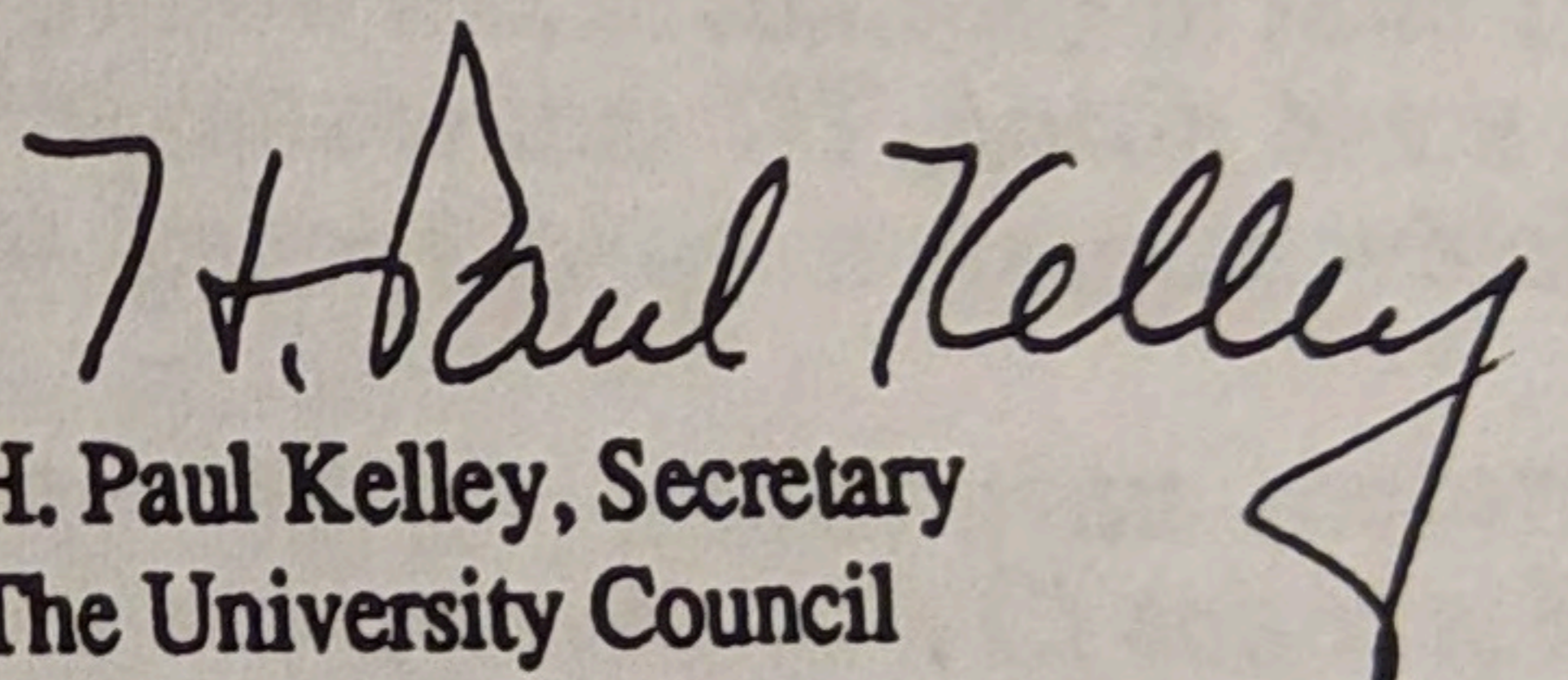


## DOCUMENTS AND PROCEEDINGS OF THE UNIVERSITY COUNCIL

REPORT OF THE UNIVERSITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE TO EXAMINE  
THE UNDERGRADUATE WRITING PROGRAM

Wallace T. Fowler (Aerospace Engineering) has filed with the Secretary of the University Council the report of the University Council Committee to Examine the Undergraduate Writing Program set forth below. The Secretary has classified the recommendations contained in this report as major legislation. The 21-day circulation rule for major legislation will be complied with on March 4, 1994.

Notice is hereby given that this report will be presented to the University Council for discussion at its meeting on February 21, 1994, and for action at its meeting on March 21, 1994.

