

2010

Who or Whom? A Program Innovation to Improve the Writing Skills of Human Service Students

Jill C. Dustin
Old Dominion University

Laurie Craigen
Old Dominion University

Tammi Milliken
Old Dominion University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/chs_pubs

 Part of the [Counseling Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Dustin, Jill C.; Craigen, Laurie; and Milliken, Tammi, "Who or Whom? A Program Innovation to Improve the Writing Skills of Human Service Students" (2010). *Counseling & Human Services Faculty Publications*. 22.
https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/chs_pubs/22

Original Publication Citation

Dustin, J. C., Craigen, L., & Milliken, T. (2010). Who or whom? A program innovation to improve the writing skills of human service students. *Journal of Human Services*, 30(1), 66-70.

Who or Whom? A Program Innovation to Improve the Writing Skills of Human Service Students

*Jill C. Dustin, Laurie Craigen, and Tammi Milliken
Old Dominion University*

Abstract

Writing is perhaps one of the most essential skills of the human service practitioner. However, many human service students lack the writing skills required to perform the necessary duties of their profession. This article describes an innovative initiative designed to strengthen the writing skills of students enrolled in a baccalaureate-level human services program.

Introduction

Considerable evidence exists to support the notion that writing matters to educators, to business leaders, and to the general public (National Commission on Writing, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006; National Writing Project & Nagin, 2006; Street & Stang, 2008). In regards to the human services field, human service practitioners are often tasked with writing well-constructed case reports, clearly expressing the meaning and significance of their professional judgments, translating observations into narratives, crafting appeals to governmental agencies, and writing proposals that will result in funding needed to support programs (Neukrug, 2008).

The authors' experiences as faculty in a human services baccalaureate program have convinced them that a large proportion of their human service students lack the writing skills necessary to carry out the vital tasks of a human service practitioner. As evidenced in class discussions, these students have shown a complexity in processing the concepts presented in their classes but struggle to translate them to written word in a manner that is fluent and grammatically correct. Our concerns over the declining writing skills of students in our human services program spring from a comparison of today's students with those in the past. There is research that demonstrates a steady decline in the writing skills of students at all levels of education over the past few decades (Applebee, Langer, & Mullis, 1986; Corrallo, 1995; National Commission on Writing, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006). As such, considerable attention has been paid to students' writing skills in recent years (National Commission on Writing, 2003, 2006).

Applebee, Langer, Mullis, Latham, and Gentile (1994) state that a large proportion of American students have weak writing skills. One reason may be that the vast majority of writing is done in English classes with very little done in other content areas. Freshman composition

courses are often inadequate in solidifying writing skills. Students are rarely assigned compositions of a paragraph or more (National Writing Project & Nagin, 2006) and in many instances, writing beyond simple note taking and filling in the blanks remains a relatively rare occurrence (Persky, Daane, & Jin, 2003; Roe, Stoodt, & Burns, 2000). As such, it is often necessary that programs integrate writing skill development throughout their curriculum (Fallahi, Wood, Austad, & Fallahi, 2006).

Although some may assert that writing is a minor skill needed by the human service practitioner, these authors wholeheartedly disagree. Writing is perhaps one of the most essential skills of the human service practitioner. The helping professionals' lack of writing skills can impede their career development and may impair the lives of their clients. According to the National Commission on Writing (2003), many working Americans would not be able to hold their positions if they were not proficient writers.

In an attempt to address the need to improve the writing skills of human service students at one particular institution, the authors designed and implemented a program initiative for its baccalaureate-level human services program. The innovation, a collaborative effort among the program, college, and university, was created by the human service faculty to enhance the writing skills of their students.

The Program Innovation

Rather than developing and implementing this innovation within the boundaries of the human services program, our plan involved the collaboration, consultation, and support of the human services faculty, the Department Chair, the Associate Dean and Dean of the College of Education, the Director of the Writing Center, and the Director of Writing Tutorial Services. Following a series of meetings and consultations with all of the aforementioned parties over a three-month period, the following 10-point plan was created and then implemented:

1. Human services faculty and instructors added additional writing assignments to their course requirements.
2. Human services faculty allocated a larger proportion of the students' grades to writing skills.
3. Information on Writing Tutorial Services (WTS) and the Writing Center was posted on Blackboard and in all the human services course syllabi.
4. Faculty were encouraged to require students to submit their papers to WTS or meet with a writing tutor prior to submitting writing assignments.
5. Faculty used the university's Exit Exam of Writing Proficiency (EEWP) grading rubric when grading writing assignments.

