

## **Proposal to Revise the Timing of Composition Courses in the New Core Curriculum**

**From: Core Curriculum Committee  
Habits of Mind Working Group**

**To: Academic Senate**

**Date: October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2011**

**Proposal:** The CCC and Habits of Mind Working Group propose to change the sequence of English Composition courses in the new core curriculum. Model 1 is to be revised as follows:

Model 1 maintains English 4 and 5. In most cases, English 4 will be taken in the fall of the student's first year and English 5 ~~in the spring of the student's second year~~ **in the spring of the student's first year**. Writing across the curriculum is adopted – students are required to take an upper division course with a writing component. In most cases it is expected that the upper division writing requirement will be fulfilled in a course required for the student's major.

**Background:** The Academic Senate adopted the new core curriculum on April 23, 2009. (For historical reasons, the specific language giving the new core is commonly referred to as Model 1.) Under Model 1 a student is to (typically) first take Composition 1 (first semester), then Seminar 1 (second semester), then Seminar 2 (third semester), and finally Composition 2 (fourth semester).

The Core Curriculum Task Force (CCTF) recommended this sequencing of courses for several reasons. First, there was a desire for students to have the opportunity to learn certain writing skills before writing essays in the first Seminar. This suggested moving the Seminar 1 to the first-year spring, and keeping Composition 1 in the fall. Second, due to the central and unique character of Collegiate Seminar within the College's curriculum, students should take one Seminar during each of their four years at the College, which implies one Seminar in the sophomore year. Third, to adopt a more developmental approach to reading and writing, it was decided to have one Composition/Seminar course per semester. Finally, to order the courses in a way that would minimize staffing problems Seminar 2 was placed in the sophomore fall and Composition 2 in the sophomore spring.

The Core Curriculum Committee (CCC) and the Habits of Mind Working Group now believe that this timing should be adjusted in order to better serve the pedagogical goals of the new core curriculum.

If this proposal is adopted, most first-year students will first take Composition 1 their first semester, then Composition 2 and Collegiate Seminar 1 in the spring, Seminar 2 in the fall of their sophomore year, and then later a writing course in their major.

**Rationale:** Composition 2 (English 5 as modified to meet the requirements of the new Core) prepares students for writing within their majors in several important ways. From the Catalog of Course description of English 5:

Students continue to develop the rhetorical and critical thinking skills they need to analyze texts and to structure complex arguments. In addition, the course gives students practice in exploring ideas through library research and in supporting a thesis through appropriate use of sources. Students write and revise three or more essays, at least one of which is a substantial research essay that presents an extended argument.

Delaying the exposure of our students to these important skills until the spring of their second academic year will have a number of negative consequences.

**1)** The CCC will expect academic departments to offer an upper-division writing course within their majors. This course does not merely include writing, but rather teaches students how writing is done within that academic discipline. Several departments are planning to target this course to students during their sophomore year. These departments include, but are probably not limited to, Kinesiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology and Communication. (A number of academic departments have not yet decided upon the timing of their course.) These departments argue that familiarity with writing in their disciplines is a necessary prerequisite for several or all of their upper-division courses, and as such, it is detrimental to delay this course later than the student's sophomore year.

As indicated, we will expect the writing courses to build upon the skills developed and the knowledge gained in Composition 2. Therefore, it would be much better for Composition 2 to be offered before students take the writing-in-the-discipline course in their second year.

**2)** More generally, Composition 2 teaches a variety of important skills students are expected to be familiar with before taking many courses within their majors, Jan Term courses, general education courses, etc. These skills include the abilities to structure a complex argument, to evaluate sources, to develop search strategies, and to use library databases to find relevant material. If students are not taught these skills until the end of their second year at the College, then we can expect to find our students less academically prepared in these areas during their sophomore year.

**3)** Our study of Model 1, and the Senate's desire for developmental learning, suggests that there are two developmental sequences within the Habits of Mind:

a) Composition 1 --> Seminar 1 --> Seminar 2 --> Seminar 3 --> Seminar 4, and

b) Composition 1 --> Composition 2 --> Upper Division Writing.

Clearly these are somewhat independent, although complementary lines. The proposed revision to the sequencing of English Composition courses is in line with the original goals of the CCTF. Students would still take Composition 1 before writing essays in their first Collegiate Seminar; students would still take one Collegiate Seminar course per academic year, Composition 1&2 would build toward the 'writing in the major' course, and, finally, Composition 1 and Composition 2 would still be taught in different semesters thereby preventing serious staffing problems.

**4)** Information Evaluation and Research Practices learning outcome #4 is, "Understand the concept of intellectual property and practice academic honesty." In order to support the importance of academic honesty at Saint Mary's and to support the students in their efforts to practice it, this learning outcome should be achieved before the end of freshman year. Waiting until the end of sophomore year would leave the students less prepared to practice academic honesty in any research-based papers or reports they may write before then. In particular, students struggle with plagiarism, as they do not intuitively understand proper citation or the difference between paraphrasing and plagiarism; these topics are covered in Composition 2. (The Habits of Mind Working Group expects Composition 2 to have primary responsibility for this learning outcome.)