  
H. Paul Kelley, Secretary  
The University Council

Report of the  
**University Council Committee**  
 to Examine  
**the Undergraduate Writing Program**

January 28, 1994

**COMMITTEE**

**Floyd Brandt**  
 (Management)

**Richard Cherwitz**  
 (Speech Communication)

**Melissa Collie**  
 (Government)

**Donald G. Davis, Jr.**  
 (Library & Information Science)

**Lester Faigley**  
 (English / Director - Division of Rhetoric and Composition)

**Wallace Fowler, Committee Chair**  
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**Miguel Gonzalez-Gerth**  
 (Spanish and Portuguese)

**Deborah Morrison**  
 (Advertising)

**Michael Starbird**  
 (Mathematics and Associate Dean of Natural Sciences)

**REPORT OF THE UNIVERSITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE TO EXAMINE  
 THE UNDERGRADUATE WRITING PROGRAM**

**Executive Summary**

The ability to communicate clearly and concisely in writing is a primary characteristic of the educated person. According to the Second Report of the Harvard Assessment Seminars in 1992, the only predictor of the intensity and student involvement in a course is the amount of writing done by the students in the course. If graduates of The University of Texas at Austin are to function well in the 21st century, their writing skills must be of the highest quality. The consensus of the UT Austin faculty who responded to a committee survey is that despite current efforts, most of our students do not write well. We, the faculty, are challenged with creating an environment in which our students become good writers.

Students can learn to write well; faculty from all disciplines can learn to teach writing well. The goal of the undergraduate writing program at UT Austin should be to develop the writing skills of all of our graduates so that they are not just adequate writers, but are excellent writers. The Division of Rhetoric and Composition was established in June 1993 to take the lead in meeting these challenges. We are fortunate that UT Austin has a strong deserved national reputation in the use of technology to teach writing - a resource which must be focused on developing the writing skills of all of our students.

Our current formal writing program, characterized by a freshman rhetoric and composition course followed by two Substantial Writing Component (SWC) courses, has two major problems. First, it provides many of our students with insufficient practice, critical feedback, and re-writing opportunities. Second, the current formal writing program is viewed by many faculty in terms of meeting a UT requirement rather than as a necessary step in the education of our students. Some faculty feel that the SWC requirement absolves them from the responsibility to improve student writing in their own classes.

The UT Austin SWC requirement has been a useful step in developing student writing; we should now take the next steps. The challenge is to maintain the effective aspects of the current writing program and to improve the weaker aspects using a minimum of new resources, facilities, and personnel. A crucial factor will be the acquisition of any necessary new resources (people, facilities, and funds).

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Strongly encourage more writing in all courses at UT Austin
- Fully implement the Undergraduate Writing Center as soon as possible
- Train faculty to use writing to increase student learning
- Train AIs to teach writing in the disciplines
- Appoint University-wide and college committees on writing quality
- Recognize faculty and AIs who are especially effective in teaching writing
- Modify course evaluations to include items on writing instruction

REPORT OF THE UNIVERSITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE TO EXAMINE  
THE UNDERGRADUATE WRITING PROGRAM

The members of the University Council Committee to Examine the Undergraduate Writing Program are Professors Floyd Brandt (Management), Richard Cherwitz (Speech Communication), Melissa Collie (Government), Donald G. Davis, Jr. (Library and Information Science), Lester Faigley (English & Director - Division of Rhetoric and Composition), Wallace Fowler, committee chair (Aerospace Engineering / Engineering Mechanics), Miguel Gonzalez-Gerth (Spanish and Portuguese), Deborah Morrison (Advertising), and Michael Starbird (Mathematics and Associate Dean of Natural Sciences).

The committee members found that studying the importance of writing in education produced significant changes in our teaching. Each of us increased the amount and variety of writing done by our students. We found that we were designing assignments with the multiple goals of meeting course learning objectives, having our students write more, and having them read and judge the writing of their peers. We found that minor modifications in assignments can produce major changes the amount and quality of student writing. We feel strongly that all faculty should consciously examine the writing of their students and actively seek ways to incorporate more writing into their courses.

## Introduction

This report examines the current status of writing instruction at UT Austin, both within formal writing courses and in courses in which writing is not one of the primary course objectives. Our committee developed a survey on student writing and distributed it to all UT Austin faculty members. The consensus of the UT faculty who responded is that despite our current efforts, most of our students do not write well. Less than 10% of the faculty think that their students write well (excellent or good). More than 90% rate the writing of their students in the fair to poor range.

