

## IMPROVING THE WRITING SKILLS OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS

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*This article discusses the declining ability of social work students to write proficiently and offers a brief historical review of different approaches to the writing problems of American students. It describes the development of a writing assistance program at a graduate school and the program's outcomes after its initial year. Using a global writing assessment, the authors found that 1/3 of entering MSW students had inadequate writing skills, and only 57% of these took advantage of the writing assistance offered.*

AS COLLEGE PROFESSORS with many years of experience teaching at the undergraduate and graduate levels, the authors of this article have often decried the lack of academic ability of our incoming students. Along with many colleagues, we have wide-ranging concerns about the academic ability of social work students. These concerns include poor study habits, an inability to produce focused assignments, imprecise or unethical use of research data, and an unwillingness to take the time to perfect assignments. However, the most serious deficiency has been in our students' declining ability to write. Students appear unable to explore issues with depth and complexity, to organize material in a coherent manner with full development and detail, and to write

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with control over diction, syntactic variety, and transition (White, 1994).

We believe that faculty members' concerns spring from a comparison of today's students with those in the past. Evidence for such a comparison is sparse, of course, because no body of longitudinal research exists. Does lack of empirical evidence mean we should dismiss concerns about current students' writing abilities as nothing more than nostalgia for something that never was (Winch & Wells, 1995)? Certainly not! We assert that if educators are dissatisfied with current students' skills they are obligated to develop methods to improve those skills.

This article discusses social work students' ability to write. Although focused on professional graduate studies, our observations and conclusions may also apply to undergraduate studies as well. First, we present some evidence suggesting that indeed a decline exists in the ability of students at all educational levels to be

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proficient writers. Then we offer a brief historical review of different approaches to the writing problems of American students and ask if it really matters whether or not social workers can write well. Finally, we describe an attempt at one school of social work to identify students with writing deficiencies and provide opportunities for improvement.

### The Problem

Over the past three decades, growing numbers of students at all levels of education are perceived as not adequately proficient in writing (Cooper, 1999; Corrallo, 1995). Evidence supporting this assertion can be found in the writing assessment studies of elementary and secondary schools as well as colleges. Under the auspices of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the Educational Testing Service (ETS), and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), data was collected on writing proficiency among elementary, middle, and high school students between 1969 and 1990. Data were published in three reports: *Writing achievement, 1969-79: results from the third national writing assessment, Vol. I—17-year-olds* (NAEP, 1980), *Writing trends across the decade, 1974-84* (Applebee, Langer, & Mullis, 1986), and *Trends in academic performance: Achievement of American students in science, 1970-90, mathematics, 1973-90, reading, 1971-90, and writing, 1984-90* (Mullis et al., 1992). Findings from these studies are summarized as follows: (1) writing performance of 17-year-olds declined slightly in quality between 1969 and 1979 (NAEP, 1980); (2) their rhetorical skill on a narrative task also declined between 1969 and 1979 (NAEP, 1980); (3) rhetorical skill on a persuasive writing task declined between 1974 and 1979 (Applebee et al., 1986); (4) proportions of students who wrote minimally acceptable papers dropped from 78% to 73%, and those writing

successful papers declined from 21% to 15% (Applebee et al., 1986); (5) 8th graders' average writing performance in 1990 was lower than in 1984 (Mullis et al., 1992); and, (6) both 4th and 11th graders' average writing performances in 1990 were lower than in 1988 (Mullis et al., 1992).

The most recent report on writing skills among America's young people is *NAEP 1998 Writing: Report Card for the Nation and the States* (Greenwald, Persky, Campbell, & Mazzeo, 1999). Gary W. Phillips, Acting Commissioner of Education Statistics, summarized the report's content this way: "The average, or typical, American student is not a proficient writer. Instead, students show only partial mastery of the knowledge and skills needed for a solid academic performance in writing" (Cooper, 1999, p. 17A). Examination of the 1998 NAEP report reveals that approximately 25% of the fourth, eighth, and twelfth graders tested scored at or above proficiency. Specifically, the results were as follows: Grade 4 (23%), Grade 8 (27%) and Grade 12 (22%).

