

News

DEP loses funding, future in jeopardy

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Students taking classes in a variety of departments will lose a valued writing resource at the end of this academic year.

The Departmental Editing Program, which provides an in-house writing editor to the art history, religion and mathematics departments, will cease this June, when the program's founder and financier Joseph Asch '79 plans to cut off DEP's funds. As of now, the College has expressed no interest in picking up where Asch left off.

According to Associate Dean of the Humanities Lenore Grenoble, Dartmouth faculty have, in the last few years, become increasingly aware of the importance of writing and the need to improve the way writing is taught.

Although Grenoble praised the success of DEP, she explained that, in the midst of competing priorities, the faculty have identified working on the first-year writing sequence as the most pressing priority.

Grenoble added that the faculty, and not outsiders, are charged with solving this problem.

Asch developed and began funding DEP in 1997. The businessman and Hanover resident, who has been regularly auditing Dartmouth classes for the past 16 years, said he established the program after he observed the weak writing skills of many undergraduates.

According to Asch, the overall quality of student writing has declined in recent decades.

Professor Joy Kenseth of the art history department agreed.

"There was a real decline in writing skills," Kenseth said. "People were having a hard time putting a paper together in some coherent fashion and really being careful about proofreading and organizing ideas."

These shortcomings forced professors to spend too much time correcting basic writing errors, Asch said.

Writing editors in the program, all of whom have taught high school English, currently assist between 65 and 70 students per term with writing assignments in their departments.

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Although the role of the editor has varied greatly by department, many faculty and students praise the program.

"The program compensates for the reality that professors do not have time to edit paper drafts or to explain grammar," religion major Mirte Mallory '02 said after having worked closely with a writing editor. "Most importantly, the program allows those students who wish to improve their writing to be followed by one particular editor over the span of several years."

Iona McAulay, the art history department's writing editor, distinguished the services provided by DEP from those of the Research, Writing and Information Technology center, which helps students with writing in any field. "Every discipline has its own writing specific needs and I find it very difficult to see how a person in RWiT could be expected to know enough about all disciplines to meet the needs of all those papers."


Asch, who to date has contributed \$500,000 to the program, had hoped that the positive response to DEP over the last eight years would be enough to convince the College to continue funding and potentially expanding it to all departments.

"If Dartmouth were bold and open to innovation, this is the kind of thing it could really pioneer," Asch said.

However, such an expansion would be quite costly for Dartmouth, as according to Asch, each writing editor costs up to \$40,000 a year.

"It would be very expensive to have an editor in every department," religion professor Ronald Green said. "However Dartmouth could then say to the world 'We are really committed to making sure that all our students can write well.' I think that would add tremendous value to the Dartmouth degree."

Tom Cormen, Chair of the Writing Program at Dartmouth, stressed that the limited scope of DEP inhibits it from expanding to every department. These structural problems include the high cost of providing an editor for each of approximately 40 departments and the difficulty of hiring such a large number of individuals from the Upper Valley area who are qualified and interested in the position.

"The current components of the Dartmouth Writing Program are sufficient to help students improve their writing, but we plan to do much more," Cormen said. "Will we ever reach a point at which the faculty will say that our student writing is as good as it can possibly be? I doubt it." 

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