6. Human services faculty and instructors referred students to WTS whenever faculty and instructors determined a student's writing skills were in need of improvement.
7. Information on Writing Tutorial Services and the Writing Center was posted on the Human Services' website and in the Human Services Program Handbooks.
8. Academic advisors verified that all of their advisees had taken the Writing Sample Placement Test (WSPT). The WSPT is a required assessment for all incoming students at the university. The Writing Center placed registration blocks on students who had not taken the WSPT prior to the student's second semester. All students whose scores on the WSPT were less than satisfactory were referred to Writing Tutorial Services for assistance with their writing.
9. The Director of the Writing Center created a 1-hour writing skills workshop DVD which was distributed to all distance-learning sites for student use.
10. A faculty member created and narrated an APA writing skills Power Point presentation which was distributed to all human services faculty to be posted on Blackboard for student use.

Conclusion

In order to determine the effectiveness of the innovation, pass rates on the Exit Exam of Writing Proficiency (EEWP) were examined over a period of six semesters. The EEWP is a three-hour university exam which determines whether students completing a baccalaureate degree are competent writers. All undergraduate students enrolled at this university are required to pass the EEWP in order to receive their degree. This program, which has just begun, has already seen a small increase in pass rates from 60% to 62%.

To further demonstrate the program's commitment to strengthening the writing skills of its human service students, beginning fall 2010, the program will add an additional writing intensive course to its curriculum. In addition, this initiative is now a component of the human services program's action plan which will be tracked and measured through the university's assessment and planning management system.

As the program continues, we hope to see more demonstrable increases and make adjustments to the program as necessary. We anticipate, over time, to be able to demonstrate significant improvement in writing skills through this program.

In order to improve the writing skills of human service students, human service educators must put writing skills on center stage by communicating the significance of first-rate writing to success in the human services field and insisting on quality writing. Prior to the

implementation of the comprehensive writing plan, the human services program had one of the lowest exit exam pass rates in the college. Human services became the only program in the college that implemented a deliberate strategy for improving the writing skills of our students, resulting in consistent improvement in pass rates during the testing periods. While the findings in this study were not statistically significant, we believe that the upward trend in scores should not be ignored. Additional research is needed to determine the long-term impact of this initiative and to demonstrate its generalizability to other programs, colleges, and universities.

This program innovation speaks to the value of developing and implementing a plan to improve the writing skills of undergraduate human service students. The writers' human services program made it a priority to enhance the students' writing skills and, as a result, encouraging gains were achieved. This initiative also speaks to the importance of creating a plan that is comprehensive and systematic. Rather than developing this plan within the boundaries of the human services program, our plan involved the collaboration, consultation, and support of the department, college, and university. Given the encouraging preliminary results of our program initiative, the Dean forwarded the Human Services' action plan to all Department Chairs and Program Directors in the College of Education. All college departments were asked to develop similar plans for their programs. Thus, through our program innovation, our human services program was able to create change starting at the programmatic level and moving upwards to the departmental level and the college level.

References

- Applebee, A. Langer, J. A., Mullis, I.V.S., Latham, A.S., & Gentile, C.A. (1994). *NAEP 1992 Writing report card* (Report No. 23-W01). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Corrallo, S. (1995). *National assessment of college student learning: Identifying college graduates' essential skills in writing, speech and listening, and critical thinking: Final Project Report*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. (NCES Document No. 95001)
- Fallahi, C. R., Wood, R. M., Austad, C. H., & Fallahi, H. (2006). A program for improving undergraduate psychology students' basic writing skills. *Teaching of Psychology, 33*(3), 171-175. doi:10.1207/s15328023top3303_3
- National Commission on Writing. (2003). *The neglected "R": The need for a writing revolution*. New York: College Board. Retrieved from http://writingcommission.org/prod_downloads/writingcom/neglectedr.pdf

- National Commission on Writing. (2004). *Writing: A ticket to work ... or a ticket out: A survey of business leaders*. New York: College Board. Retrieved from http://www.writingcommission.org/prod_downloads/writingcom/writing-ticket-to-work.pdf
- National Commission on Writing. (2005). *Writing: A powerful message from state government*. New York: College Board. Retrieved from http://writingcommission.org/prod_downloads/writingcom/powerful-message-from-state.pdf
- National Commission on Writing. (2006). *Writing and school reform*. New York: College Board. Retrieved from http://writingcommission.org/prod_downloads/writingcom/writing-school-reform-natl-comm-writing.pdf
- National Writing Project & Nagin, C. (2006). *Because writing matters: Improving student writing in our schools* (Rev. ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Neukrug, E. (2008). *Theory, practice, and trends in human services: An introduction to an emerging profession* (4th ed.). Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Persky, H. R., Daane, M. C., & Jin, Y. (2003). *The nation's report card: Writing 2002*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
- Roe, B. D., Stoodt, B. D., & Bums, P. C. (2000). *Secondary school literacy instruction: The content areas* (7th ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Street, C., & Stang, K. (2008). Improving the teaching of writing across the curriculum: A model for teaching in-service secondary teachers to write. *Action in Teacher Education*, 30(1), 37-49.