

Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "A Defense of English," by Mary Adams, 3/1/98

The General Education Review Committee welcomes Mary Adams' "A Defense of English" in the March 1 Faculty Forum. Her argument identifies several of the important issues from our draft proposal for General Education, specifically those concerning the composition requirement and the humanities requirement. There are others, the Freshman seminar and the role of learning communities to name a few. Mary's essay should help to promote the discussion of the general education program proposal in the weeks and months ahead. The proposal is still very much under development, and input from all constituencies and individuals of the University is essential. The General Education Review Committee directs your attention to our letter of February 26 and the draft proposal attached to it which explain where we are in our work. Further discussion opportunities will include a series of open hearings beginning after Spring Break, and a University Forum that will conclude the semester's deliberations. The development process will continue into next Fall semester, and the Committee will welcome thoughtful input from throughout the University community.

Curtis Wood, for the General Education Review Committee

Mary Adams makes several definite points that we all need to consider in any General Education revision. The Committee must weigh these carefully before revamping a curriculum that puts our students out of step with other state institutions or any higher learning institution for that matter. We need only recall that we tried the Thinking, Reasoning, and Expressing course series for a number of years only to find they would not transfer to other institutions nor were there many courses that would fit this category and transfer into ours. In this case, it was not a poor idea but rather it was a simple practical matter of credit approval. Will we go down the same path with a new curriculum?

Dan Pittillo, Biology

Mary has many good points concerning the development of writing abilities of our students. I wholeheartedly agree with her perspective that one semester of composition is not nearly enough for our students. I also would tend to think that her points about the impact of the composition of the committee are probably true to some extent. These issues should not, however, overshadow the obvious hard work that went into the development of the proposal. As Mary points out, the proposal has many great ideas and is the work of many dedicated, insightful colleagues.

I think that the primary issue of consideration is not the number of semesters of composition that students have but the extent to which writing is emphasized in ALL classes, both in general education and within majors. I do not teach general education classes but require my undergraduate students to write at least 3 papers each semester. Most are dismayed by how "mean" I am in grading. I have high expectations of them, and by the end of the semester I usually can see a clear improvement in their writing.

The time it takes to grade these papers is time well spent, though this time clearly takes away from other, perhaps more "rewarded" activities, such as research or service activities. I, however, like many of my colleagues, realize that this time giving students feedback on their writing will, in the long run, prove to be the best use of this time.

Thus, I believe the issue to be not one of number of courses taken with a composition title, but the extent to which composition is emphasized in ALL classes. I would like to see much more writing and much less emphasis on tests throughout the university. I believe that students learn much more through writing, feedback, and perhaps re-writing than they are likely to learn by studying and taking tests. To the extent that we can incorporate this writing emphasis into ALL classes at WCU is the extent to which our students, and ultimately us, will benefit.

Rob Routhieaux, Management

Let the church (the WCU community) say Amen! *Alfred Wiggins, Communication & Theatre Arts*

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Responses to "A Defense of English,"
by Mary Adams, 3/1/98, continued

Mary Adams raises a very important point--one that I'd like to phrase even more provocatively: the true purpose of a college education is not to develop "marketable skills" but to develop the mind and spirit. We should not be in the business of training potential "employee product" but of stimulating human beings (our students and ourselves) to think and feel deeply about what it means to be human. We must do this not only in our (too often) narrowly identified disciplines, but in everything we do. Because good thinking is ultimately inseparable from good writing, the writing courses should be, as Mary suggests, the very core of our general education curriculum.

Will Peebles, Music

I agree strongly with the position that the second semester freshman course in research documentation should be retained in the new General Education curriculum. It is essential that students have the skills to do research papers if we are to meet the objectives of General Education in perspectives courses, and we cannot wait until students are in the middle of their majors to teach those skills. Nor should instructors in courses in the majors have to spend time on teaching those skills. I especially like the idea of combining the research documentation course with a perspectives course in a learning community. That would help both instructors convey to their students the importance of the form and content of a research paper--and of the library resource skills that lie behind it.

Ed Price, Anthropology and Sociology

We the undersigned members of the Art Department can only deplore with Mary Adams any kind of reduction in the development of general compositional skills. Over the last few years one of the most alarming and noteworthy aspects of student performance has been their increased difficulty in expressing their thoughts in writing. Clearly not less but more training in writing is needed. Learning a specific vocational vocabulary is no substitute for discovering how to put words and ideas together in every aspect of life, so that meaningful communication between individuals remains within the province of a university education. Otherwise, to quote recent remarks by William Sloane Coffin, "The humanities don't humanize. They're cultural icing on an economic cake."

Joan Byrd, Robert Godfrey, Cathy Griffin, Jon Jicha, Marya Roland, James Thompson, Art

I agree with Adams. But, something has got to change from the way we have taught English in the past, if my current crop of Seniors is any indication of English 101 basic mechanics.

I require written laboratory reports and deduct for obvious errors of grammar and spelling. I usually end up deducting more points for English 101 than I do for technical content.

If we are going to do English 101 let us do it right and quit passing on illiterates to the rest of the University. I am tired of trying to fix the English departments' mistakes.

Kenneth Ayala, Industrial & Engineering Technology

Among the excellent points Mary Adams makes, I agree that the Comprehensive Articulation Agreement would make it suicide for WCU to cut freshman composition to 3 hrs. and to remove the literature requirement. Beyond this, I join her in applauding most of what the General Education Review Committee has proposed: a freshmen seminar can be valuable (how better to clearly communicate to first-year students the "idea of the university"?) and to require upper level writing courses in the student's discipline (students need further grounding in the conventions of good writing and correct documentation in their fields). It must be stressed, however, that mechanics of good writing properly belong in most classes taught at WCU--not only in Engl 101. As Dr. Adams so aptly puts it, "Students ought to learn the lessons of coherence and grace in all disciplines." The newly thought-out coordinated General Education program can help to make this possible--IF we do not sacrifice writing taught by trained faculty and make the error we did in the 1970s with foreign language and declare literature "unnecessary."

Steve Eberly, English