Good writing requires clear thinking. Students who write well master certain thinking abilities which they can exploit in their writing. Among these abilities are:

- the ability to pose worthwhile questions;
- the ability to evaluate the adequacy of an argument;
- the ability to move easily and unconfusedly among facts, inferences, and opinions;
- the ability to construct and support arguments within disciplines;
- the ability to deal with ill-formed problems and quandaries;
- the ability to give and receive criticism profitably;
- the ability to agree or disagree by measure; AND
- the ability to extend a line of thought beyond the range of first impressions.

Our students can learn these skills, but they must be taught. Currently, at UT Austin, we depend upon Substantial Writing Component courses to provide the opportunities needed to develop these abilities. Most other courses should also help students to develop them. This report presents some problems in our current writing instruction and suggests ways in which we might improve.

The report consists of an executive summary and three main sections. The first section reviews the status of Substantial Writing Component (SWC) courses. The second section reviews status of writing in courses in which writing is not a primary focus (non-SWC courses). The third section contains recommendations aimed toward improving writing instruction at UT Austin.

## Section 1: Substantial Writing Component (SWC) Courses

The committee examined published data concerning the writing programs at major universities which have requirements comparable to our SWC requirements. In addition, selected program directors were interviewed. The committee found that programs which have been most successful in improving campus-wide writing are those where the institution provided focused resources to support courses in the writing program. Universities that have been less successful in improving writing campus-wide have a writing-intensive course requirement but offer little or no focused support of those courses.

Successful writing programs at major research universities have all or most of the following means of supporting writing-intensive courses. Two of the best programs are at the University of Michigan and Cornell University. These programs have:

- a standing university faculty committee that provides guidelines for writing intensive courses.
- data collected and maintained on writing-intensive courses. For example, outstanding course designs are identified and used as models for other courses.
- workshops on teaching writing in specific disciplines led by faculty in those disciplines. Faculty who give these workshops are compensated, and often faculty who attend are also compensated.
- a training program and ongoing workshops for graduate students who assist faculty in writing-intensive courses.
- recognition of faculty who teach writing-intensive courses well.
- a writing center that provides consulting and other services for students in writing-intensive courses.

The UT Austin Substantial Writing Component Requirement does not have all of the characteristics listed above.

## Status of SWC Courses

The status of the writing instruction in substantial writing component (SWC) courses was discussed extensively by the Committee to Examine the Basic Education Requirement in 1987. A primary focus of the 1987 committee was the SWC courses, their availability, how they were being taught, by whom they were being taught, and how they were perceived by the faculty. Many of the findings of this committee are still valid today. Problems which were identified by the 1987 committee and still exist include unbalanced distribution of SWC courses, wide variation in course writing content, adverse faculty attitudes, and lack of training and support for faculty and graduate students who teach SWC courses.

The SWC course experience at UT Austin has had mixed success, with teaching units here repeating the patterns found at other institutions. The programs which succeed are those which focus resources on SWC courses. Some of our colleges and departments which focus resources to support writing courses are the Division of Rhetoric and Composition, the College of Business Administration, and the College of Engineering. Units which have experienced difficulties with SWC courses are those which have found it difficult to focus resources for this purpose. As a consequence the number, content, and quality of writing-intensive courses varies widely across campus.

Of special note with respect to the SWC course is the faculty training and consultation provided to writing faculty by the staff of the Center for Teaching Effectiveness (CTE). The CTE has collected references on the teaching of writing and has made consultations available for SWC faculty for several years. For many colleges, the only resources available to aid faculty in learning to teach SWC courses have come from CTE.

## Problems With SWC Courses

Many of the problems found by the present committee were similar to those found by the 1987 committee. The problems which we identified by the current committee are:

1. **Unbalanced Distribution of SWC Courses Across the University.** Some departments still offer many sections of SWC courses while others offer none. The situation is better than in 1987, but more good SWC courses are needed across campus if the current requirement is to be retained.
2. **Limited Resources.** The SWC requirement was imposed on departments with no reallocation of resources or allocation of new resources to meet the additional teaching requirements. As noted above, some departments and colleges still have not found the resources to teach their own SWC courses and rely on courses taught in other departments.
3. **Adverse Faculty Attitudes.** Many faculty remain reluctant to offer SWC courses. In 1987, faculty reported that the credit given for offering SWC courses was not commensurate for the amount of effort required to do it well. Many faculty assigned more writing than required in a SWC course, but they did not want to have their courses listed as SWC courses. They did not want to teach large classes of uninterested non-majors just taking a course to fulfill the SWC requirement. Such problems still exist today.

