

FINAL REPORT

**REVIEW OF THE FOCUSED INQUIRY PROGRAM
VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY
RICHMOND, VA**

Submitted on behalf of the
National Council of Writing Program Administrators

by

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and

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Preview of Recommendations and Remedies

Throughout the following report, we make recommendations and suggest remedies that address potentially problematic situations. Here is a brief summary of those recommendations and remedies.

To address issues of faculty working conditions:

- Reduce the full-time teaching load to 3/3 or at least 3/4.
- Develop a modified sabbatical program to support the teaching load reduction.
- Encourage faculty members explicitly to share their sensible techniques for accommodating the large teaching load.
- Develop a faculty fellows or visiting faculty program.
- Investigate issues involving the preparation and work load of graduate teaching assistants.

To overcome problems related to the perceived insularity of the Focused Inquiry program:

- Establish multiple opportunities for building connections and interchanges with VCU faculty to create an atmosphere of mutual understanding and respect.
- Work to promote a clear vision of, and rationale for, the FI curriculum and pedagogy to all stakeholders, including high school students in the state, and develop champions and friends of the program within and outside the university.
- Add faculty lines to the Focused Inquiry unit over the next five years.
- Prioritize recruiting at least one faculty member per year who has background and teaching experience in rhetoric and composition/writing studies and actively participates in its professional networks.
- Continue to pursue the goal of diversifying faculty makeup by discipline and increase efforts to hire and retain minority faculty.
- Use the current system of professional development for the faculty to educate itself about scholarship in rhetoric and composition/writing studies and connect to its professional networks.

To strengthen curriculum and pedagogy:

- Adjust the balance between standardization and faculty autonomy by providing more opportunities for faculty to bring their disciplinary/professional expertise into their own classes, as preparation for “transfer” of foundational skills beyond 200.

- Make a more explicit transition from UNIV 112 to 200 to bridge the gap between them, and revise 200 to move more gradually toward advanced expectations while building in more scaffolding for assignments.
- Design a “bridge” or “transfer” course for 1st-year students who exempt one or more of the UNIV 111-112 sequence
- Prepare for transfer of foundational learning beyond UNIV 200 by emphasizing disciplinary differences and encouraging metacognition about transfer.
- Prioritize hiring additional librarians to partner with FI on teaching information literacy.

To strengthen assessment:

- Assess readiness for UNIV 200 among vulnerable or new students in order to recommend a bridge course and/or offer such students increased support while taking the course.
- Consult cutting-edge scholarship on writing assessment in future development of assessment for Focused Inquiry courses.
- Develop assessment for persistence and further development of foundational learning after leaving FI courses, in the new Gen Ed program and majors, possibly through development of electronic portfolios used throughout the undergraduate years.

Introduction and Context for the Report

On April 28-30, Professors Jolliffe and Phelps¹ visited the Virginia Commonwealth University (hereafter VCU) for the purpose of evaluating the role of the Focused Inquiry (FI) Program, a department housed in University College (UC).

This visit was arranged through the National Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) Consultant-Evaluator Service, of which and are appointed evaluators. Arrangements for

¹Brief credentials for Professors and , along with a description of the Council of Writing Program Administrators Consultant-Evaluator Service, are included as Appendix B and C to this report.

the visit were made by Professor Shirley Rose, Director of the WPA Consultant-Evaluator Service, in consultation with

Prior to our visit, we received a document titled “.” This report the university’s strategic plan, the new General Education proposal, a copy of the revised Focused Inquiry departmental bylaws, a representative sample of syllabi for Focused Inquiry courses, an explanation of shared learning outcomes and curriculum maps for FI courses, and an explanation of the custom textbook, *VCU Writes*.

