College of San Mateo
Writing Across the Curriculum Initiative Proposal
for CASTL Leadership Program:
Theme C. Liberal Education and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

<u>The Need and the Research Question</u>

In our age of information overload, the need to teach logical, integrated thinking has taken on a new urgency. Our students, as citizens of the world, desperately need to practice and engage in logical and critical thinking in their college work and to make connections of various kinds with their learning. And it has long been recognized in the Writing Across the Curriculum movement that writing is perhaps the primary locus for the development of logical thought and integrative thinking.

However, although our college in theory supports the idea of WAC, too little writing is done on this campus (or probably most community college campuses in our area) beyond that in the English composition sequence, where writing is divorced, for the most part, from the meaty knowledge being served up in other disciplines. The often-dismal writing abilities of many of our students have discouraged the assignment of significant writing in many classes. How should a biology professor deal with a paper so grammatically unsound that its content is unclear? What is a history professor to do with a student who can earn an "A" on a multiple choice and short-answer test but who turns in an incoherent research paper? Untrained in the teaching of writing, instructors understandably may avoid writing as a means of assessing a student's success in the course. Furthermore, most classes in the disciplines *have no prerequisite for college-level writing* and would undoubtedly suffer enrollment losses if they did, so the project of asking for college-level writing in those courses as they are normally conceived seems unreasonable and doomed to failure. The teaching and practice of writing are left to the sequence of English composition classes, in which teachers struggle to make the topics and assignments meaningful, the learning integrative, and the students engaged. Students are unconvinced that writing has any purpose beyond completion of the composition course requirements.

But we are settling for too little for all these students when we allow them to escape the rigor of intellectual thought required in writing in all the disciplines. We are proposing a campus-wide plan and structure to encourage and support Writing Across the Curriculum here at CSM. Through it we will broaden our commitment to integrative learning and support our assessment goals. We will also address a significant research question, one perhaps at the heart of difficulties with implementing WAC programs in California community colleges: **Can WAC function as a teaching and learning tool for below-college-level writers who are enrolled, along with more advanced writers, in discipline courses with no writing prerequisite?** Or is remedial writing best accomplished, with occasional exceptions in learning community configurations, in writing courses that more or less isolate the writing skills being taught from other fields of learning? Is it most efficacious to reserve the integration and development that are the benefits of WAC for already reasonably competent writers? Or can WAC, using strategies such as carefully constructed and scaffolded assignments, individualized support for students in a writing center environment, helpful and clear feedback in grading rubrics, and

collaboration and consultation between a discipline expert and a writing expert, become a way to encourage the growth of critical thinking and integrative skills in developmental writers?

We have interested faculty who have initially hypothesized on both sides of this research question but who are all willing to undertake serious research to find answers and strategies. In undertaking this project, we are building on a strong basis of accomplishment: We have developed, through previous learning community and Integrative Learning Project work, models for team work and cooperation across the campus, collaborative methods for producing effective integrative assignments, experience with assessment tools such SLO's, rubrics, student surveys, and reflective writing, and a working relationship with our Dean of Articulation and Research to provide quantitative assessment data (e.g., he conducted a remarkable comparative study tracking success of students from ASSET Development, a basic skills mathematics and study skills/counseling learning community, through four semesters of the math sequence, showing that the students' early learning community experience nearly doubled their success rate at every following level. See http://www.smccd.edu/accounts/lcom and click on Asset Development PowerPoint). We have fostered innovative pedagogy, evident in new learning community configurations such as "The Tragedy of the Commons," which links seven classes in an integrative learning experience, and "Writing in the End Zone," which links basic-skills-level writing with Physical Education courses for the football team, an especially difficult cohort to reach academically. This WAC project would build on these achievements, both formalizing and broadening the scope and effect of our pedagogical innovation and our scholarship.

Existing Context and the Plan

We would start with a pilot program. We envision engaging additional faculty and developing expertise, in part, through forums: workshop lunches at which various CSM faculty would present their teaching experiences with writing assignments, describing particular assignments, student work and reflections, and other details that would promote a scholarship of teaching and learning related to our writing initiative. The ongoing interest on our campus in learning community meetings that encourage such public sharing of teaching insights, discoveries, and problems convinces us that faculty need and want to participate in collegial and scholarly reflection on their work. Thus the WAC initiative logically grows out of our learning community program, which often integrates composition classes with other disciplines through writing.   It would also complement our already-significant college work on student learning outcomes and assessment in at least two important ways: First, we propose to pilot student e-portfolios as a way to document and assess our WAC work. We would furthermore be developing a model for institutional assessment, currently a problematic concern for California community colleges. Second, working with our Dean of Articulation and Research, we propose to collect and consider comparative data on the success of students who enter the WAC classes at various skill levels, judged through writing placement test scores (available for all students) and completion of classes within the composition sequence. We will cross-correlate quantitative data and qualitative evidence—both essential to understanding the results of our study—obtained from students both in the WAC courses and in traditional courses on campus; we will also seek to compare data and experience among the institutions that we might be

working with. Finally, we will produce case histories to document our experience in planning, implementing, and assessing a WAC program that acknowledges and attempts to address the needs of students who write at very different levels, in a community college setting.   Considering all these pieces of data and information, we will be able to provide to our campus and other campuses struggling to implement WAC in community college courses a body of scholarship that addresses our research question. We will publish our work on the web and disseminate it through various conferences and workshops. We also want to publish our findings and experience in more traditional formats as well.