4. **Variations in SWC Courses.** Large variations occur between SWC courses taught by faculty trained to teach and evaluate writing and faculty not trained to do this. Also, significant variations result from the conflict between the goals of teaching content and teaching writing. Individual instructors may resolve this conflict in different ways, resulting in very different weightings for the writing component, even among the sections of a single course.
5. **Faculty Training / Grading Questions.** Individual faculty still refrain from teaching SWC courses because they feel that they do not know enough about writing or about composition instruction to do a good job. Some faculty need training in order to be able to handle SWC courses effectively.
6. **Lack of Training of Teaching Assistants and Assistant Instructors Who Deal With Writing.** At large research universities, graduate student instructors carry much of the burden of teaching writing. Outside of the Division of Rhetoric and Composition, there is no training program for TAs and AIs who might support SWC courses.

## Section 2: Writing in Non-SWC Courses

The committee members think that enhancement of the writing instruction in non-SWC courses offers the greatest opportunity to improve the quality of student writing at UT Austin. Students in many colleges currently take only three or four courses in which writing is emphasized out of forty or more in their degree plans. There exist many opportunities to enhance writing skills in the 90% of their degree plans which do not directly involve writing instruction. A key to getting the faculty to adopt any such program is to show, through example, how writing instruction can be enhanced without taking much time from current course subject matter and how student writing can be effectively evaluated without requiring significant new resources (faculty time, teaching assistant time, funding).

The committee adopted the philosophy that good writing is vital to every field of study at the university level. The recommendations and classroom techniques suggested in this report are based on the following guiding principles:

1. **Writing should be required in every course at the University.** We should recognize that, in a sense, the distinction between SWC and non-SWC is partially arbitrary, perhaps even a matter of convenience. By maintaining this distinction, we mistakenly communicate the idea that writing is important and relevant to some subject matters but not to others. While there may be pedagogical and practical differences for maintaining this distinction, writing must be encouraged in all classes; it is important and germane to all academic areas of study.
2. **Writing is not a separate act from reading, understanding, or critical thinking; indeed, the act of writing should be viewed by faculty and students as a means for enriching and better understanding all aspects of the course.** The committee endorses the idea that writing is one form of the active creation of knowledge, rather than the mere transmission of what exists. One of the academic

lessons learned in the last century is that the content and form of discourse cannot be entirely segregated. Writing is an essential part of the way we create and discover; therefore, the act of writing must be conceived of and taught as more than a separate act or as a set of additive skills developed subsequent to learning a subject matter.

3. **Students have a responsibility to learn.** That is, students should be held accountable for valuing the process of writing, for completing all writing assignments, and for seeking to improve their writing skills. As in all academic pursuits, a large part of the responsibility for learning to write belongs to students; instruction is only one part of the learning process. Hence, the burden to improve writing must be shared by students. We must acknowledge that the goal of improving writing cannot be accomplished entirely through formal instruction and feedback. Faculty can only facilitate effective writing. To become effective writers, students must oftentimes learn to create writing opportunities and to nurture their writing skills independent of the classroom. In short, the onus for finding ways to improve writing must be shared by students and faculty alike; it is a matter of mutual accountability.

If every course required more writing, students' writing would improve. Implementation of more writing in each course would require a faculty focus on writing in addition to the focus on traditional course material. Many courses offer unique challenges for which innovative solutions will be required. Problems such as large class sizes, how to evaluate student writing, and how to integrate writing into classes which traditionally do not focus on writing skills (e.g., mathematics, engineering, physical education) will have to be addressed. Specific recommendations concerning how some of these problems might be addressed are provided in our recommendations.

Of course, there would have to be exceptions if a "more writing in every course" policy were adopted. Performance courses in music, drama, and studio courses in art are obvious. Also, basic skills courses in physical education such as swimming, handball, etc. come to mind. However, there are other courses in which a "special" writing requirement might be required. Foreign language courses should have more writing -- in that language. This, as in courses taught in English, would lead to better student learning of the basic course material.

### Strategies to Increase Writing Quality in Non-SWC Courses

As part of our deliberations, the committee discussed ways to increase the amount of writing in non-SWC courses. The following strategies, developed out of committee deliberations, are specific classroom ideas aimed at making writing a stronger part of all curricula. Each idea should inspire a longer list of ideas suited to specific disciplines and situations.