Our visit included meetings with Dean Relihan; Melissa Johnson, chair of the Focused Inquiry Department; Gypsy Denzine, senior provost for faculty affairs; Beth Kreyhaus, chair of the FI self-study committee; Matthew Vechinski, FI faculty member; members of the FI departmental council; members of the FI textbook and curriculum committees; three different groups of FI faculty members; Brian McTague, director of the writing center; several graduate teaching assistants and undergraduate teaching assistants; Scott Oates, director of the Office of Academic Integrity and Assessment; Maggie Tolan, senior associate vice president for student success; Jenny Stout, teaching and learning librarian; Erin Webster Garrett, assistant provost for the REAL initiative; Lynn Pelco, associate vice provost for community engagement; several faculty members of the Gen Ed 30 curriculum committee; and Gail Hackett, provost and senior vice president for academic affairs. A visit schedule is included as Appendix A to this report. In the following sections, we will analyze the most important the

The Character and Concept of the Unit

During our visit we heard some debate over whether Focused Inquiry is a “writing program” along with insistence that it is not an “English” program, and indeed we were curious ourselves about where it fits in the spectrum of programs associated with “foundational” skills, academic writing, and the first-year experience. Understanding its character comparatively is prerequisite to whether a unit like this is a viable concept in the long term, specifically in terms of its mission and fit with VCU as an institution.

The faculty is correct in asserting that Focused Inquiry is not a traditional “English composition” program in numerous respects, including its separation from English, its status as a department, its labor force of full-time term faculty, the faculty’s multidisciplinary backgrounds, and its mission to teach an array of “foundational skills.” At the same time, it is not a classic first-year seminar, despite overlapping with that type of program in certain features.

First-year seminars have proliferated over the last few decades as part of the larger effort to assist students’ transition to college life in the first year. Barefoot and Fidler’s 1994 survey of first-year seminars identified four models for their structure and content, of which FI fits best into the category called *academic seminars with generally uniform academic content across sections*. “These courses may be elective or required, inter- or extra-disciplinary in focus, and will sometimes be a part of the required general education core. These courses often focus on the “higher order” academic skills such as critical thinking, analysis, and argument” (9). However, with some exceptions (elite institutions, small liberal arts colleges), most first-year seminars do not replace writing programs in teaching foundational academic skills to all students. According to the most recent survey of first-year seminars (2012-2013 National Survey of First-Year Seminars) the most common model is the less academic *extended orientation* model, which supports student success by such means as orienting students to campus resources, teaching study skills, and engaging students socially with the institution. This role is played at VCU by UNIV 101, advising, and other initiatives for student success. Further, 1st-year seminars on the academic skills model often at small liberal arts are more typically taught topically by in the disciplines (e.g., the University of Richmond), while those like UNIV 101

emphasizing a general introduction to college life are more likely to be staffed by student affairs professionals.

FI shares with first-year seminars high-impact practices and features intended to support student learning and engagement (thus retention), including small classes, mentoring relations with teachers, collaboration with peers, civic engagement, participation in a Common Book program, and cohort relationships. However, it differs significantly in structure, goals, content, and staffing from first-year seminars. It is a free-standing unit with its own large full-time faculty that offers a 3-semester, carefully coordinated shared curriculum. The content of those (3-credit) courses, as we will discuss later, is substantial and has an intellectual base in the discipline of rhetoric and composition/writing studies (RCWS) rather than solely in the educational literature on topics like the first-year experience and high impact practices. Indeed, in many contexts the FI and VCU faculty spoke of these as “writing courses,” and they take the place of the usual introductory composition requirements at public research universities.

The student-centered qualities and practices FI has in common with first-year seminars are also found in most contemporary writing programs. The programmatic content of its curriculum look extremely similar to that of most writing programs we have reviewed or know about, including a scope that goes beyond alphabetic writing to include such goals as multimodal and digital communication, information literacy, critical thinking, civic engagement, collaboration, and research experience. Writing programs are predominantly by non-tenure track faculty (an increasing number as career teaching professionals on full-time renewable contracts with promotional potential, although this is still rare). However, FI differs from the typical writing program in significant respects. It is not located in or subject to the oversight of an English department and doesn’t draw most of its teaching staff (faculty, TAs) from English; more unusually, it has deliberately sought to make its faculty multidisciplinary. This is not unique (for example, Duke University does so as well), and most writing programs today are more diverse in disciplinary terms than they appear, since few are fully staffed with faculty (or TAs) with training in rhetoric and composition/writing studies. But it is distinctive to claim that such a faculty brings its varied disciplinary knowledge to bear on its curriculum and pedagogy,

which could be one of FI's greatest strengths in grounding a general-education program. (Sbelow). Further, it is not simply an autonomous program but whose faculty has sustained²

