

**A NEW ENTITY
TAKES ON THE
CHALLENGE OF
TEACHING
WRITING**

After two semesters of the University's renewed efforts to improve student writing, perhaps the impact can best be measured not in what has been written but in what has been said.

The new Division of Rhetoric and Composition is still coming together. Its courses are still being restructured. The Undergraduate Writing Center has yet to move into its permanent home. And so far the initiative has reached only part of the student body.

The faculty members involved, however, can't seem to contain themselves. Professor John Trimble notices a greater sense of common purpose, easier communication among faculty members, and "a kind of family feeling. There's a lot of enthusiasm, a sense of adventure, opportunities, and high challenges. The people are unusually amiable," he says. DRC associate director John Ruskiewicz says, "We've had more conversations about what we're going to do with writing than we'd had in years."

But don't get the idea that the division is all talk. Spun off from the Department of English last June, the DRC is taking concrete steps toward its goal of becoming the best undergraduate writing program in the country.

Among its accomplishments so far is the fall 1993 opening of the Undergraduate Writing Center, a laboratory where students can get help with assignments in the division's courses. The center is a safe, friendly place to talk about writing problems, says its director, Sara Kimball. "We're a lot like a consultant a business

would hire — we give advice but not judgments." During the center's first two and a half weeks, students made more than 100 visits, Kimball reports.

The division has begun to integrate computers into a variety of writing classes, with plans eventually to use computers in 80 percent of its courses. DRC director Lester Faigley says computer-assisted instruction makes sense in writing courses because it makes them very writing intensive. "Rather than talking, people type back and forth. . . . It gives everyone in class a chance to 'talk' because everyone can write at once. Instructors become a part of the conversation, and the writings themselves are part of the conversation," he says.

Other projects include the creation of a textbook specifically geared toward E306 — the basic freshman writing course — as well as a manual to be used by teachers of writing classes in other departments.

DRC faculty members say the establishment of a separate division for the teaching of writing was much-needed and long-overdue. When undergraduate writing instruction was part of the Department of English, Ruskiewicz says, there was no long-term and concentrated interest in developing the writing program. Trimble says the need for restructuring the program was evident in the lack of a writing center. "I think it's embarrassing that we haven't had one until 1993," he says. "There are a lot of people on this campus who need and know they need writing help and haven't been able to get it before now."

But when UT's president William Cunningham — in one of his last acts before becoming UT System chancellor — announced the new division in August, 1992, he touched off much grumbling and

Devising DIVISION

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by Chris Barton

debate among faculty members. Concerns included the surprise of the announcement, the level of faculty involvement in the decision, the administration of the new division, the division's funding, and its goals. There were also allegations that the new division was created to punish the English department for its perceived politicization of E306.

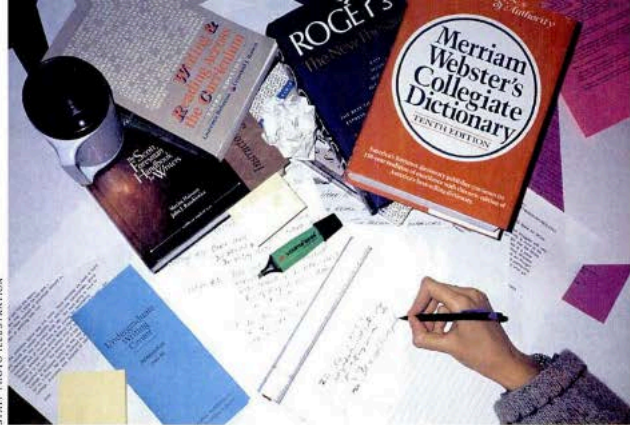
As for the financial concerns, Faigley says that no matter who oversees the process, writing is always more expensive to teach because you can't teach in lots of 500 students. There's a limit of about 25. Ruskiewicz says that while the other grievances haven't all been smoothed over, nobody is terribly concerned about those controversies. "The new division is working out far better than anyone could have imagined this time last year."

Still, Department of English chairman Joseph Kruppa is skeptical. "I think it's unwise to separate (the teaching of writing) from the English department. It's been done elsewhere, and it hasn't worked." "Besides," he says, "there will always be a writing problem. No one's ever going to be satisfied."

Trumble, however, says the Department of English should see the DRC as a blessing. "I think the English department has always been more comfortable teaching literature courses than writing courses. I should think that it would be a relief for the English department. Many of its students have wanted to become far better trained writers and looked to the English department for more serious coaching than the department could provide."

Christina Friend is one of those students. An assistant director at the new writing center, Friend says that while the Division of Rhetoric and Composition hasn't changed the way writing courses are taught, it has given a boost to her and other graduate students. "It's working out really well," she says. "It certainly provides a lot of support for grad students who are teaching a lot of writing."

Aiding the instruction of writing in other departments and colleges is one of the DRC's biggest projects on the horizon. Along with creating the instruction manual, the division wants to provide training and resources to professors campuswide



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who teach "substantial writing component" courses — writing-intensive courses intended to hone students' composition skills while teaching the courses' subjects.

By next fall, the writing center will involve students across campus. Once the center moves from its temporary home in Parlin Hall to its permanent Undergraduate Library location, it will be able to accommodate students who need help in writing courses other than those taught by the DRC. Also, Director Kimball says, the center will begin using students from all majors as peer tutors.

The DRC has no plans to offer a major, minor, or concentration in rhetoric and composition. Currently, DRC faculty members include professors who work solely for the division as well as those who split their time with the Department of English. In the future, Ruskiewicz says, there will be more professors teaching exclusively for the division.

According to Ruskiewicz, another development in store for the division is a "substantial" revision of E309, the second level of undergraduate writing courses. The creation of an "upscale" version of E306 for the large number of students who place out of the existing version is also on tap, he says.

Meanwhile, there's the faculty's revived interest in discussing the ins and outs of teaching students how to write. With so much activity, it's a wonder that anyone in the division has time to talk at all. But as the new Division of Rhetoric and Composition comes together, Ruskiewicz says, nobody seems to mind the rush. "We're extraordinarily busy," he says, "but quite content."

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—John Ruskiewicz, Associate Director Division of Rhetoric and Composition

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