This problem is not confined to the United States. A study of writing skill among college students in the United Kingdom was completed in 1992 (Winch & Wells, 1995). Surveys were distributed to 336 first-year college students in seventeen institutions; a 51.5% response rate was obtained. Student respondents were asked to construct a written argument on a subject relevant to the discipline they were studying. Their work was assessed for errors in spelling, punctuation, vocabulary, morphology, syntax, and omission; ample time was provided for both thought and self-correction. The researchers established that regardless of the actual frequency of specific errors, if six types of errors occurred (spelling, punctuation, vocabulary, morphology, syntax, and omission) in a student's work, a need for remedial support was indicated. Using this criterion, the study found that





about a third of all students ( $n=50$ ) were not proficient writers and required extra assistance. Winch and Wells (1995) concluded that

there is a prima facie cause for concern that standards of student literacy are not what one might expect. Indeed, it does not appear to be too outrageous to claim that most of these abilities should have been achieved by the end of the compulsory phase of education at the very latest. (p. 77)

### Finding Solutions to the Problem of Poor Writing Skills

Educators at all levels have been willing to face the writing crisis, and many different approaches to addressing the writing problems of American students have emerged during the past decades (Applebee, Langer, & Mullis, 1986). Starting in the early 1970s, many writing experts believed that the Writing-across-the-Curriculum (WAC) movement would improve the writing skills of students from grade school through the undergraduate years (Barnett & Blumner, 1999; Fulwiler & Young, 1982; Haring-Smith, 1985). Based on the belief that writing should not be taught only in English composition courses, WAC programs engaged all of a school's instructors in focusing on the development of their students' writing skills. Although WAC proved partially effective in several areas of learning, writing problems continued to plague students as indicated by the assessment surveys referenced above.

The most recent solution in precollegiate education is "the high standards movement" and its spin-off, rigorous high school exit exams that assess college preparedness ("Colleges prepare," 2000). Florida was the first state to adopt basic skills graduation tests in the 1980s. Now, many states are following this lead. Massachusetts and New York, for example,

have developed the most demanding tests covering core high school subjects, and in trial runs 25% to 50% of students have received failing scores ("Colleges prepare," 2000).

Despite these efforts, college and university instructors still face large numbers of students who are unprepared to write effectively. In the past, the primary response of faculty had been the development of low profile writing labs. However, after Yale University announced the opening of their Learning Center in the mid-1970s, many four-year colleges in the United States and England either announced that their writing labs were now more broadly focused "learning centers" or they established such centers. (Olson, 1984). The earlier writing labs established for remedial purposes provided a triage function, sorting students by level of deficit into different programs ranging from intense tutoring and mentoring to casual drop-in assistance (Boquet, 1999; Crump, 1998). The more recent trend in writing assistance is to structure writing labs as "resource centers" that encourage all students to participate in writing groups and peer assistance (Childers, 1999). Once writing assistance centers—whether labs or learning centers—were established, however, many colleges found they were unable to keep up with the demands of students and referrals from instructors. They also worried that despite their best efforts, students were being advanced without the skills necessary for success in the junior and senior years. Thus, some colleges created required developmental English courses to be taken in the first semester of the Freshman year or in summer sessions prior to enrollment (Applebee et al., 1986).

During the 1980s, college educators introduced critical thinking which they hoped would contribute to solving students' learning and writing problems, critical thinking (Clarke & Biddle, 1993). Most writing teachers recognized that the





critical thinking (CT) advocates were presenting many of the principles long-associated with the "writing-as-process" approach to writing instruction—topic selection, statement of purpose, outline of procedure, selection of evidence, and logical formation of argument. As a result, many of the instructional methods for teaching writing and critical thinking have merged during the last decade.

Unfortunately, despite these many efforts in high schools and colleges—WAC programs, writing labs and centers, developmental English courses, and CT methods—it is believed by many that large numbers of students continue to graduate from college and matriculate to graduate school without adequate writing skills. Little attention has been given to this problem, and only a few professional graduate schools have mounted programs to remediate it. These include the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the University of Wisconsin at Madison, which have both created online writing centers to accompany their on-campus centers (see Table 1 for URLs).