From our perspective, its structure, content, and distinctive features place FI most accurately in the category of an "independent writing program/department" (IWPDP). Such programs have been growing in number (most recently estimated as 60), but they are in constant flux as new ones are created and existing ones restructure, relocate, or redefine their missions. Their primary characteristic is their extraordinary diversity and their resilience as they adapt to new conditions and institutional changes: in fact, many of them are unique in their particular combination of structure, staffing, mission, institutional location, and disciplinarity/interdisciplinarity (Phelps 2016, Phelps forthcoming). Their diversity and resilience reflect the fact that IWPDPs are usually formed in response to unique local conditions and are most successful if and when they are shaped to fit a particular institutional context.

We think Focused Inquiry typifies these characteristics of IWPDPs in its extremely context-specific design and institutional fit: for example, inclusive, student-centered pedagogies addressed to VCU's diverse population and community engagement with the city of Richmond; or its use of practices like learning communities and committee service to enable a faculty from different disciplinary backgrounds to develop a common language, form a teaching community, and administer a consistent curriculum. There is no typical independent writing program. But most employ a greater range of types than FI, including at least some tenure-track faculty, and have a wider scope of responsibilities that may include undergraduate and graduate degree programs, writing centers, and/or WAC/WID programs. (Compare, for example, Grand Valley State University's Writing Department and the Program for Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Colorado-Boulder.) Thus FI's most distinctive characteristic compared to other IWPDPs is the way it combines a full-time term-faculty labor force in a departmental unit (housed in a university college) with an almost exclusive focus on foundational courses.

We believe that Focused Inquiry as an independent writing department represents a design that is effective and appropriate for VCU, although we noted some dissatisfaction with the concept among faculty in other disciplines that we address below. One question that any consultant-evaluator would pose is whether an academic unit staffed by teaching professionals

on term appointments (essentially career positions) is both viable in the long term and ethical as a means of constructing a labor force for small foundational classes in the context of a research university. Given the practicalities of university budgets and labor conditions in the academy, we view such a dedicated teaching unit and staff as far superior to staffing foundational courses primarily with adjuncts and TAs and will make recommendations about practices for such a unit. Ethical issues posed by this design include salary levels and heavy loads carried by the faculty. Our report will emphasize the need for Virginia Commonwealth, University College, and Focused Inquiry to meet the associated with the design of FI as a term-faculty teaching department and offer suggestions to build on what has already been done to address these issues.

Observed Strengths

Issues Related to Term Faculty (For a review on this issue see Merritt Boyd, 2016).²

Both their curricular and co-curricular responsibilities constitute a commitment to devote a substantial amount of time and energy to mentoring students. Their research—research that undergirds the National Council of Teachers of English’s “Principles for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing”³--We strongly recommend that University College and VCU administrators work toward a 3/3 load for FI faculty in the long term, perhaps moving first to a 4/3 load. While doing so, they should look for interim ways to offer relief to teachers, for example through course releases available each year through application.

an inquiry (scholarly research in his or her home discipline or pedagogical research) that would potentially sustain or improve teaching and learning in

members faculty learning communities often bring, which the Dean of University College emphasized would need to be developed by Focused Inquiry leaders and faculty members,

Summary of Recommendations Related to Work Load and Sustainability

- Reduce the full-time teaching load to three-three or at least three-four.
- Develop a modified sabbatical program to support the teaching load reduction.

² Alvin C. Merritt Boyd III, “Experiences and Perceptions of Full-Time, Non-Tenure-Track Faculty at a Four-Year University.” *Education Doctoral*, Paper 254, 2016.

³ <https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/postsecondarywriting>

- Encourage faculty members explicitly to share their sensible techniques for accommodating the large teaching load.
- Develop a faculty fellows or visiting faculty program.

