Sallyanne H. Fitzgerald

SERVING BASIC WRITERS: ONE COMMUNITY COLLEGE'S MISSION STATEMENTS

ABSTRACT: Various factors combined to move a California community college towards creating a mission statement for all their English courses and within that context, one for their basic writing courses. The context for the creation of the mission statement includes a commitment to basic writing as a legal mandate, but its final version is unique to the particular context of this college.

The legal guidelines governing the mission and much of what happens in the 108 California Community Colleges are delineated in Title V, part of the legal code of the state. That code explicitly mentions instruction in basic skills as one aspect of the mission of community colleges. The web site of the California Community College Chancellor's Office further illuminates the mission of the state's community colleges: "Primary missions of the Colleges are to offer academic and vocational education at the lower division level for both younger and older students, including those persons returning to school. Another primary mission is to advance California's economic growth and global competitiveness through education, training, and services that contribute to continuous work force improvement. Essential and important functions of the Colleges include: remedial instruction for those in need of it and in conjunction with the school districts, instruction in English as a second language, adult noncredit instruction, and support services which help students succeed at the postsecondary level. Community Services is designated as an authorized function."

Since their mission is set by the legal mandate in Title V, the mis-

---

Sally Fitzgerald *has been involved in teaching and researching basic writing since she began her higher education career at the University of Missouri-Saint Louis as a basic writing teacher. She received her doctorate from UM-St. Louis with a dissertation on basic writers and one-to-one conferences with teachers. She has published two basic writing textbooks and numerous articles. Most recently, she was the associate editor of a collection of essays concerning mainstreaming basic writers. She has served as the co-chair of the Conference on Basic Writing and chaired three national basic writing conferences. Formerly Dean of the Language Arts and Humanities Division of Chabot College, she is now Vice President of Instruction at Napa Valley College, a California community college. She is the California representative to the Two-Year College English Association of NCTE.*

DOI: 10.37514/JBW-J.2003.22.1.03

sion statements adopted by the colleges vary little from campus to campus. Moreover, because Title V requires California community colleges to provide basic skills for students and the Chancellor's Office mentions remedial education, English teachers at Chabot College, like those at the other California community colleges, accept the validity of offering basic writing. The most recent version of the mission statement of Chabot College reflects this congruence: "Chabot College is a comprehensive community college that provides quality educational opportunities to all individuals who seek to enhance their knowledge and to improve their skills. The College offers both traditional and non-traditional methods of learning and student support services and activities that foster student success and enrichment. The College provides resources and programs that help students develop a sense of civic and social responsibility and commitment to life-long learning."

To accomplish this mission, the College provides the following academic programs:

- Technical and career-vocational education programs
- Transfer education programs to four-year universities
- General Education
- Basic Skills instruction
- English as a Second Language programs
- Community and Continuing Education programs

Although Californians accept the need, based on the community college mission, to offer basic writing courses, programs reflect differing opinions about how to offer basic writing and what should be included in a basic writing course. Indeed, across the state, basic writing courses range from word or sentence level courses to those requiring students to write full-length, documented, argumentative essays. The courses at Chabot College aim towards this latter goal.

Chabot College, a medium-sized, California community college with over 15,000 students, usually finds about 70% of its students have placed into one or more basic writing courses. Located in the San Francisco Bay area, Chabot is representative of the diversity of many California community colleges, with about 32% of the students being white and 56% being female in 2002-2003. Almost all students work full or part time, and the median age is 22, younger than the median age in most California community colleges. Students transfer from Chabot to the University of California campuses, the California State University campuses, and many local, private four-year colleges.

In this context and to fulfill the mission of the college with regard to basic skills instruction, during the early 1990s, Chabot College English faculty created a basic writing, two-course sequence that pre-

ceded freshman composition. To further delineate the mission of the college to provide basic skills instruction, the faculty developed a mission statement for all English courses and, within that broader mission, a statement for the basic writing sequence.

When I arrived at Chabot College in January 1993, I discovered that four things had happened simultaneously in order to create conditions that resulted in a basic writing mission statement:

- Institutional research had revealed that the basic reading and basic writing centers were not preparing students for success in transfer level courses.
- The college had been awarded a Title III grant which required integrating the basic reading and writing centers into one center.
- The college calendar was moving from quarters to semesters, and so all courses were being re-written for the new configuration.
- Long-term faculty members who had been involved in the original curriculum were retiring and newly trained faculty were replacing them.