### Does Good Writing Matter?

Given that there is some evidence suggesting a decline in student writing skill, it seems important to ask if it really matters whether or not social workers are skilled writers. Is this skill as important

for social work students as skills in relationship building, critical thinking and planning, intervening, etc.? This is not simply a rhetorical question. We have heard some students and faculty argue that today's lack of writing proficiency is not a problem. This argument starts with the assertion that writing is a minor skill for professional social workers and, therefore, "writing shouldn't count" (or shouldn't count for much) in assessing students' performance. The argument continues by asserting that clinical professionals, especially, do not need to spend time perfecting writing skills because their primary writing activity is limited to case notes and clinical reports. Others argue that the ability to be self-expressive and creative is a more important attribute of a writer than accuracy, organizational skill, and knowledge of syntax. This view holds that writing standards are a barrier to students' ability to think creatively and freely, and that they put undue attention on mechanics and structures. Finally, some believe that current technology and electronic media have made writing skill largely superfluous. Word processing, spelling and grammar checks, and the electronic thesaurus have made it unnecessary for professionals to be proficient writers themselves.

We disagree with these positions, arguing that never has writing skill been more important for professional social work than it is now. The increasing complexity of human lives and situations requires that clinicians be able to clearly express the meaning of their professional judgments so that others can understand and implement them appropriately. Capturing the concrete world by translating observations into narrative is thus a crucial skill for all clinicians. Other kinds of social workers need the ability to build persuasive arguments that convince law enforcement authorities and judges of a plan or certain path of action. Community workers not only need to advocate in

**Table 1. Online Writing Center Resources**

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Harvard Graduate School of Education <a href="http://gseweb.harvard.edu/~writing">http://gseweb.harvard.edu/~writing</a>
<i>The Writing Lab Newsletter</i> <a href="http://owl.english.purdue.edu">http://owl.english.purdue.edu</a> (edited by Muriel Harris, a publication of the National Writing Centers Association, an assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English)
University of Wisconsin-Madison <a href="http://www.wisc.edu/writing">http://www.wisc.edu/writing</a>

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writing, but they must also craft appeals to foundations and governmental agencies and write proposals that will result in funding for needed programs and services. It is not overly dramatic to say that the lives of clients can be significantly diminished by social workers' inability to write well, or significantly enhanced by strong writing proficiency in social workers.

The argument that creativity and self-expression are stifled by an insistence on good writing is a false dichotomy because it assumes the two are mutually exclusive. Quite the opposite is true. Mastery of the rules of sentence construction and punctuation are essential for expressing meaning in a clear and unambiguous way and for the development of a clear and individual style. Self-expression in writing involves engagement in a rule-governed activity which nevertheless allows great scope for the development of an individual style.

The argument that we are moving into an age of post-literacy where electronic media renders old fashioned alphabetic literacy obsolete is somewhat plausible. After all, we spend many hours each week obtaining information and communicating on the Internet and the World Wide Web. Is this activity making obsolete our need, and subsequently our ability, to write well, or is the opposite the reality? We argue that the latter is the case because the volume of writing has actually been increased by the advent of electronic media. The facility with which writing can be produced, either on screen or on paper, has led to its proliferation (Winch & Wells, 1995). If this is the case, then educators certainly have a responsibility to ensure the quality of the written word in future generations.

### One Graduate School's Response

The problem of students' deficient writing skills is often exacerbated in graduate social work students because some

students have been out of college for many years. In addition, the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act has resulted in an increase in the number of students with learning disabilities entering graduate schools.

### The Pilot Program

The faculty of the medium-sized graduate social work program at the University of Denver became increasingly concerned that they were graduating some students who did not have the ability to communicate effectively in writing. Over a period of several years, an increasing amount of anecdotal evidence from classroom faculty and especially from field instructors seemed to verify this concern. However, several discussions at faculty meetings only confirmed the lack of empirical information about the extent and severity of the problem. These discussions did not result in a firm consensus that a problem existed, nor did they produce an agreement on what should be done about it, if a problem did exist.

During the summer of 1998, a small committee of interested faculty members decided to develop a pilot program to implement during the following academic year. The program had two components: a writing assessment of incoming students, and writing assistance offered to students throughout the year in a newly developing writing lab. Further, the committee decided that assistance should be provided to students only on a voluntary basis. This decision was based on their belief that graduate students are adult learners who should be responsible for their own academic development. Finally, writing assistance was to be provided in the most accessible format that could be developed. The project was named "Writing Counts" to emphasize the faculty committee's conviction that good writing skills are essential for effective professional social work practice and that the





evaluation of students' writing skills should be an integral part of all assessments of student performance.

