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Mr. Joseph Asch
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Dear Joe:

The members of the Religion Department would like to give you a brief report on the progress of the Department Editor Program, as an update to the report we sent you three years ago.

In 2000, when we heard about the trial DEP program in the Art History program we were intrigued, and we were grateful to be included in the first phase of this program. We have worked now with Nancy Leavitt-Reibel for six years, and in short, her contribution to our students and to our curriculum in the Religion Department has been lively and much-needed. In fact, it has allowed us to see under just what conditions student writing can be improved.

Each year at a spring meeting, we decide which classes will have the DE's services. It's a given that the students in the one First-Year seminar we teach a year will work with her, and the students in our Senior Culminating Experience seminar will also be required to have drafts of their 25-page Senior Essays scrutinized by her. We then select from among our other courses that have a heavy writing component so that at least two courses each term are assigned to her. However, as a department we have agreed that any faculty member who senses serious deficiencies in a student's writing can send him or her to Nancy for her attentions. In addition, all honors thesis writers are expected to work closely with her. The latter development has been an enormous improvement over the old days when the faculty thesis advisor had to spend as much time correcting grammar and spelling chapter by chapter as commenting on content.

We'll talk below about student perceptions of Nancy's work, but here we'll just say that Nancy is fully integrated into the department curriculum. Perhaps in defining her work as purely mechanical, even you have shortchanged the extent of her contribution. Her work has very much altered our teaching for those courses to which she is assigned, so that we can require more drafts per paper, and work much more intensively with our students as they develop these drafts on research, argument, documentation, and framework, since Nancy corrects incoherent organization, grammatical and some logic errors, and the diffuse wordiness that afflicts Dartmouth students who have seldom had occasion to write long research papers before.

Our majors are required to write a 25-page Senior Essay as their “culminating experience.” The paper must have a thesis and an argument. Nancy works with each student in the early stages of the paper, along with two faculty members, and coaxes the thesis out of hesitant drafts. Students like and respect her and often feel more free to try out their half-baked ideas with her than with us. She helps to motivate them, organize them, and hold them to the high standard she knows we expect. For your information, here are the kinds of helpful marginal comments Nancy has made on recent student papers:

“An assertion and an imaginative comparison cannot substitute for support here.”

“Try to avoid stilted or windy style.”

“What are you saying?”

“You have many ideas here which make for a fragmented, not-quite-developed whole.”

“Finish developing—you are circling here.”

The result on the whole is Senior Essays, honors theses, and other papers that are much better than the work we had to consider before Nancy joined us. In addition, it seems that students have a much more positive experience in the courses and programs in which she assists, since they get the benefit of her nearly infinite patience, availability, and expertise in the technical issues of writing. Moreover, having now worked with the department for six years, a mutual training process has taken place and we have learned how most effectively to work with Nancy; she has also learned the preferences of the department, and the quirks of individual faculty. The result has been extremely satisfactory for all concerned.

In particular, students have been the beneficiaries of this program. Nancy Leavitt-Reibel has turned out to be an excellent choice. I thought you might be interested in some of the reasons:

- Students value consistency, privacy, and the Departmental Editor's familiarity with coursework and assignments. They can go to Nancy throughout their career in the major and find someone who knows their work, and knows the department's demands.
- Some students perceive the DEP program as leveling the playing field: those who believe themselves to have inferior academic preparation are grateful for a chance to catch up. The more time they spend working with Nancy, the better their writing becomes.
- Nancy has a broader knowledge of students' learning styles than the faculty, and also some knowledge of learning disabilities and how these can be addressed. A number of students with such disabilities have thrived under the individual coaching they get from Nancy.
- The fact that we are always able to provide Nancy with an office in Thornton Hall (someone is always on sabbatical and she is flexible about moving around) makes a big difference to our students. They know where to find her. Moreover, we know where to

find her. We find this preferable to the system of telling students to “go see someone in the Student Center for Research, Writing, and Information Technology (RWIT),” as one never knows with whom a student might speak or (more important) learns what advice that student might be given.

- Precisely because she is *not* the content expert, the Department Editor can help a student clarify his or her work. Often we’ll fill in the blanks in conversation with a student since we know a lot more about a topic than the student does. Then we’re perplexed at problems with his or her papers. Nancy forces them to connect disconnected points, link assertions to data, and put signposts along the way of their argument. Her particular background in high school teaching has turned out to be quite advantageous in this regard.

- Most importantly, Nancy’s presence in our has allowed us to set higher standards for honors theses, culminating projects, and other Religion Department assignments than would otherwise be the case. We don’t see the DEP as separate from other programs the College has in place, but it seems to us an indispensable top-tier program for producing Dartmouth graduates with mature writing skills.

In the end, we have found, the best analogy of the Department Editor is to a coach: the department editor is a kind of coach, with a specific kind of expertise that very effectively complements our various academic specialties.

For your information, here are some student comments we have received over the years:

“Nancy LR is a brilliant editor, I still send her my stuff. She's a dear person and ... she did wonders for how I think about my writing.”

“I found Nancy Leavitt-Reibel's guidance to be quite helpful. I only worked with her for one paper—our culminating paper—but realize now that the process of working with her was formative.”

“She was able to help me to think of/see nuances in my areas of study that I otherwise would not have been aware of.”

“She saved my thesis.”

“I thought it said so much about the Religion Dept. that it provided students with writing assistance. I loved working with Nancy. She helped me so much. I can't imagine working on my seminar papers without her.”

“I thought Nancy was AMAZING my senior year, and I only wish I'd had her help earlier!”

“Not only did she help me craft the most technically excellent senior paper I could, but she was also a real intellectual partner in the writing and research process.”

“She helped me considerably, and I certainly was appreciative to have had a department-specific editor with whom we were not only encouraged to meet but required to meet. I'd say her help vastly improved the quality of my senior colloquium. I remember specifically how I had difficulty with introductions, and she helped me to eliminate three pages of blithering shit to get to the underlying point of my paper.”

“I think that Nancy was an amazing resource, especially for students writing their thesis or in their senior seminar. I don't think that any writing center could replace the relationships that Nancy had with every senior in the religion department. I know other religion majors who felt like they really learned to write under the instruction of Nancy. It would be terrible to lose such a wonderful, integral part of the department.”

“Nancy was a fabulous help when I was working on my culminating class project. She is hands down the best editor that I have ever worked with throughout all of my academic experiences. Not only did she have a vast knowledge of the subject matter, she was also extremely effective when it came to helping students incorporate ‘time management’ skills. I, for one, came to her after procrastinating for a good half a semester on my final paper, in a pathetic and helpless state, and she somehow managed to get me back on track. She is not only vital to the success of Dartmouth's religion program, but a necessity!”

“I think Ms. Leavitt-Reibel was an excellent editor; she was a stickler for structure and grammar in a way professors are not (have they given up themselves? or are even scholars able to coast and just spew their ideas?), even legal writing instructors at law school are not. Based on the quality (i.e. lack thereof) of writing I've been seeing at Notre Dame (I'm TA'ing a polysci class on the side of law school fun), I think 18-22 year-olds need SERIOUS, personal writing attention. Mostly to reinforce that which they forgot in basic 5th grade grammar lessons. It's helpful to have dept-specific writing people (and to have consulting with them mandated).”

As you can see, both department faculty members and students have found the DEP program extremely successful, and we are grateful to you for your support these last six years. Your generosity has noticeably improved the writing of countless students and made a huge difference in the teaching experience of many faculty as well.

With gratitude and thanks,

Susan Ackerman
Professor and Chair,
On behalf of the Faculty of the Department of
Religion