During the first decades of the college, the faculty at Chabot had created two centers, the Reading Center and the Writing Center, implementing what were regarded at the time as very innovative strategies. The approach consisted of "courses" based on a mastery-learning model. Depending upon their needs, students might take both the reading and the writing center courses, or they might take only reading or only writing. For reading, students tested into a series of basic reading courses based on a reading placement exam, initially the Nelson-Denny and then the Descriptive Test of Language Skills. In the Reading Center, students completed seven workbooks, moving from word attack skills in Workbook A to critical reading skills in Workbook G. When they finished the programmed materials, they earned credit for the courses. In the Writing Center, students created essays based on standard prompts with the assistance of a teacher. Because the students did not necessarily work with the same teacher on each essay, the teachers read each piece of writing looking for the following specific traits: an introduction with a thesis; body paragraphs with topic sentences developed with brief clarification and "specific, anecdotal examples"; and sentences with few "grammar" errors.

The courses were intended to prepare students for freshman composition; however, the centers appeared subtly to compete with one another, and so there was no formal collaboration between the two. Although the rhetorical modes introduced in the writing prompts might

be similar to some readings, no attempt was made to help students think about the connections between reading and writing. Although in freshman composition, students were expected to be able both to read freshman level texts and to compose freshman compositions, the reading in the Reading Center did not directly relate to the writing produced in the Writing Center. Critical thinking was taught in a quarter course that followed the first and second quarters of freshman composition, and such a course was not required for transfer unless students were continuing at institutions that specifically required it. Even the research paper was a separate course that students only took for transfer to a few institutions.

Most faculty were not surprised when the institutional research indicated students were not succeeding in courses following the basic reading and writing courses and, thus, they were very open to a Title III grant to support innovation in all basic skills curricula. The first year of the Title III grant called for the development of a computerized writing lab, but the only staff member funded by the grant was a new computer technician for the lab. The instructional assistants (IAs) and the adjunct teachers who staffed the Reading Center and the Writing Center were going to find there was no work for them unless they became involved in the new computer lab. The faculty were reluctant to let technology dictate what should happen in the new center, and so they began to investigate what other community colleges were doing with computers. Two faculty members went to San Francisco State University to take a class, Teaching with Computers, and they taught workshops for English faculty, almost all of whom attended, on how to use the new equipment. The IAs became involved in the discussions and attended the computer workshops. Almost everyone became excited about the possibilities of the changes that Title III was making possible.

In the midst of investigating the possibilities for change provided by the use of computers and examining the lack of success in the existing basic writing sequence, the faculty also began re-writing curriculum to make quarter courses into semester ones. Faced with these complex and pressing issues, the English faculty decided to do more than just change the length of courses. Instead, they embarked on a six-month project to research basic writing and reading pedagogy. They began to meet weekly to discuss what they were learning, what they valued, and what they thought would work for Chabot students. Long philosophical discussions happened. Some rather heated arguments flared. In the end, the English faculty came together to draft two statements. Cindy Hicks, an English faculty member who advised on this article, explained what happened as the result of the work done in order to draft the mission statements: " The process of rewriting the curriculum created a feeling of support, mutual respect --even when

we disagreed – and friendship among us. Makes for a very wonderful learning and work environment!"

A concrete result of the collaboration was a mission statement or statement of philosophy for all English courses, called the Throughline. A second, related, outcome was the Articulated Assumptions that serves as a statement of mission or philosophy for all basic writing courses. Because the legally mandated mission of the college is so broad, these more specific, content related statements may appear to be program goals rather than a mission statement, but such criticism ignores the mandated college mission where the only flexibility resides in the more clearly articulated mission as it is attached to a specific philosophy.

Throughline for Chabot College English Subdivision

English courses at all levels will:

1. Integrate reading, writing, critical thinking, speaking, and listening.

2. Address directly students' reading practices. Reading is critical to academic success, and we strive to include more reading, in terms of both range and depth, in our program.

3. Approach the teaching of writing by inviting students to write prose pieces of varying length and complexity. Writing is not taught in a progression from the sentence to the paragraph to the essay.

4. Emphasize critical thinking. Critical thinking is the creation of meaning. Critical thinking is not limited to concepts of formal logic but includes grouping items/seeing patterns, drawing inferences, evaluating for purpose, synthesis and argumentation, differentiating fact from opinion, asking questions, evaluating for standards of fairness and accuracy, and making judgments. Critical thinking is broad-based, including sensing, feeling and imagining.

5. Create settings which include speaking, listening and responding that foster the building of community and forge links to critical reading and writing. Teaching those skills sometimes needs to be explicit and directed. Activities may include student presentations (solo and group/panel); small- and large-group discussions in which students speak to each other and not only to the instructor; student/teacher conferences; interviews in the class or community. We also encourage listening skills that involve note taking and feedback/response.