The Writing Counts committee conducted a search to find a writing instructor. A retired full professor of English with 34 years of experience in teaching composition was hired for the part-time position of writing lab director/instructor for a modest hourly rate. In addition, an office was found for the writing lab, procedures developed for publicizing the program, and guidelines written for evaluating the pilot.

#### **Administration of the Writing Assessment Tool**

During the fall of 1998, a spontaneous writing assessment was added to the regular orientation format for new students. The structure of the assessment, described below, was intended to determine the ability of students to respond effectively in writing to a spontaneous prompt. The ability to respond coherently to a spontaneous prompt is comparable to the problem solving required of social workers in the field. The two activities present the worker and the writer with parallel consecutive tasks:

- Recognition of the problem (topic);
- Selection of an appropriate solution (method of development); and
- Logical implementation of the solution (effective organization and articulation of ideas).

The writing assessment followed a regular orientation activity in which new students meet in small groups with a faculty member to read and then discuss a case study. This "get acquainted" exercise is meant to introduce basic social work concepts within the context of a realistic case presentation. The case focuses on a young boy named Angel:

Angel, a 12 year old youth, has been

referred to a school social worker because he has been acting out, displaying violent behavior, and exhibiting a fascination with a cigarette lighter in class. He has been referred to assessment and consultation. The intake process revealed several problems. Angel has reported that his father recently "rejoined" the family "after an absence" (no further details available). Because of shootings in the past week on their block, Angel's mother has been very fearful and anxious. Angel reported that he and his brothers and sisters missed school several days after the shooting.

Angel's ESL instructor reports the father speaks some Spanish and a little English; the mother speaks a Guatemalan regional dialect. The instructor states that in one-on-one sessions with Angel he displays very good behavior and responds well with a positive attitude. She also reports that the classroom teacher has commented on Angel's poor social interactions and behavior with classmates.

After 45 minutes of discussion, students are reassembled and each group is asked to list briefly the interventions they decided would help remediate the case problem.

In the fall 1998 orientation, following the discussion and a break, students were given 45 minutes to construct a written response to the following prompt:

Thinking about the discussion in your small group as well as that in the large group, select 3 or 4 typical social work methods of intervention that you would use in the case of 12 year-old Angel. From these 3 or 4 methods, select one as the best and defend your decision logically. Or, select a social work method which you thought about but which was not discussed and defend your idea logically.

Specifically, your task here is to construct a formal essay of 4 or 5 paragraphs that includes an introduction,





body, and conclusion. You must briefly, but adequately (1) describe 3 or 4 methods of intervening, explaining how they are typical social work methods rather than another type, e.g. a psychologist's method; and then, (2) select one social work method which you must defend logically as the best means of intervention for a social worker in this case.

During the next two weeks each writing sample ( $N=124$ ) was read by the newly hired writing lab director, and by one of the five faculty committee members. The papers were assessed using six criteria:

- *Diction*—word choice is appropriate and precise
- *Sentences*—variety of compound, complex, and simple; no fragments; active voice
- *Paragraphs*—well organized, clear focus
- *General organization*—clear focus, thesis is apparent; logical structure, clear introduction, body, conclusion; coherence, appropriate transitions; evidence, appropriate and sufficient details
- *Mechanics*—spelling, punctuation, capitalization
- *Usage*—appropriate subject-verb agreement and pronoun reference.

These criteria are consistent with those found in recent composition textbooks (Aaron, 1999; Axelrod & Cooper, 2001; Rottenberg, 2000) and national writing assessments and are accepted as valid measures of good writing (Corrallo, 1995; Greenwald et al., 1999; Mullis et al., 1992; NAEP, 1980).

The five faculty members were given written instruction regarding these criteria (see Appendix). In the future, a short training session will be provided to further clarify these criteria and thus improve inter-rater reliability.

Faculty evaluators were instructed to assign each paper a score between 1 and

4 (4=A, 3=B, 2=C, and 1=D) based on the six criteria. This process uses the holistic assessment approach where the evaluator compares each paper to an ideal response to the prompt and then assigns a score by determining how well a paper conforms to the ideal.

The scores from the two evaluators (the writing lab director and one faculty member) were then summed, producing a global score between eight and two (8-7=A, 6-5=B, 4-3=C, and 2=D). Each student's writing sample, score sheets with numeric ratings, and written comments were placed in a file in the writing lab. A letter was then placed in students' mailboxes informing them that their essay scores and written comments were available in the writing lab. Thus, only those students who came to the lab obtained their scores and comments.