1. **Share personal writings with students.** Professors who share their own writing in class offer a personal investment in class material and class assignments. A teacher's writing can be shared as such or simply offered as one of many papers offered for class evaluation. Students must realize that professors place a high value on their own writing skills and seek to improve them even as professionals.

2. **Use alternative methods of feedback.** One student can read and evaluate another student's writing, a technique which strengthens editing and evaluation skills. Selected students can edit via overhead in front of the class to show their approach and editing technique. Writing assignments might be displayed--both edited and non-edited versions--in the classroom for public viewing.
3. **Use nontraditional evaluation methods.** Not all student writing need be graded by traditional methods; some writing might be reviewed for content, other assignments for critical analysis, organization, or creative perspective. Another possibility is grading a random 20% of the student work, providing carefully detailed feedback for a few students on each assignment.
4. **Support course content with writing assignments.** Writing in every class session would be an ideal goal for most courses. Five minute exercises to clarify concepts would aid the instructor in determining if students understand the material. Possible assignments: summarize the reading assignment, summarize the lecture, summarize the lecture at the 25 minute point in a 50-minute class. Asking students to write abstracts of lectures or reading material underscores the need for succinct, critical writing in scholarly and professional work.
5. **Assign exploratory writing.** Journal writing can be assigned to more fully explore readings, question theories and methodologies, or judge practical application of abstract material. Autobiographical writing fosters clearer understanding of self and relationship to the class material; such personal perspective can be included in classes usually dedicated to empirical exploration, as well as other courses. Students writing a journal could be constrained to two or three pages per day.
6. **Use specific topic writing assignments.** Have students write short, one-to-two-page papers on specific topics each day. Collect all of the papers each day and give up to ten papers each to selected students. These students might be given a week to read and evaluate the writing quality and content of each paper, also using the information contained in them to write a short summary document on the assigned topic. Summary documents might then be made available to the class.
7. **Critique writing through peer evaluation.** Have each student write a paragraph or two and have a neighbor evaluate the writing. Such exercises have double value since students write and evaluate writing soon after. Such exercises can be done during class, or as homework.
8. **Develop writing portfolios.** Suggest / require that students develop and maintain writing portfolios to document their writing abilities. A writing portfolio should be a treasured part of what each student takes from UT Austin.

We make one final observation before presenting recommendations. Though we recognize that certain fiscal and logistical limitations may prohibit sweeping changes in curriculum and course structure, we nevertheless feel a strong argument should be made for lowering the student-to-faculty ratio in all classes to facilitate more careful interaction between professor and student concerning the course material and the writing process. Concomitantly, attention must be given to lowering student numbers in intensive writing classes in order for more individualized instruction to take place.

## Section 3: Recommendations

A university culture must be dedicated to encouraging good quality writing by its students. Our committee's recommendations focus on the most important issue framing this discussion: improving the quality of student / professor interaction about the improvement of writing. Our recommendations are action-oriented and, if implemented, will require faculty time and input as well as institutional resources. The committee strongly urges the University Council to use these recommendations as the starting point for an innovative program to improve the quality of the writing done by all of our students.

First, twelve basic recommendations which can be implemented in the near term are presented. Next, a single long term recommendation is presented. The committee strongly endorses all recommendations and urges the University Council to consider them thoughtfully, to debate them, and to use them as a catalyst in the development of a writing program for UT Austin for the 21st century

### Basic Recommendations

1. **Strongly encourage more writing in all courses taught at UT Austin.** Students should be required to exercise their writing skills in every course taught at UT Austin. We should provide our students with many opportunities to learn to write clearly and concisely. As faculty -- as designers of the UT educational environment -- we must create an environment in which our students become good writers in their major fields.
2. **Fully implement the Undergraduate Writing Center (UWC) as rapidly as is consistent with available resources and good academic program design.** Specifically, provide resources to support one-to-one tutoring and electronic consultation services offered to all undergraduate students through the UWC. The UWC opened on September 15, 1993, in a temporary location and is now offering help to students in Division of Rhetoric and Composition courses. The UWC plans to assist all undergraduate students beginning in Fall 1994. The Writing Center is an important means of making the SWC requirement live up to initial expectations.
3. **Train faculty to use writing to increase student learning.** Special workshops, featuring faculty noted for the effective teaching of writing, could be organized by the Center for Teaching Effectiveness and the Division of Rhetoric and Composition. Attendees would be nominated by their department chairs. The Center for Teaching Effectiveness and the Division of Rhetoric and Composition could also provide informal discussions on writing and ongoing consultation with instructors who are trying to improve the quality of their students' writing.
4. **Train graduate students to assist faculty in evaluating writing.** This training might take various forms, such as a module for 398T courses, an apprenticeship for TAs and AIs in the Undergraduate Writing Center, or workshops similar to those offered to faculty. A major focus of this training should be focused on

