

## **Approaches for the Gordian Knot of staffing: three proposals**

In the Spring of 2005, the Academic Standards subcommittee of the Curriculum Council requested specific staffing proposals to promote a discussion by the full faculty. This report draws on an earlier report, “Revisiting Gateway: Issues and Recommendations,” from December 2004. “Revisiting Gateway” provides a 13-page overview of our current staffing structure and reviews some of the challenges it presents. A copy of the report remains on the Mellon Center web site at:

[http://www2.iwu.edu/melloncenter/geneduc/as\\_final\\_report-1.pdf](http://www2.iwu.edu/melloncenter/geneduc/as_final_report-1.pdf)

Three proposals are discussed here. Proposal I institutionalizes our present staffing practice with some minor modifications. Proposal II provides a more prescriptive approach to staffing, while Proposal III outlines the staffing for a portfolio requirement. Each sets forth a discrete approach to staffing, but also contain elements that might be combined into a hybrid approach. For instance, faculty might adopt a variant of the “Carleton Model” in which there is no required first-year writing course, per se, but an emphasis on each student combining their writing experiences in a portfolio. Staffing for a portfolio system would depend heavily on the recommendations of Proposal III. Another approach would integrate the portfolio system with existing writing requirements (e.g. the Gateway Colloquium/ First-Year Seminar, Writing Intensive courses, etc.). Staffing for such a system would combine elements of Proposal I/Proposal III or Proposal II/Proposal III.

More than anything, these proposals are presented with a view to encouraging faculty discussion. Since none of these proposals will be passed without amendment, it will be essential for the faculty to discuss the elements of each after the Fall Faculty Conference with their colleagues in departments, schools, and divisions.

### **Proposal I: Codify the Status Quo**

The current process of staffing the Gateway Colloquium—referred to as a “non-process” in the staffing report of December 2004—approaches its 10-year anniversary. Faculty and administrators have expressed persistent concerns over the process, so its longevity must be attributed to inertia and the costs of reforming it rather than its efficiency, fairness, or, certainly, its popularity. The system rests on an central assumption of market economics: individualistic, self-interested behavior (from Gateway Volunteers) will, when aggregated, provide an essential collective good (the Gateway Program). After a decade of testing this assumption, there seems to be sufficient evidence to question its validity.

An essential advantage of the current system is its flexibility. Departments and schools submit their staffing preferences in the Spring along with their other course offerings. Since the number of Gateway volunteers has met the needs of the incoming class only once in 10 years, the central administration then works with individual departments to identify the additional sections that are required to seat the first-year students. For a decade, this process has identified the requisite number of instructors for the program

without any collective input from the faculty, either from a vote of the full faculty or from input by the faculty's representative bodies.

One useful modification of our current system would be to allow full-time visiting faculty to teach our first-year writing course. Many departments struggle to offer colloquia when their colleagues take a research sabbatical. In many cases, the faculty hired as sabbatical replacements are well positioned to teach a first-year writing course. This modest amendment of our staffing policy stops well short of the exploitative adjunct pools used to teach writing at many peer and aspirant institutions.

It is likely that the present process can persist into the foreseeable future with or without this minor revision. To continue the current practice, however, the faculty should identify and discuss the costs of such a system. The 2004 staffing report discusses how the current system negatively affects the relationship between faculty and administrators in academic affairs and, by extension, affects our system of shared governance. If, in fact, the current practice is the process favored by the faculty, then approval in the form of a resolution is preferable than accepting the system by default.

## **Proposal II: Staffing Formula**

Faculty have discussed a more prescriptive staffing approach since the introduction of the Gateway Colloquium in the mid-1990s. To address the uncertainty and ad hoc nature inherent in Proposal I, the faculty might choose to work with administrators to craft a stable staffing scheme for a vote by the full faculty. It should be noted that a staffing formula could be applied to the Gateway Colloquium or to any required first-year writing course.

The benefits of such a staffing system are clear. First, the instability of the present system would be minimized. A stable staffing scheme would allow chairs and school directors to plan their schedules in advance without the specter of a last-minute request from Holmes Hall to replace an course with an additional Gateway Colloquium. Second, a stable staffing scheme would minimize concerns over resources and might instead provide opportunities for faculty and administrators to concentrate on writing pedagogy, linkages among our writing courses, and writing in the majors.

Of course, the specification of a staffing formula remains the primary obstacle to its creation. The essential task of a formula is to establish indicators of faculty work or faculty productivity that, in turn, provide guidelines for assigning writing courses. The existing literature on measuring faculty workload comes principally from the experiences of larger institutions, especially large state institutions who must explain their work to state legislatures and state bureaucracy.<sup>1</sup> These bodies measure faculty work almost solely in terms of contact hours with students. But, as indicated in the American Association of University Professor's 2000 *Statement on Faculty Workload*, measures of

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent review of these indicators from the Illinois Board of Higher Education, see the IBHE 2004 Performance Report at <http://www.ibhe.state.il.us/PerformanceIndicators/PerfReport/2004/default.htm>.