### Writing Assistance

During the first weeks of the fall 1998 quarter the writing lab was established and the writing lab director was hired. In a memo, students were informed that the lab would be open three days a week from 4:00 to 6:00, or by special appointment; that they should bring rough drafts of assigned papers to the lab well before they were due so that the lab director could provide assistance with organization and logical sentence construction; and that they should not expect to receive proofreading services. Finally, the faculty committee encouraged all faculty members to refer students with writing needs to the lab.

### Results of the Pilot Program

#### Assessment Results

Faculty committee members wanted to know if their perceptions of students' writing ability were correct; namely, that a significant number of incoming stu-





dents lacked the ability to write a grammatically correct and logically organized response to a probing question. The committee was also curious to see what the grading curve of such an assessment would look like.

As described above, the assessment was administered to all new students who attended orientation. Since the total number of new students enrolled in the fall of 1998 was 140, the 124 assessments obtained represented 89% of this class. Scores for 124 students, shown in Table 2, can be translated into letter grades as follows: 19% of students received an "A"; 47% received a "B"; 29% received a "C"; and, 5% received a "D".

Grades of "C" are below the minimum required for successful master's level work. The committee concluded that the high percentage of "C" and "D" assessment scores (more than a third) indicated a problem that should be addressed programmatically.

The score sheets were also examined to determine the areas in which students had strengths and weaknesses. The faculty had hypothesized before the assessment that students' greatest deficits lay in two areas—the mechanics of writing as well as clarity of expression. Surprisingly, students scored above average in clarity of expression and mechanics but below av-

erage in organization and focus. A large number of students ( $n=46$ ) simply did not answer the question posed by the prompt or their answers were diffuse and rambling.

As a secondary question, the committee wondered whether there was a difference in the scores assigned by those who evaluated the writing samples. The concern was whether social work faculty readers' standards were higher or lower than the English professor's. A paired t-test comparing the two sets of scores was run to answer this question. The results showed a mean difference of .282 ( $t\text{-value}=3.52$ ;  $p<.0007$ ) with the English professor assigning scores that were statistically significantly lower than the faculty scores. While this result was not unexpected, it perhaps underscores the need to focus on standards and to reach consensus about the level of writing skill expected of incoming social work students.

This finding should not be interpreted necessarily to mean that the assessment scores were not useful in predicting subsequent classroom performance. A modest positive correlation was found between students' assessment scores and their grade point average (GPA) for the first quarter ( $r=.66$ ;  $p>.05$ ). At the end of the year, an analysis of variance, using the letter grades as the grouping variable, showed a significant mean difference between the year's GPA for each group ( $F=4.23$ ;  $p<.0176$ ). In other words, students who received an "A" assessment score had on average a GPA for the year of 3.854, while students who received a "C" or "D" score had a GPA of 3.225.

### Use of the Writing Lab

The faculty at large was concerned about whether the writing lab would really be used, given the busy schedules of their graduate students and the general effects of grade inflation. If the quality of

**Table 2. First-Year MSW Students' Writing Assessment Scores (N=124)**

Scores	n	%
8	4	3
7	20	16
6	33	27
5	25	20
4	29	23
3	7	6
2	6	5
1	0	0
Total	124	100

Note. 8 or 7=A (19%); 6 or 5=B (47%); 4 or 3=C (29%); 2 or 1=D (5%).





writing was not a criteria for grading classroom assignments or few or no students received a "C" on classroom assignments would there be any incentive for students to use the lab? To answer this question, the lab director kept a record of the students who made and kept appointments and the number of times each student visited. Despite the accessibility of writing assistance, only 41 students (29%) out of 140 first-year students made 70 visits during the academic year with a dramatic drop in usage during the winter and spring quarters (fall quarter=31 students, winter quarter=8 students, and spring quarter=2 students). Overall, the committee was disappointed in lab attendance.

Given this low attendance, it was important to know what type of student did use the lab. Was it used by those who could already write well but had a compulsion for perfection, or by those it was designed to serve—students with writing difficulties? To answer this question, we correlated the writing assessment scores, number of visits, and GPA earned during the year for all 41 student lab attendees. We found a moderate negative relationship between assessment scores and lab visits. Students who attended the lab more frequently tended to have lower assessment scores ( $r=-.51$ ;  $p>.05$ ).

