Minutes

This meeting was devoted to a conversation with Susan Rodgers, presenting a proposal from the Integration of Knowledge Study Group for an intensive writing seminar required for all first-year students: one semester, class size of no more than 15, focus on improving college-level writing and critical thinking skills, co-curricular events encouraged.

Fortuitously, Phil Rule had asked me to prepare copies of a Chronicle of Higher Ed. article that discussed this very type of course as it is being developed at other elite liberal arts colleges and universities. All Committee members should now have a copy of this article; please let me know if you don’t.

Susan explained that her group envisioned this writing seminar being “delivered” in several ways: in existing FYP courses; in the English Department’s Critical Reading and Writing courses and the History Department’s historical themes first-year courses if these courses could be reduced in size; in seminars designed by individual faculty on idiosyncratic topics of interest to them.

Discussion with our group focussed on several topics. Loren calculated that about 35-36 new courses would be needed to enable all first-years to take this course. Susan thought that existing courses [as noted above] would make up most of that total. We all agreed that faculty development would be needed to help faculty become [even more] effective teachers of writing. There was some discussion of how such courses are staffed at other schools, e.g. with full-time non-tenure-line people who have a particular commitment to teaching writing—probably not an option for Holy Cross.

I suggested that faculty might be reluctant to sign on for first-year courses that did not fulfill disciplinary purposes and that the concept might be easier to “sell” embedded in proposals for other first-year initiatives, as seem likely to be forthcoming from other study groups [just as now, we find that a faculty member may not want to radically change the content of the introductory course in his or her discipline to make it writing-intensive but has no problem adding a writing-intensive component to a course designed expressly for the FYP]. A question was also raised as to how this proposal would intersect with existing Common Requirements; Susan reminded us that her group proposed making the writing-intensive seminar, of one kind or another, mandatory for all first-years.

Perhaps the most significant suggestion we had to offer for her group’s consideration was our sense that any attention to communication skills in the first year should include oral
as well as written work—a focus on “rhetoric,” if you will, not just on writing. Susan promised to take this point back to her group.

Her group thinks first-year dorms for all first-year students would also be desirable. Her group is also discussing the capstone experience with the idea that a range of options should be available, not all of them as labor-intensive for faculty as the capstone seminar or thesis.

Agenda for 2/26

We need to discuss progress on our winter break homework assignments and figure out what work we want to do in the rest of the semester, leading up to preparation of a written report that will be presented to the faculty in May. Coordination with the other study groups will be important as we proceed with this task to avoid duplication.

Phil and Sue Berman have produced a draft of their winter break homework assignment, a “goals” statement on reading, writing and speaking abilities.

Laurie has been left without a partner to develop the technological skills part of this document; Laurie, could we request that you try to put something together on your own?

Loren and Mark are supposed to collate information collected from our faculty interviews, but it makes sense for them to wait to do that until more of the interviews are complete: for those who have not yet seen all their subjects, please do so asap. For what’s been done, please see our website, now password-protected, as maintained by Catherine [thank you!]?—the username is “croberts” and the password is “rhetoric.”

Respectfully submitted

Pat Bizzell