“credit generating activity” make highly imperfect indicators of the work faculty invest in their teaching.

As one might expect, the prospect of a staffing formula has attracted acute interest among our IWU faculty colleagues. There exists, to put it mildly, very little agreement on how to operationalize faculty workload at IWU, since accurately measuring our work would go beyond credit hours/FTE, majors/FTE, Gen Ed credit hours/FTE. Colleagues in the social sciences and humanities cite the abundance of other writing-rich courses in their curricula for which they should be given credit, while faculty in the natural sciences highlight the labor-intensive nature of laboratory courses. Our colleagues in the School of Nursing, School of Music, and Educational Studies (among others) probably log more student contact hours than those of us in other disciplines.

For these reasons and possibly others, liberal arts institutions do not depend solely on these rigid criteria for staffing of their writing programs. Instead, it seems that administrators depend on a more holistic assessment of faculty workload that are then discussed and revised with representative faculty bodies. The advantage of a staffing formula for a first-year writing course, then, is less as a rigid algorithm than as a catalyzing agent for dialogue between administrators and faculty.<sup>2</sup>

Hence, a stable staffing formula could serve as a mechanism for reengaging chairs, school directors, and administrators on the staffing issue. The following formula, then, is a starting point for what must be an ongoing dialogue. Posted are the number of first-year writing courses, whether Gateway or first-year seminar, that would be offered by each department and school. The figures are for the average number of sections offered over a three-year period. For example, during a three-year period Mathematics/Computer Science would offer two Gateway colloquia for two of the years, but the third year would offer only one. This proposal provides an average of 39+ colloquia each year, which is enough to seat our average entering class. If our enrollment management models change, obviously, we could make adjustments.

A faculty vote could also approve full-time visitors to teach Gateway, which would make the proposed staffing levels easier to accommodate. No matter what amendments are offered, Proposal II will require ongoing discussion among the chairs, school directors, and central administration, which will make adjustments easier. There will be inevitable short-term staffing issues which will prevent a department or school from providing their expected allocation in a given year. Proposal II, however, offers a mechanism for ensuring that other departments can be assured of compensation for providing additional sections over and above their expected allocation in a given year.

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<sup>2</sup> These observations come from interviews conducted in the drafting of “Revisiting Gateway” and discussions with administrators and faculty attending AAC&U and American Conference of Academic Deans meetings between 2002-2005.

<b>Department or School</b>	<b>Average # of Colloquia/year</b>
School of Art	0.3
School of Theatre Arts	1.6
School of Music	1.6
School of Nursing	2
Biology Department	2
Business Administration	2
Chemistry	1.3
Economics	1.3
Educational Studies	1.6
English	5
Hispanic Studies	1
History	3
Mathematics/Computer Science	1.6
MCLL	1.6
Philosophy	2.3
Physics	1.6
Political Science	3
Psychology	2.3
Religion	2.3
Sociology/Anthropology	2

### **Proposal III: Portfolio Program**

The curricular strengths of a portfolio program are discussed in the report by Academic Standards: it extends the logic of writing-across-the-curriculum by empowering students to collect their writing experiences and reflect on them. Writing instruction, then, would be distributed throughout the curriculum, but identified as such and supported with administrative and technical support.

Carleton College has the most mature version of this system and requires no first-year writing course, per se, but instead requires that students take a “writing-rich” course in the first year. These courses include writing assignments as a significant part of the curriculum and are flagged in the university catalogue. [See the Academic Standards Report for additional details on a portfolio system.]

Unless the portfolio requirements include a first-year writing course, concerns over our writing course offerings will be reduced. Some of the faculty resources currently devoted to the Gateway Colloquium could be reallocated to writing courses in the major, courses for May Term, and other curricular needs. The resource constraints of a portfolio requirement would instead concentrate on two aspects of the program: collecting/archiving the papers and the holistic reading of the portfolios. The collection/archiving of papers will require a staff person to manage the computer software employed to archive the student portfolios.

The principal resource constraint of a portfolio requirement will be the compensation for readers of the student portfolios.<sup>3</sup> Readers require an initial three-hour session to review the assessment rubric and harmonize the faculty reader’s expectations. Conservatively, we can estimate one hour of faculty time per portfolio or eight portfolios per day. With a portfolio cohort of 525, then, 12 faculty readers could complete the work in eight days. Even with generous compensation, then, the entire program would cost a fraction of the current cost of the first-year advising program.

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<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this discussion, I use the portfolio parameters outlined in the AS report. Changes in the requirements of the portfolio would obviously affect the resources necessary to support it. The specifics of this section draw on Joel Haefner’s experience at Carleton College and conversations with Carol Rutz, Director of the Writing Program at Carleton.