

Opinion

Poor Writing at Dartmouth

By Joseph Asch '79, Guest Columnist

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Trustee Chair Bill Neukom was following the Administration's media playbook when he said in an interview in the January/February Alumni Magazine that Dartmouth graduates are "superbly prepared." In the area of writing, this statement is just not true.

A few years ago in Paris, in a moment of greater candor, President Jim Wright told alumni that student writing is a "national problem." The status of undergraduate writing was best summarized by Professor Warren Goldstein in the July/August 2005 Yale Alumni Magazine when he wrote: "There is no single topic on which faculty, nationwide, agree more than that student writing is atrocious and getting worse."

The Dartmouth Administration has not been blind to this problem, but its lumbering response has been all too typical.

After a 2002 outside review of the Composition Center, a review that one faculty member described to me as "scathing," the Center's name was changed to RWIT [Student Center for Research, Writing and Information Technology]. However, its organization and the role of its revolving group of undergraduate student tutors remained substantially the same.

Subsequently, work by a faculty "Committee on Writing" in 2002-2004 led to the creation of Dartmouth's new Writing Program, with a three-year budget of \$400,000.

Writing Program Chair Tom Corman's first step was to change the names of English 2, 3, and 5 to Writing 2, 3, and 5. Later, Professor Corman upgraded the training of the non-tenure-track adjunct professors who teach these courses. While this is the case, Writing 2 and 3 are still supported by the part-time tutoring work of MALS students -- recent college graduates from around the country taking a one-year supplementary degree at Dartmouth.

In auditing College courses over the past 16 years, I have listened to numerous faculty members complain about student writing. Not only does weak writing make their grading of student papers tedious, but the effort required to correct poorly drafted work requires a huge measure of faculty time, at least for those professors willing to focus on the mechanical and organizational aspects of student writing.

I spoke extensively about students' writing with Art History Professor Joy Kenseth; from these conversations the Departmental Editing Program (DEP) was born. In 1998, her department accepted my offer to fund an in-department writing editor.

Art History's DEP Editor, Iona McAulay, was a high school English teacher for 34 years. As an Editor, she spends innumerable hours with individual students, often first commenting on their

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papers via e-mail, and then sitting elbow-to-elbow with them in lengthy sessions to review and revise their papers.

Over the last eight years Ms. McAulay has cooperated closely with the Art History faculty, acquiring a profound knowledge of their stylistic and intellectual preferences.

Ms. McAulay's expertise is such that her responsibilities have grown. For the past two years, she has been the writing editor for Dartmouth's Collegiate Journal of Art. Last year, at the behest of Professor Kristin O'Rourke, Ms. McAulay edited the essays of the College's Rhodes, Marshall, Fulbright and Mitchell scholarship applicants, arguably the College's finest students.

The Art History Department's experience with DEP showed other faculty that an effective method of teaching writing existed at Dartmouth. In 2000, Professors Nancy Frankenberry and Kevin Reinhart approached me on behalf of the Religion Department. I put funding in place and another Editor, Nancy Leavitt-Reibel, was promptly hired.

Religion Professor Ehud Benor has told me that the pedagogy of the entire Religion Department has changed because of the presence there of an Editor. Former Religion Chair Ron Green has described Ms. Leavitt-Reibel's teaching as "an educational experience. Students emerge with their writing transformed" ("DEP Tutors," Jan. 17, 2005).

In 2003, at the request of Mathematics Professor Dorothy Wallace, I funded a third Editor. In the Fall term of that year, Jane Whittington, also a former high school English teacher, began working in the Math Department with excellent results.

From the start, I intended DEP to be a pilot program: a means to prove that close editing by English teachers based within academic departments is the best way to elevate Dartmouth students' writing to the level expected of Ivy League graduates. After eight years and an investment of \$500,000, I believe that the concept underlying this unique program has been proven beyond doubt.


The objections to DEP on the part of the Wright Administration seem to be that hiring high school English teachers is beneath Dartmouth's dignity, and that the program is too expensive.

The former argument is invalid given the three Editors' achievements over the past eight years, and especially given the fact that Dartmouth already employs undergraduates and MALS participants to teach writing.

The cost objection is a lame excuse. After all, what expenditure could be more central to the College's mission than teaching our students to write well?

However, let's look at the financial question head on. Various trustees and administrators have argued that the massive growth in administrative spending in the Wright years is but a small portion of the College's budget ("The Administration Strikes Back," April 6, 2004). Well, for about one twentieth of the College's present administrative spending, Dartmouth could place an Editor in every department. And really, do we need all those dormitory Community Directors (who are paid substantially more than DEP Editors) when so many students write poorly?

Or better yet, for less than the annual cost of the Wright Administration's multi-million-dollar public relations machine, the College could solve the writing problem. How refreshing it would be for Dartmouth to garner praise for the originality of its programs and the skill of its graduates rather than seeking prestige through the volume and slickness of its pricey PR program.

C'mon Dartmouth. Grow this program. The occasional innovation is good for the soul. 

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