6. Include full-length works, defined as any work that sustains themes,

including a book of short essays by a single author. We suggest that the work(s) be integrated into the course thematically. On the pre-1A level, we recommend that non-fiction be used; that if fiction or autobiographical works are assigned, they be analyzed for issues and themes connected to other readings in the course rather than for literary aspects; that a combination of book-length works and short essays be used to provide a variety of models; and that students be asked for both personal and analytical responses.

7. Increase students' familiarity with and knowledge of the academic culture, themselves as learners, and the relationship of the two. Some ideas include: collaborative teaching and learning, using materials reflecting successful college experiences, acknowledging and validating the students' experiences while introducing them to academic culture and values, modeling academic values, and demystifying the institution.

Within the context of this broader English mission, the basic writing mission spells out the elements expected in those courses.

Articulated Assumptions

- The hierarchal model of English where skills proceed from words to sentences to paragraphs to essay structure is not favored in this division.
- The whole language approach, involving reading, writing, speaking and listening, is the desired approach for English courses.
- Students who improve their reading tend to improve their writing and vice-versa.
- Preparatory English students often lack student skills.
- We should offer preparatory English students the same kind of reading and writing experiences we offer English 52A/1A students.
- Readers should read for ideas and process units of meaning rather than focus on word-by-word reading.
- An active reading style is vital to improving reading comprehension.
- Some form of study reading method, such as SQ3R, should continue to be taught in these courses.
- Reading and writing will improve as students become aware of structure, especially the [consistent] movement of English from general to specific [or specific to general].

- Student essays should largely, if not always, be based upon a response to something the students have read.
- We do not generally favor students' expository essays being exclusively personal reflection.
- Students should be encouraged to write and revise preliminary drafts of substantial written work.
- Students improve their writing when peer groups engage in focused discussions.
- Students should provide self-evaluation of their written works.
- Many students who currently don't pass preparatory courses need more time reading, reasoning, writing critically and/or improving "studenting skills."
- Book-length works, fiction or non-fiction, should be included at all levels of our curriculum, including the preparatory level.
- Students completing 101B should be able to summarize, analyze, evaluate, and respond academically to what they read.

Beyond the Title III grant, the findings from institutional research, and the change in the calendar, a fourth factor made possible the creation of mission statements: faculty retired who had created the original curriculum, and newly trained faculty were hired. Since the college's early days with mastery learning and separate reading and writing centers, the world of composition theory had changed from being focused on product to focusing on process, but the curriculum had been slow to follow. Process theory in both reading and writing had flourished in the 1970s supported by the same theory in psychology, so those faculty who attended graduate school in the 1980s received training in it. In addition, the connection between reading and writing had begun to be explored in those graduate programs and by innovative faculty. Finally, the UC and CSU campuses began demanding that courses they accepted for transfer in the early 1990s have an explicit goal of critical thinking. The newly trained faculty were familiar with the idea of explicitly training students to think critically, and their recent training in theory contributed greatly to the English Department's discussions about pedagogy and to the rewriting of the Chabot English curriculum.

From these four factors came a basic writing curriculum that mirrors the demands of the transferable freshman composition courses. The faculty created a two-course sequence of basic writing where students write essays from the very beginning of the courses and concentrate on using text to support an argument. They begin with summaries and research based on the reader chosen by the teacher in the first

course, and by the end of the second one, they are using both primary and secondary sources to develop extended arguments. They read full-length non-fiction texts in each class as well as a reader that concentrates on non-fiction. All of the writing assignments are tied to readings. Students learn about grammar in the context of their own writing and discuss topics in small and large groups in order to reinforce the connections among all the language arts --reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking. These connections are also made explicit in the peer tutoring available in the Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum Center, now staffed by the original IAs as well as some instructors and student assistants. The computers are still available and are used both by classes and individuals, but they serve the curriculum and are not an end in themselves. No longer are there reading and writing center programs leading to freshman composition. Instead, the services in the very successful Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum Center are voluntary, intended to support students' efforts in all their classes across the campus.

Chabot College has come a long way from the early days of separate reading and writing centers with mastery learning to basic writing courses and a Writing and Reading Center that reinforce the connections among the language arts and prepare students successfully for other courses. Semester in and semester out, instructors from all disciplines report that 85-90% of the students who use a WRAC Center service succeed in their classes. In addition, students now perform as well as or better on the junior level writing exam than those who are native to the local CSU. Chabot faculty have accomplished a lot in just a decade guided by the basic writing mission in the context of the larger English mission, which in turn is related to the college mission and the mission of all California community colleges.