A very-belated brief report from
The CAS Task Force on Writing and Speaking

Submitted by Paulette Bierzychudek, December 28, 2005

This Task Force was created by then-Dean of the College Jane Atkinson. We met weekly for three semesters, from January 2000 to April 2001.

Members: Paulette Bierzychudek (chair), Dinah Dodds, Kurt Fosso, Micha Grudin, Matt Levinger, Jean Ward, and Ben Westervelt.

Our charge:
a) what are our shared standards for the writing and speaking abilities of our students?
b) how do we determine that our students meet these standards?
c) how do we discharge our collective responsibility for instructing students in writing and speaking?
d) how do (or should) we prepare faculty for such instruction?
e) how do we ensure that students encounter "significant writing requirements" across the curriculum? Of what do these requirements consist? How should these encounters unfold for students developmentally as they proceed through the curriculum?
f) how do we determine the "appropriateness" of oral presentations in class and other forums? Should we offer instruction in as well as occasions for speaking? If so, there are questions about standards, faculty preparation and evaluation.

What we did:
- organized a successful faculty retreat on this theme
- gathered information on faculty perceptions of student skills and support needs (see summary of results on pp. 3-4)
- met with most departments to learn how they address the writing and speaking abilities of their students
- interviewed: John Callahan, Kim Stafford, Susan Hubbuch
- visited the strong Writing and Speaking program at Mt. Holyoke College
- thought as broadly as possible about this issue, linked as it is to issues of recruitment and retention and to the College's mission
- presented some of our ideas at a Faculty Forum and led a discussion about them

We arrived at these recommendations:
- create a series of writing- and/or speaking-intensive courses with student mentors and small class size.
- re-institute teaching workshops to improve faculty preparedness to teach writing and speaking well and to work with mentors effectively.
- provide additional support (a first-yr. composition course? other models?) for students who enter with serious writing deficiencies.
- raise awareness of the value of effective writing and speaking across the College by better integrating this emphasis with other College programs (e.g. through community outreach,

overseas programs, internships, etc.) and dedicating space in Bicentennial Hall (as the renovated Albany was to be called) for this purpose.

We made two specific proposals. One proposal, made to the administrators planning the renovation of Albany, was to use the renovation as an opportunity to create a locus for an integrated set of programs that would help develop our students' skills in writing and speaking and serve to illustrate the importance of these skills (see final page). That proposal ran counter to plans already made for the renovated space, and did not go forward.

Secondly, we proposed an experimental pilot program for a series of writing- and speaking-intensive courses, and received a modest allocation from then-Dean of the College Curtis Johnson to fund it. The funding would have paid for a 3-day workshop, to be led by LC faculty, to help 6 faculty and 6 student mentors develop such courses. While there was considerable faculty interest in developing and teaching such courses, faculty wanted the assurance that they would be able to limit their course size to 15-20 students, i.e. that the College would support adjuncts to add extra sections of these courses if necessary. No such assurance was given. For this reason, interest waned; the pilot, originally planned for Spring 2002, never took place.

One lesson that clearly emerged from our work was that in order to devote additional time to developing students' writing and speaking skills, faculty need some incentive (e.g. reduced class size, or salary bonuses). There were some other impediments to progress on this front as well:
- Some faculty think that our students' writing and speaking skills are fine and that there is not a problem
- Some faculty object to the establishment of a new set of GE requirements
- The College is trying to reduce reliance on adjuncts, several departments and programs are itching for more faculty, AND the implementation of a strong program of writing and speaking will cost resources. Do we need to choose among these competing needs? Is supporting writing and speaking antithetical to these other goals?

We reached no resolution of these concerns. Pages 3-4 of this report provide a summary of faculty responses to a questionnaire distributed at the 2001 CAS retreat (a more extensive report of the results is available from Paulette Bierzychudek). Page 5 presents the Task Force's proposal for an integrated set of programs to develop and highlight the importance of writing and speaking skills.

A synopsis of results from the CAS faculty questionnaire

38 faculty returned the questionnaire distributed at the 2001 retreat.

Results for questions about writing:
Of the faculty responding,
      95% give writing assignments in their classes.
      92% use drafts and rewrites in some or all of their classes.
      72% require drafts and rewrites.
      57% use peer response/review in some or all of their classes.
      97% meet individually with students to discuss writing.
      97% recommend the Writing Center to students with problems.
so -- FACULTY ARE WORKING HARD WITH STUDENTS ON WRITING.