Another way of answering the question about who used the lab is to categorize the assessment scores by letter grade and run an analysis of variance using the number of lab visits as the independent variable. This analysis showed that the most frequent lab attendees were those who needed its services the most: 24% of attendees had received an "A" assessment while 33% had a "B" and 43% had received a "C" or "D" assessment score. Thus, of the 42 students assessed at the "C" or "D" level, 57% used the lab at least once, while 43% of these students never visited the lab.

A survey was administered to students

at the end of the year to evaluate the pilot program and to solicit students' opinions regarding several issues. Unfortunately, administration of the survey went badly and only 50 responses were obtained, and many of these contained numerous blank items. From the few usable responses, the following was learned:

- Most students who used the lab were self-referred.
- Most students saw no need to use the lab because as one wrote "my writing is up to par" and as another commented "I had English as an undergrad."
- A few said they would have used the lab if the hours had been more convenient.
- When asked what would motivate students to use the lab, most students replied "bad grades."

Based on the analysis of the spontaneous writing assessment and the records kept by the lab director during the year, the committee concluded that a remedial intervention was needed for about one-third of incoming MSW students. In addition, the committee concluded that, although lab attendance was less than expected, a fairly large number of students with writing difficulties did attend the lab at least once. Overall, however, the faculty was disheartened by the low attendance.

### Discussion

This study has described the Writing Counts demonstration project that assessed the writing proficiency of 124 first-year MSW students and provided a writing lab on a voluntary basis to those who wished to take advantage of its services. As such, the study has obvious limitations: it describes only one cohort of students at one graduate school. Certain characteristics of this school clearly affected the study's outcomes. For example, the school





is a private graduate school in a decentralized university which has financial resources to invest in supplemental student services that many public graduate schools may not have. The faculty of this school is sincerely dedicated to the adult learning model, and therefore refuses to make use of remedial services mandatory. Because of this, utilization of services by students who need them is always problematic. The limitations of this study suggest that its outcomes should not be generalized beyond the study parameters. Nevertheless, lessons learned here could be built upon by schools in other environments.

This study of the first year of the Writing Counts program produced mixed results. On the one hand, approximately one-third of entering students were assessed as needing writing assistance but only 57% of these students actually took advantage of the help that was offered. On the other hand, many of the 41 students who did use the lab were those who were most in need of its services. Given these mixed results, social work faculty members were asked to decide if students' writing problems were serious enough to warrant an ongoing Writing Counts program. After viewing the final report of the pilot year, the consensus of the faculty committee was that the program should continue for at least one more year. In addition, the social work faculty voted to add an undergraduate writing course to the school's entrance requirements as a prerequisite for admission.

Overall, the social work faculty felt the Writing Counts pilot program made a contribution to the quality of both the master's and doctoral programs and they decided to retain it, albeit with some adjustments and fine-tuning. Summarized below are the lessons learned during the first year.

Though not perfect, the writing assessment did a credible job of identifying

entering students with writing problems. However, despite its apparent usefulness, students viewed the assessment as an intrusion into Orientation Day and the social work faculty felt that the scoring phase was extremely time consuming. Therefore, they were asked to consider giving the assessment in class during the first or second week of the fall quarter. While such a plan may have relieved student stress and involved more faculty members in the identification and referral of students with writing difficulties, the social work faculty decided not to devote precious class time at the beginning of the year. Instead of administering any type of writing assessment in the fall of 1999, they elected to be more diligent in referring weak writers to the writing lab who they would identify through regular class writing assignments.

This strategy seemed to work. As a result of the decision to be more diligent in identifying weak writers, the number of students who attended the writing lab because of a faculty referral in the fall quarter of 1999 was four times that of the same quarter in 1998. However, over the same period, self-referrals decreased, an indication that the formal writing assessment in 1998 had motivated some students who received low scores to make use of the lab. Above it was noted that students in 1998, unlike those in 1999, had to go to the lab during its open hours to obtain their writing assessment scores. Although 57% of students who received a "C" or "D" did obtain the score in this manner and did attend the lab at least once, 43% did not. At the time we thought having to go to the lab to get their scores would motivate students to use the lab. In retrospect, we believe the scores should have been disseminated via student mailboxes. We now think it is the low score that motivates lab attendance rather than merely stepping into the lab. It is clear that both faculty referrals and directly disseminating the assessment scores are





needed to stimulate lab usage.