learning to provide student writers with appropriate and timely feedback, both in person and via electronic mail.

5. **Appoint a University of Texas at Austin Writing Committee to oversee campus-wide efforts to improve students' writing abilities.** This committee should monitor student writing quality and recommend to the University Council actions designed to enhance the quality of student writing. Specifically, the committee should be charged with:
  - acting as an advisory board for the University Writing Center (UWC),
  - developing a set of goal statements concerning writing quality for graduating students and outlining a writing standard which addresses levels of valid persuasive argument for university students. Importantly, goal statements also should be developed at departmental levels, giving credence and form to the specific writing issues of the discipline,
  - identifying resources required to implement programs to improve writing quality,
  - recommending guidelines for SWC courses and revised procedures for approving SWC courses,
  - recommending procedures for the collection and dissemination of successful SWC course syllabi and writing assignments, and
  - developing and recommending a plan to assess the success of the SWC requirement.
6. **As a corollary recommendation to that presented above, ask each college and school to establish a Writing Committee to define writing standards and monitor the quality of writing instruction within that college.** Each college/school committee should produce standards and objectives for writing within its fields. The chairs of the college committees might form the recommended University of Texas at Austin Writing Committee.
7. **Develop a process to identify and recognize faculty who are especially effective in teaching writing.** Two categories of writing instruction should be recognized—writing instruction in courses in which writing is the primary focus, and writing instruction in courses in which writing is not the primary course objective. Recognition for high quality writing instruction within the various colleges should also be encouraged.
8. **Develop a process to identify and recognize adjunct faculty and graduate students who are especially effective in teaching writing.** As in the item above, two categories of writing instruction should be recognized (writing instruction in courses in which writing is the primary focus, and writing instruction in courses in which writing is not the primary course objective). Recognition for high quality writing instruction within the various colleges should also be encouraged.
9. **Modify the course evaluations so that they address the writing instruction within specific courses.** The current Course-Instructor Surveys do not address writing quality directly, even for writing courses. All course evaluations should ask specific questions about writing such as:
  - (1) How much writing did you do in this class?
  - (2) How much feedback did you get on the quality of your writing?

(3) How much re-writing were you required to do?  
We recommend that the Center for Teaching Effectiveness be consulted when formulating the item(s) for the evaluations.

10. Encourage programs within colleges (Teaching Days, etc. ) which focus on the teaching of writing within specific disciplines. Our committee members found that our discussions of the writing problem have changed our personal views of the importance of writing. We agreed immediately that writing is an extremely important component of any college education and is worthy of special attention. Moreover, each of us has examined and changed the writing instruction in our courses as a result of serving on this committee. Awareness of the problem by more faculty is a key to its solution.
11. Develop and maintain a library of materials concerning the teaching of writing at the university level. This library should reside in the new Division of Rhetoric and Composition and be available to all faculty who want to improve the quality of writing in their courses as well as to Division faculty and staff.
12. Offer adjunct courses taught by AIs in subject areas. These AIs would be from the various disciplines and would be trained by the Division of Rhetoric and Composition. The courses would be offered under Rhetoric and Composition course numbers. The AIs would be funded by the college, school, or department which requested the course for its students.

### **Long Term Recommendation**

13. UT Austin should consider sweeping modification and strengthening of the writing requirement. Our current formal SWC-based writing program provides many of our students with insufficient practice, critical feedback, and re-writing opportunities. Meanwhile, some faculty feel that the SWC requirement absolves them from the responsibility to improve student writing in their own classes. The committee suggests that although the Substantial Writing Component requirement has been a useful step in developing student writing, UT Austin may be ready for the next step. We recommend that representatives from across the campus be involved in designing and implementing a writing program which involves most courses and faculty on campus.