

**Why Johnny Can't Write:
An Analysis of the Effectiveness of a Writing Requirement in a
Business Administration Curriculum**

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ABSTRACT

In the play, *My Fair Lady*, linguist Henry Higgins laments "Why Can't the English Learn to Speak?" as he describes a crisis in English language usage. During the latter decades of the twentieth century and at the dawn of a new millennium, businesses, governmental agencies, and academics have a similar lament that might be summed up as "why can't the students learn to write." According to a survey of Fortune 500 executives, "poor reading and writing skills were the number one cause of employees being terminated within their first year." (Smith & Bernhardt 1997). The widespread lack of writing skills contributed to making education reform a major theme in the U.S. presidential election campaign of 2000.

Academics, often blamed for failing to teach students how to write, were painfully aware of the crisis. Several studies during the 1980s, such as the one conducted by Porter and McKibbin (1988) focused on management education, highlighted the problems of student of writing. In response, the founding faculty of one of the newest institutes of higher learning, established in 1989, seized the problem head on. At the heart of its formative identity, the university instituted a 2,500-word-cross-the-curriculum writing requirement. Every course offered at the university would require students a minimum of 2,500 of writing from every student.

After more than a decade of following this novel approach, it is time to assess whether or not the writing requirement is effectively addressing the problem it was established to solve. In the spring of 2001, a study was commissioned by the Dean of the College of Business. This study was performed from the perspective of the faculty who are responsible for implementing the writing requirement.

The results of the study are the primary focus of this paper. Based upon the interviews, it is clear that the faculty are committed to continuing the writing requirement. Although there is concern that

the requirement is labor intensive for both students and instructors and that it is not clear that the

requirement is being applied uniformly throughout the university, faculty unanimously agree that the requirement benefits students. Assessing faculty attitudes toward the writing requirement is but one way of measuring its effectiveness. Several other steps need to be taken to accurately determine whether and how much the writing requirement benefit students, they include the following actions:

1. Instituting a writing skills test.
2. Require writing skills workshops.
3. Require all students to purchase and use style manuals.
4. Add a formal business writing course.
5. Require students to keep writing portfolios.
6. Increase an introductory course by one unit to accommodate more writing training.
7. Enlist outside assessment agencies such as the ETS (Educational Testing Service).

While we are as yet unsure which of these strategies will prove most effective, all faculty in the college agree that maintaining and enhancing the requirement will give students a competitive advantage in the marketplace.

References

Porter, W. Lyman and Lawrence E. McKibbin, *Management Education and Development: Drift or Thrust into the 21st Century*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company. 1988.

Smith, Edward L. & Stephen A. Bernhardt, *Writing at Work: Professional Writing Skills for People on the Job*. Lincolnwood, IL, NTC Publishing Group. 1997. pp.-5-6.