The most common problems mentioned by faculty:
      47%: organizational problems, lack of clarity, or inability to stick to the point.
      39%: mechanical problems: grammar, spelling, punctuation.
      36%: lack of a cohesive, developed argument based on evidence.
      11%: unclear sentence structure.
      8%: difficulty defining or narrowing the topic.
      6% each: limited research skills; difficulty defining one's audience; limited
      vocabulary; difficulty developing one's own voice.
students need help with -- ORGANIZATION, MECHANICS, MAKING AN ARGUMENT
AND SUPPORTING IT WITH EVIDENCE.

Faculty named these as their greatest challenges:
      47%: lack of sufficient time in and out of class to work on writing.
      14%: poorly motivated students.
      14%: student failure to recognize that writing is a skill that develops with practice
      rather than an inborn "gift".
      11%: knowing what kind of feedback is most helpful to students.
      6%: a campus culture of alienation from intellectual pursuits.
MOST FACULTY SAY THERE'S NOT ENOUGH TIME TO WORK WITH EVERY
STUDENT ONE-ON-ONE.

Faculty would like these kinds of support:
      44%: faculty workshops.
      19%: more divisional or departmental discussions of standards.
      14%: having student mentors to work with their classes.
      8%: a remedial writing course.
      6%: better coordination between faculty and the Writing Center.
      6%: a commitment from colleagues to teaching writing.
      6%: smaller classes.
STRONGEST SUPPORT FOR WORKSHOPS, SHARING IDEAS, STUDENT
MENTORS.

Results for questions about speaking:
Of the faculty responding,

      97% use discussion in some or all of their classes.
      86% sometimes assign students to lead discussions.
      97% require their students to make oral presentations in some or all of their classes (including individual presentations, panels, and debates).
      92% sometimes or always provide their students with guidance about how to prepare these presentations.
      32% use rehearsals or re-presentations in some or all of their classes.
      only 17% require them.
      51% use peer response/review of student presentations.
      89% grade or give feedback on oral presentations.
so -- FACULTY ARE WORKING QUITE HARD ON SPEAKING AS WELL.

The most common problems mentioned by faculty:

      35%: student shyness, insecurity, anxiety, lack of confidence.
      19%: insufficient preparation/rehearsal.
      16%: poor organization.
      11%: over-reliance on a script.
      8%: point or focus not clear.
      8%: poor timing, too long or too short.
PROBLEMS ARE ASSOCIATED WITH LACK OF PRACTICE.

Faculty named these as their greatest challenges:

      35%: lack of sufficient time in and out of class to work on speaking.
      11%: students don't have enough opportunities to get experience.
      11%: lack of training in teaching students to be good speakers.
      8%: getting students to take speaking seriously.
      5%: how to structure assignments effectively.
ONCE AGAIN, NOT ENOUGH TIME TO WORK WITH STUDENTS ONE-ON-ONE.

Faculty would like these kinds of support:

      30%: faculty workshops.
      16%: have no idea what kind of support they want.
      8%: hearing from other faculty about what they do in their classes.
      8%: having student mentors to work with their classes.
      5%: a commitment from colleagues to teaching speaking.
ONCE AGAIN, SUPPORT FOR WORKSHOPS, SHARING IDEAS, AND MENTORS.

A Vision for Writing and Speaking at Lewis and Clark College

Our goals: To engage our students more fully in their learning and in their community (both at Lewis and Clark and beyond) by motivating (and helping) them to become thoughtful, articulate, and persuasive speakers and writers. We also wish to convey to our students that the arts of speaking and writing are integral to effective leadership. Finally, we want our students to understand that writing and speaking help us to think more clearly, more deeply, and more critically.

We hope to provide this motivation and support by integrating three major parts of the Lewis and Clark educational experience: General Education, community engagement, and an expanded program in Rhetoric (i.e. writing and speaking). The diagram below outlines these ideas.

How to achieve the integration: We suggest locating these programs in Bicentennial Hall, with a floor plan and architectural design that encourage communication among them. If this space were attractive to students and promoted interaction, students would be encouraged to use these offices and take advantage of the linkages among them. Staff from different programs would also have more opportunities for collaboration and communication. Evening hours and food service might also help promote the use of this complex of offices and programs.