

### The College and W Courses

A brief review of W course offerings in the college reveals a matter of interest to C&C committee: although there remains widespread support for the traditional features of W courses as originally proposed, two different types of W course have in fact developed, each permitted by the guidelines and administrative procedures intended for W course implementation. On the one hand, most W courses stress writing as a principal element of student performance and its evaluation, advertise faculty instruction and supervision of student writing as a normal part of the course, and affirm that 50% of the student's grade depends upon his writing. The W designation of most such courses, one gathers, was essentially a recognition that such practices were already among the traditional features of these courses.

On the other hand, another group of courses (fewer and mostly in the sciences) seems to have developed in response to the W requirement's introduction. These courses tend to describe substantial writing as a feature *added* to a previously existing course, and in some departments this has contributed to "cloning" of established courses: listing offerings under a new number but under the same course title (and often the same description) as their originals. A second stage in the development of such courses is now prompted by new *Bulletin* procedures, presumably intended to minimize student confusion: henceforth, alternative offerings of a course will bear the same number as the original (hence, 2xx, 2xxW, 2xxQ, instead of 2xx, 2xyW, 2xzQ). This mitigates the fears about "commingling" that troubled the CLAS faculty last year, but in effect ratifies the notion that it is appropriate to offer *different versions* of the same course.

Although intended to ensure substantial attention to a course's W features, the practice of *adding* specific written work to a course seems to ignore the matter of their impact upon the course's basic architecture. Some original supporters of the W course concept find this troubling, since it is not easily demonstrated that the addition of an element on which 50% of the grade depends can leave the substantial core of the course unaltered. Surely the material presented in the W version will suffer compression or dilution under pressure of such a substantial additional feature -- or the W version will require half again as much work as the "basic" version. Certain science courses have addressed such problems of equity by assigning an extra credit (or more) to W versions of a non-W course. Some recent requests for W course approval have renewed interest in such questions. A review of selected college and committee materials offers a useful context for their consideration.

At the outset, it is interesting to note the definitional language of the current CLAS guidelines:

A W course "is one in which special attention is devoted to teaching the student to write clearly and cogently. ... Substantial writing assignments are required. ... A W designation assumes that the writing in the course will be supervised while it is in process."

A Q course "requires the students to use statistics, algebra, trigonometry, calculus ... or other math skills."

A C course "is one in any discipline in which students are given hands-on experience using a computer. ... Incidental use of the computer is not adequate."

It appears that actual instruction in appropriate skills is required for W and C courses, but not for Q courses. But all three types reflect the expectation that 50% of the course grade depend on adequate student performance in the relevant skill. The C course guidelines actually specify that should a student fail the C component, he must fail the course, a directive making explicit the historical motivation for the original "50% rule" in W and Q courses.

On 1 April, 1986, the college faculty approved the following motion:

The CLAS Curricula and Courses committee must approve a department's plan to offer specific W and non-W courses simultaneously. Reasons must be presented and explanation provided of how the two sections will be coordinated so that the W students receive appropriate attention to their

writing efforts. The commingling of W and non-W sections of the same course should be avoided whenever possible.

This established the principle that if "cloned" offerings are proposed, adjudication of their W features must rest upon an educationally sound *coordinated relationship* between W and non-W versions. Departments must guarantee careful coordination of syllabi and instruction to ensure a substantial parity of course material and marking equity, when it is to be achieved through different means in different classrooms.

(Although not directly related to the issue at hand, we note here for completeness' sake that the faculty also approved the following at the same meeting:

- Stiffer prerequisites should be instituted for all W courses: English 105 and 109; the latter may be taken concurrently.
- Departments should create a Senior Thesis course, or modify one, so that it can be formally approved for W credit in Fall 1986. Sample course descriptions and guidelines will be provided to all department heads.

Both of these matters merit the C&C committee's continuing attention.)

