

News

DEP tutors teach basic writing, grammar

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While students admitted to Dartmouth typically have strong intellectual backgrounds, many professors lament the steady decline of student writing. After founding the Departmental Editing Program seven years ago in an attempt to ameliorate this startling reality, Joe Asch '79 would like to see his system of one-on-one writing help within departments catch on throughout the College.

Asch, a businessman and Hanover resident, has been auditing Dartmouth classes for the last 15 years. In one such class, he witnessed a professor tell the entire class after the midterm that their writing was poor.

Asch later conceived the idea of hiring a writing editor for the art history department to work with students on writing skills. Since its inception, the DEP has expanded to encompass the religion and mathematics departments at their request.

Many professors complained that students lacked a grasp of even the most basic writing mechanics, and as a result, spent much of their time correcting grammar rather than focusing on the content of the writing.

"The job of the writing editor is to do the mechanical basic editing, and thereby free the faculty to do the things only they can do," Asch said. "In the sciences, a technician helps teach the tools of science while a professor focuses on concepts. The editors are technicians for writing."

Located in easily accessible department offices, the writing editors have backgrounds in teaching high-school English and help students with everything from spelling to fine-tuning. Although the role of the editor varies greatly by department, the faculty and students that have used them are enthusiastic with praise of the program.

Nancy Leavitt-Reibel, a high-school English teacher of 20 years prior to becoming the religion department's writing editor, says she has had a long-term interest in improving students' English skills. She is assigned to two classes per term and often sits through them or completes the reading in order to maximize her ability to assist students. She does not, however, feel that she replaces the work of the Research, Writing and Information Technology center.

By focusing entirely on the writing of one department, Leavitt-Reibel feels she knows what professors want in addition to being familiar with the material, but, she said, "the more resources we have to help students with writing, the better we will be as an institution."

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Religion Professor Ronald Green agreed.

"This is not just correcting spelling and grammar for problem writers," Green said. "This is an educational experience. Students emerge with their writing transformed."

Although Asch views RWIT as a useful resource, he feels that a centralized writing center is not able to give the most effective help to specific papers.

"The most important aspect of the program is the editor being in the department; the one-on-one instruction is the only real way for students to learn to write," Asch said. "DEP is a major innovation in how writing is being taught."


With resources such as DEP, RWIT and a policy requiring most freshmen to take English 5, it is puzzling that many students still lack writing skills. Asch believes students do not learn these skills earlier in their educational careers.

"It is a culture that is much less literate," Asch said. "They seem to teach much more creativity than syntax in high school today."

Green agreed that there has been a shift away from writing in many courses.

"Writing is often dreadful. I'm appalled really," Green said. "Too many courses don't require writing, and students are not used to expressing themselves through it."

With DEP now in its seventh year and funding three full-time editors, Asch is hoping to pass the program onto the Dartmouth administration. The faculty and students who have participated in DEP are eager to see it expand to the whole College.

"I think that all departments would benefit from having an embedded writing coach for one-to-one interaction in addition to the other resources we already have," Leavitt-Reibel said. 

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