well-taught courses in oral communication can probably respond effectively both to student fears and to employer needs, one might have thought that instructors who could produce these results would enjoy greater respect on campus. 43 Yet respect from colleagues is precisely what professors of speech rarely receive in the United States.

One can only speculate on why the field of oral communication does not enjoy a higher status. The problem may stem from a perception that communication lacks a distinctive intellectual method or discipline of its own—a sense that its techniques are largely borrowed from psychology, linguistics, and other established disciplines and that its greatest intellectual advances have been made by professors from other departments. Part of the explanation may also lie in a suspicion that courses in oral communication lack rigor and intellectual substance, for though faculty publications in the field are packed with theory building and empirical testing, many of the basic texts and courses seem to rely more on simple common sense than on new knowledge and thought-provoking insights. Conceivably public speaking suffers from the fact that the most useful teaching involves the transmission of skills, a type of instruction too practical and too lacking in intellectual depth to command much respect in most academic circles. The situation is not helped by the annoying habit of some communications professors to label aspects of their subject using words such as “impression management,” “relationship maintenance,” and “conversation management,” terms calculated to grate on the nerves of any self-respecting humanist.

In the end, therefore, despite its longer history, greater breadth of subject matter, and firmer empirical base, oral communication suffers from problems of academic status similar to those of its near relative, writing. Faculty members in both fields feel undervalued by other Arts and Sciences
disciplines and victimized by a widespread impression that communication is a subject without much intellectual rigor and depth. In both cases, they have responded by seeking independent status and developing ambitious programs of scholarship and research. In this respect, at least, communications professors have probably enjoyed more success than their writing colleagues. For both fields, however, the strategy has come at a cost to the quality of teaching. As professors of speech and writing have fled from basic courses to research and advanced seminars, most colleges have allowed budgetary pressures to override the interests of their students by entrusting introductory classes to a host of inexperienced, loosely supervised instructors.

This is a disappointing state of affairs and a shabby testament to the reigning priorities in the modern university. All undergraduates need to speak and write with confidence and style. Under competent guidance, almost every student can make substantial progress toward this goal. Indeed, few courses in the college curriculum have as much potential to offer lasting benefits to so many undergraduates. For this reason, whether instructors in basic speech and composition courses are classified as professors or given some other title, they should be carefully selected, properly trained, generously compensated, and respected for the valuable work they do. Any colleges that can achieve this state will be much the better for it, especially if they are willing to experiment with new methods of instruction, assess the results, and gradually develop better ways of helping students to improve.

5 | LEARNING TO THINK

With all the controversy over the college curriculum, it is impressive to find faculty members agreeing almost unanimously that teaching students to think critically is the principal aim of undergraduate education. The reasons for the consensus are quite clear. Merely accumulating information is of little value to students. Facts are soon forgotten, and the sheer volume of information has grown to the point that it is impossible to cover all the important material or even to agree on what is most essential. Concepts and theories have little value unless one can apply them to new situations. The ability to think critically—to ask pertinent questions, recognize and define problems, identify the arguments on all sides of an issue, search for and use relevant data, and arrive in the end at carefully reasoned judgments—is the indispensable means of making effective use of information and

"Unfortunately there is no universally accepted definition of "critical thinking". One of the more precise definitions is that of the American Philosophical Association: "Purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual and methodological considerations on which a judgment is based"; Critical Thinking: A Statement of Expert Consensus for Purposes of Educational Assessment and Instruction (1990). Authors often use the term more loosely, however, to refer to analytical thinking, problem solving, reflective judgment, applied logic, or practical reasoning. Further complexity arises from the fact that there is no universal set of intellectual skills appropriate for thinking about all kinds of problems. Different subjects often have their own specialized methods of defining and analyzing problems, which may not be helpful in addressing problems in other fields."