The CLAS C&C committee, in moving the above rules, also made the following recommendations, upon which no action was taken:

- The committee recommends that instructors in W courses be given copies of the guidelines at the beginning of each semester. Instructors should also be made aware that student evaluations will occasionally monitor conformity to the guidelines for W courses. Department heads are in the best position to guarantee that instructors are aware of W requirements, so that distribution and explanation of guidelines should be their responsibility.
- The committee recommends that the established guidelines continue to serve as a standard for W courses, to help assure that special attention is devoted to teaching the student to write clearly and cogently.
  1. appropriate enrollment limits, as determined by the department head, faculty member and dean;
  2. Minimum of 15 typed double-spaced finished pages;
  3. supervision of writing in process (several short papers or successive drafts);
  4. at least 50% of grade based on writing (content and expression);
  5. in addition, the committee urges that the course syllabus of a W course indicate how the instructor's involvement with student writing will occur (in-class discussion of writing or comments on submitted work; office consultations, etc.).

A C&C committee review during 1986-87 yielded agreement that W course enrollment be limited to 20 students, and that department heads are best positioned to enforce relevant guidelines. Addressing "problems in W designation," its sub-committee opposed W designation for 100's-level courses:

The committee seemed to be against adding new W designations to 100's- level courses. The thought seemed to be that a W course should be one that is given after English 105 and 109, and should be an advanced course with writing.

The subcommittee also thought that

mixing W and non-W students in the same class was a bad thing, since part of the class time in a W course should be concerned with writing. The committee thought that, in the case of science courses which have extra meetings for W students, this objection did not apply.

While acknowledging that that the teaching and execution of writing in science courses might profitably employ special techniques, the committee affirmed the view that course material ought not be scanted in favor of W matters (and *vice versa*), nor ought courses bearing the same number and title be substantially differentiated for two different groups of students.

That individual students, some W and some non-W, might be "commingled" in the same section would naturally raise serious questions of academic equity, especially in view of the "50% rule" upon which grading is to be based in W courses. But the same questions, if only less dramatically posed, arise in those cases where students choose between two courses bearing *the same title and description*, albeit with different numbers. These questions are sharpened by the recent (5 May 1987) CLAS faculty decision to

delete all 'clone' numbers for W and Q courses and revert those courses to their old numbers, with the attached letter (e.g., 210W). Both the original and any skills versions of the course shall be listed in the *Bulletin*.

On these points, materials furnished the departments strongly imply the routine separability of W features from a given course at departmental option. The current *Guide for Preparing and Submitting Proposals for W Designation* (August, 1987) includes the following language:

- Is this course an existing course, all sections of which will be W?
- Is this course an existing course which will need a new course number to enable the course to be offered with or without W credit?
- 2xx (non-W) - may be taken without W credit as 2xy.
- 2xy (W) - may be taken without W credit as 2xx.
- For variable credit ...: Must be taken for at least 3 credits to count as one W course.

The new *Bulletin* instructions (reflecting the 5 May 1987 action) make some of this obsolete, but take its assumptions a further step as well: in the new rules for listing "W and Q courses and respective clones," and the new 4-digit code intended to accommodate such listings, one finds the tacit assumption that whether W characteristics are added to or separated from a given course, the course remains essentially the same.

Clearly, the practice of offering for equivalent credit what purports to be the same course in both W and non-W modes has become widespread throughout the college. There are presently 36 such courses listed: Anthropology (1), History (4), Political Science (1), Psychology (2), Sociology (25), Urban Studies (2), Biology (1). In these courses, the student declares his choice of W or non-W enrollment by electing the course under one course number or the other; the course title remains the same for all students. It is this practice that the new 4-digit designations, reflecting the 5 May faculty action, confirm. In the face of this, it is difficult to support the claim that 50% of the course grade will be based on writing without altering substantially the basic course content and its related evaluation techniques for one group of students or another. Anecdotal evidence suggests that courses separately listed as W and non-W sometimes actually meet together, and in some cases count as 2 courses toward the instructor's load.

