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OU initiative cultivates student writing

By **Liz Lent**, OU Writer

Lab reports. Research papers. Web pages. Poetry. The written word plays an enormous role in every student's college experience. But perfecting it and realizing the value of good writing in any career – from accountant to scientist to history teacher and physical therapist – is another matter.

"We all use writing in our professions," said Anne Becker, an OU special instructor in rhetoric. "Sometimes students don't think about that."

Becker sees myriad applications for a program that will enhance student writing, no matter the career path. And that, OU writing professors argue, will put OU students a step ahead in tomorrow's job market.

More than 50 faculty and staff joined OU President Gary Russi and Interim Vice President of Academic Affairs and Provost Virinder Moudgil on April 9 for a workshop led by Washington State University Rhetoric and Composition scholar Bill Condon. "Looking Toward 2010: Writing Across the Disciplines" was part of an ongoing effort by OU's **Rhetoric, Communication and Journalism Department** in combination with the **English Department** and OU administration to improve student writing and communication skills in every area of study, from astronomy to women's studies.

"We need to be promoting broader competencies," Condon said. "Only about one-third of people end up in careers related to their majors. If we're not preparing students more broadly, we might be missing the boat altogether."

Moudgil, a biological sciences professor and renowned cancer researcher, echoed Condon's thoughts. "Effective writing is the greatest tool we have."

Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) involves more than just putting pen to paper, explained Margaret Willard-Traub, assistant professor of rhetoric and organizer of the event. "The way we're looking at this, writing is widely defined – there's print literacy, digital literacy and visual literacy. A WAC program that was far-thinking would attend to how students learn using all three of those means."

In his lecture, Condon outlined the successes of WAC at Washington State University. He incorporated inquiry-based assignments, forcing students to ask questions, do research and write out their answers. Students worked on collaborative and "peer response" projects, which essentially required them to communicate their objectives to each other and then through the written word.

"It addressed the issue of why the things they are learning are relevant to them," Condon said. He saw the program increase personal engagement in the subjects students studied and believes it improved active learning. It served as a vehicle for critical thinking and meaningful discourse, helped build a bridge to a new discourse community and provided a life skill important in any career.

Washington's program proved just as beneficial to faculty, Condon said, by increasing the variety of class work and promoting valued skills such as critical thinking and discipline-specific knowledge.

Condon cited studies indicating that students who do the most writing in their classes typically enjoy the most reward from their work.

"That level of engagement among students appeals to me," said Special Instructor in Rhetoric Catherine Haar. It's something she would like to see even more of at Oakland.

But simply increasing the number of writing assignments will not necessarily improve communication skills. The work needs to involve critical thinking, a topic Condon expanded on at the afternoon faculty workshop.

"Active learning only happens when you stop memorizing and start using the information," he said. Condon encouraged professors to be flexible. "The philosophy student will write and learn to write differently than the zoology student."

Another WAC component involves the creation of a leading-edge writing center, providing the latest tools and techniques to help students and to guide them as they develop projects, papers and their writing in general. The facility currently is in the research stage. Committee members visited other top-tier university writing centers to "find commonalities and see how they serve their students," said committee member Marshall Kitchens, assistant professor of rhetoric.

It's a long-term process, Condon said. Incorporating WAC fully into any university takes anywhere from six to 10 years.

"People have to be patient," he said. "It's going to take a while for effects to show." It's imperative, however, to maintain a high level of commitment from faculty and administrators for the initiative to work.

"You have an institutional commitment here at Oakland and the leaders are enthusiastic," Condon said. "If we don't transform education, someone else will and it might be someone without the same values."

For more information on Writing Across the Curriculum, visit the [Rhetoric Program](#) Web site.

SUMMARY

Oakland University seeks to improve student writing and communication skills in every area of study by pursuing a Writing Across the Curriculum initiative.

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