To summarize, our project would include the following structures and activities, the first four focused primarily on establishing our WAC program and the next nine on promoting and documenting the scholarship of teaching and learning on campus:

To undertake the WAC program:
- formulation and training of a WAC Coaching Team, members of which would work with participating faculty
- starting a pilot program of WAC classes, to include philosophy, math, and 1 to 3 additional disciplines
- identifying opportunities and developing strategies to enable the Writing Center to serve an additional student cohort: students participating in all WAC classes
- developing strategies to incorporate library support for students writing research papers

To promote and support the scholarship of teaching and learning:
- launching of "faculty forums"—2 per semester. These would initially focus on WAC scholarship but could later address other teaching and learning issues
- development of a student e-portfolio pilot program to document student achievement in WAC classes, collect their reflective observations, and provide a tool for assessment of SLO's, at course, program, and institutional levels
- compilation and analysis of data on student success in WAC classes, as compared to students in traditional classes and to other institutions
- tracking the role of support services, provided by the writing center and the library, in student success
- web-based compilation of all WAC writing assignments and rubrics, together with a form for each instructor's brief reflection on the results of the assignment
- on-going assessment, discussion, analysis, and refinement of the program through twice-monthly meetings of all faculty involved
- compilation of case histories for planning, implementing, and assessing a community college WAC program
- development of a WAC website that makes public all these materials, strategies, and assessment results
- dissemination of our materials and results through conferences and traditional publications

To achieve this broad vision of WAC and integrative learning on our campus, with accompanying scholarship to help us understand, document, and encourage our work, our college is committed to providing support in these areas:

- adequate reassigned time for the WAC Coaching Team
- reassigned time and/or stipends for WAC faculty
- various technological needs for the e-portfolio pilot, including staffing resources and outside training help, and website construction
- forum funding
- funding for convenings and conference attendance

We have developed a budget plan that, through use of FTES generated by "hour-by-arrangement" requirements, allows our program to become cost-effective within two semesters, even before we can document (as we plan to) the long-term effects on students.

The Team Members

Our team includes our original ILP team, Mike Burke (mathematics), Jeremy Ball (philosophy), and Jean Mach (English), who have thrived together on the projects undertaken together in the past. Two additional faculty members have joined us for this project: Cheryl Gregory (mathematics), who has been an essential member of the learning communities steering committee from the beginning and who is our program's webmaster; and Dave Danielson (philosophy), a highly respected, bright, younger member of the faculty who is eager to join us in making WAC an important part of our college. In addition, Susan Estes, the Dean of Language Arts, who now oversees all our work and whose support and expertise have proven invaluable over the last year, will join us. Finally, we have Mike Claire, Vice-President of Instruction, who lends us both moral and financial support. Our team members enjoy working together, represent disparate divisions of the college, and contribute a useful range of skills and knowledge. The strong administrative presence will facilitate reaching our goals. All team members have met numerous times and contributed ideas to the writing of this proposal. We all look forward to the project.

The Benefits, for Us and Others

We'll conclude with a small sample of the rewards and excitement of such an endeavor. As a part of Mike Burke's Carnegie Scholar work and Professional Development projects they both undertook, Jean Mach and Mike concocted related writing assignments for their non-learning community classes. These assignments, based on a set of CO_2 data collected on Mauna Loa and a limited number of statements about commonly accepted scientific knowledge, asked students to think about *both* what the data set meant and what it did not mean. They were asked to describe what they could conclude and what they could not, from such limited information. They were asked to envision what they would need to know in order to draw larger conclusions. The students found this writing assignment, focused on logical and critical thinking rather than on readily Internet-harvested information, very hard. They also found discomfort in being asked to think in ways not usually required

in math or composition courses. Students made comments such as "It is hard to separate fact and opinion" and "I am not a person who can draw ideas and analyze from a few facts." Both instructors realized that this paper exposed, in many students, an inability to understand and explain their own thinking processes well, and in that sense revealed how little students know about examining data and evidence, making hypotheses, and drawing conclusions linked to real-world issues.

  This realization, along with the willingness to modify and create curriculum to address the lacunae in students' educational experience, is exactly what meaningful curricular assessment should involve and what Writing Across the Curriculum fosters. Such experiences, when studied, discussed, and made public, transform the scholarship of teaching and learning from theoretical abstractions sitting on a shelf to concrete and useful tools for teachers. We already see, from our participation in the Integrative Learning Project, some impact of our focus on such scholarship: teachers, giddy with excitement and ideas, despite all the work; students, engaged and intrigued, despite the challenge; and administrators, willing and eager to lend support, despite the financial limitations they face. The CASTL Leadership program will give us an important intellectual and professional connection to help us expand our work, engage with other colleges, and develop solutions to shared problems and concerns. Our campus is excited about contributing to and supporting the scholarship of teaching and learning, both on the campus and beyond, through this initiative.

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