Certain science courses present a slightly different problem. Here practice has been to add at least one extra credit to an existing course in recognition of W-related work. While this appears a direct challenge in strictly quantitative terms to the 50% rule (the W appears valued at 25% in most cases, 40% in one), this listing technique at least announces identical course content for all students as a floor which W work will not lower in selected cases. Such courses are Biol 176W, EEB 257W, EEB 267W, EEB 288W and MCB 222W (1 extra credit each, with extra work announced for all but EEB 257W). EEB 253W appears to be unique in its W version formulation: its "individual tutorial" segment replaces the 4-hour laboratory segment of EEB 243 (its non-W equivalent); both carry 4 hours' credit.

In neither category (the 36 'cloned' courses or the 5 science courses) does the 50% rule appear to operate in practice.

A letter from the C & C Committee chair (8 October, 1982; excerpted here) responding to a faculty inquiry addresses this matter:

The second suggestion you make, that certain W courses might be raised from three credits to four, is more complicated. We have found that in most W courses instructors are substituting writing assignments for some other means of testing, usually exams, and that the time students put into paper writing takes the place of the time they would have used studying for exams. These course clearly

should remain three credits. If, on the other hand, a course is actually adding class contact hours when it becomes a W, it probably should be increased in credit. The committee is, in fact, considering just such a proposal for Biology 218. Right now we are handling this on a course by course basis and haven't been able to come up with any general principle on which to base these decisions.

### *Concluding Observations*

Whatever uncertainties now attend the offering of W courses, the introduction next fall semester of related (but not necessarily identical) principles of W designation for university-wide purposes prompts urgent concern. At the very least, a mechanism to ensure articulation of senate and college actions on the subject should be confirmed. In many cases, the college will in effect be considering the enactment of criteria more stringent than those of the senate for W designations, and the potential for confusion, and for consequent petitions for student relief, will increase.

In order to ensure availability of adequate information about each W-course listing in the college, the C&C committee moved (20 October, 1987) to require including in each W-course syllabus a declaration of the amount and character of its required writing features, writing supervision and instruction, and the weight writing would receive in grading.

To ensure adequate awareness on the part of students and the college about the W features of each course, the language of that motion ought to be included in the guidelines for W courses:

The instructor will distribute to students at the beginning of each W course a brief statement describing how the W requirement will be met. This should specify the amount and character of the required writing, a calendar of assignments due, provisions to ensure periodic consultation between instructor and student on the written work, and the relationship of student writing to the final course mark. Each semester a copy of the handout distributed in each W course or section should be filed with the department head, to be available for review by the dean and the C&C committee.

Further, as a step toward imposing more orderliness upon the development of new W courses and the maintainence of those already listed, the C & C committee may wish to consider adoption of guiding language much like the following:

1. If the content and procedures of a course will routinely require the production, supervision and evaluation of written student work to the degree specified by the published college W guidelines, it may be designated a W course. Such a course may not be elected on a non-W basis.
2. Should a department wish to list concurrently such a course in an alternative version, without writing features adequate to W designation, but for equivalent credit, upon requesting approval and from time to time thereafter
  - a. the department head must certify to the C & C committee or the dean that the course content of both versions is substantially identical and that the requirement of substantial student writing (the 50% rule) in the W version matches equitably the student work and evaluation required in the non-W version.
  - b. W and non-W versions of such courses will be regarded *functionally* as different *sections* of the one course, to be differentiated by the new 4-digit listing system.
  - c. Students electing such a course as a W offering may not be commingled with students in a non-W version of the course.
3. Should a department seek to reflect the enhancement, by *additional* additional writing requirements suitable for W designation, of any course (ordinarily a science course), it must demonstrate that in its enhanced W version the course will require substantial student writing of such an amount and character that the attainment of a passing final grade will depend upon its satisfactory execution. Appropriate additional credit may be added for its election as a W course, provided that corresponding teacher-student contact (either classroom or tutorial) be appropriately added, and attested by the department head. W and non-W elections may of course be commingled in the regular meetings of such a course.

(This report and its recommendations were approved by the CLA&S C&C Committee, 1 December, 1987)