Empirical as well as anecdotal evidence reported in the year-end 1998 report suggested that uneven standards concerning student writing exist among the faculty. Students reported that the importance of writing varied substantially within the curriculum and that writing standards were enforced very differently from class to class. Therefore, social work faculty members were asked to decide if they wanted to develop a standardized approach to writing for master's and doctoral students and, if so, how they wished to achieve this objective. They were also asked how the lab could be used to best benefit students and whether lab attendance should be made mandatory for students with the most severe writing difficulties. Answers to these two questions are still forthcoming at this writing.

While the social work faculty are to be commended for their efforts in trying to improve the writing skills of their students, they must take additional steps to improve the writing assistance program. Perhaps the considerations discussed below might be useful for other schools of social work when thinking about how to approach the writing problems of their students.

The writing deficiency of students today is clearly a systemic problem. Teachers at all levels must deal with students' writing failures at prior educational levels. While we recognize that our school's Writing Counts program will never eliminate students' writing problems entirely, such a graduate level program will be necessary as long as the trend in writing skill deficiency continues. Teachers at all levels must not succumb to the inertia of the trend but fight it with all the tools at their disposal. The time for complaining about student writing skill is past; the time to act is here.

The findings of this study can apply with some modification to undergraduate as well as graduate social work educa-

tion. It is in college that all the prior training in K-12 composition comes together and students mature as proficient writers. If, as sophomores, students have not become proficient writers, it is imperative that faculty members commit themselves to referring students to existing writing assistance programs and insist they use them. If a writing center does not exist, faculty members should get involved in starting one. Undergraduate social work faculty should also be diligent in preparing students for graduate study by requiring APA style for assigned research papers.

Faculty exploring ways of developing their own writing assistance program can often do so without draining discretionary resources. Collaboration among academic departments or graduate units can often make available what a single program cannot possibly afford on its own. Offering assistantships to graduate English students to staff the program may also be feasible. The *Writing Lab Newsletter*, an online publication of the National Writing Centers Association, is an excellent source of ideas and models (see Table 1 for URL).

To insure success for a writing assistance program at whatever level, a significant majority of the faculty must support the program actively by using their classroom writing assignments as a means of assessing mastery of content as well as students' ability to express the content in an organized, concise, and articulate manner. If a writing lab or center is established, the faculty must decide whether the lab is to be a triage center where "writing casualties" are sorted and given appropriate remedial assistance or whether such a lab will be a comprehensive learning center where collaborative learning and writing discussions occur among all students—the able as well as the less proficient.

Though the writing difficulties of social work students may be revealed through





assessment and faculty assignments, providing remedial assistance through a writing lab or center may not appeal to those in need, nor will they necessarily make use of it. Because graduate students generally live off-campus and the majority must work, any visit to a writing lab on-campus will not only take tremendous commitment but also may simply not be possible due to tight personal schedules. Alternative means of providing remedial writing support may have to be made available. One such alternative may be to place a writing lab online through the school's Website so that MSW students might access writing assistance from their homes. Although only a few online writing centers for graduate students exist like those at Harvard and Wisconsin, they seem to be a very viable option for accommodating the writing needs of students attending a graduate program of social work.

Finally, faculty must continually reinforce the belief that good writing is very important to their students' success as professional social workers. In other words, Writing Counts!

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### Appendix. GSSW Writing Assessment Scoring Instructions

- I. Each student's spontaneous writing assignment will be evaluated by two different readers independently, using the following holistic scoring system based on the six criteria shown on the itemized cover sheet: 4=A; 3=B; 2=C; 1=D. Any comments or brief notation you include on the cover sheet will always be welcome and helpful.
- II. The two numerical scores for each paper will be summed to produce a final score for the paper. Final scores indicate the following:
  - 8 Excellent work; no need to visit the lab
  - 6-7 Good work; feel free to use the lab
  - 4-5 Suggest visiting the lab with rough drafts
  - 2-3 Strongly suggest visiting the lab at earliest convenience to discuss the spontaneous essay and ways to improve writing
- III. The papers and cover sheets may be read by student writers in the writing lab, but they will remain on file in the lab.

*Note.* In the holistic scoring approach, the evaluator compares each paper to an ideal paper then assigns a score by determining how well the paper conforms to the ideal. An "A" paper conforms the most closely and a "D" conforms the least closely.

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