Investigate issues involving the preparation and work load of graduate teaching assistants.

enEdGenEdExamples of potentially promising interchange projects include the proposed faculty fellows program described above; invitations for faculty members from other colleges to be guest speakers in Focused Inquiry courses; invitations for faculty members from other colleges to participate in Focused Inquiry faculty learning committees; and expansion of the currently operating, but seemingly limited, teaching exchange programs with departments in other colleges. One consequence, certainly unintended, of the relative insularity of Focused Inquiry is that neither VCU students nor potential supporters of the program within and beyond the university seem to be aware of its nature, scope, and purposes.

incoming VCU In addition to orienting incoming students more thoroughly, t, to spread the word about the program. provide generate Ideally, University College and Focused Inquiry would have access to a development officer to consolidate and support these efforts. onea These approaches emphasize again the need for and to edwassGenEd

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Capitalizing on the new General Education Program and SCHEV Changes in General Education

Current

New (2019)

| | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| writing communication | communication fluency |
| oral communication | |
| critical thinking | problem solving (critical and creative) |
| information fluency | information literacy |
| quantitative literacy | [to be assessed by Math Department] |
| collaborative learning | |
| ethical and civic responsibility | ethical reasoning |
| | global and cultural responsiveness and agility |

ss⁴ /⁵Most regional accreditation agencies mandate assessment for this purpose every five or ten years.

Darren Cambridge, Barbara Cambridge, and Kathleen Blake Yancey.⁶

Conclusion

Our visit to Virginia Commonwealth University allowed us the opportunity to witness a strong and successful independent writing program. We trust our observations and recommendations will be received in a spirit of collegial optimism. We have every hope that the university as a whole and University College in particular will capitalize on every opportunity to make the Focused Inquiry program a location where faculty members will be treated equitably and ethically and where students can learn to prosper as readers, writers, thinkers, and citizens.

Appendix A: Schedule of WPA Consultant-Evaluators' Visit to VCU

Virginia Commonwealth University
April 28-30, 2019

Sunday, April 28

4:00 p.m. Dr. David Jolliffe--Arrive at airport. (Driven to The Graduate [301 W. Franklin] by Constance Relihan

Dr. Louise Wetherbee Phelps-- Arrive at The Graduate [301 W. Franklin] (Picked up from home by Melissa Johnson, 1pm)

6:00 p.m. Dinner at restaurant **TBD** with:

Dr. Gypsy Denzine, Senior Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs

Dr. Constance C Relihan, Dean, University College

Dr. Melissa Johnson, Chair, Department of Focused Inquiry

Dr. Beth Kreydatus, Chair of the self-Study Committee, FI Faculty Member

Dr. Matthew Vechinski, FI Faculty Member

⁴ See, for example, Michael M Williamson., and Brian Huot, "Literacy, Equality, and Competence: Ethics in Writing Assessment." In Pemberton, Michael A. (ed.), *The Ethics of Writing Instruction: Issues in Theory and Practice*. Stamford, CT: Ablex, 2000. 191-210.

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⁶ Darren Cambridge, Barbara Cambridge, and Kathleen Blake Yancey, eds., *Electronic Portfolios 2.0: Emergent Research on Implementation and Practice*. Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2009.

Monday, April 29

7:30 a.m. Pick-up from Hotel (Melissa Johnson pick up)

8:00-8:30 a.m. Meet with Constance Relihan, Dean of University College

8:30-9:15 a.m. Faculty Lounge Rm 5173 Meet with FI Department Council: Melissa Johnson, Mike Abelson, Michael McIntyre, Ryan Cales, Thad Fortney, Vicki Pallo, Amber Pearson, Ginni Totaro, Jennifer Selman, and Beth Kreydatus (Melissa Johnson)

9:15-9:45 a.m. HHALL 3133 Meet with FI Curriculum Committee & FI Textbook Committee **9:45-10am**
Walk to Ginter House

10:00-10:30 a.m. Ginter 105a Meet with Dr. Jamie Cooper, Assistant Vice Provost for Academic Programs

10:30-10:45 *Walk to OLVED*

10:45-11:45 a.m. OLVED 2119 Meet with FI faculty--primarily those teaching UNIV 111/112 (Dept. Chair & Curriculum Cmtee/Textbook Cmtee will not be present)

12-12:45 p.m. Lunch with Melissa Johnson, Department Chair

1:00-2:00 p.m. HHALL 4153 Meet with FI faculty--primarily those teaching UNIV 200 and 200-level courses (Dept.Chair & Curriculum Cmtee/Textbook Cmtee will not be present)

2:15-2:45 p.m. MCALC 4204 Meet with Brian McTague, Director of the Writing Center [CONFIRMED and meeting at his office MCALC 4204]

3:00-4:00 HHALL 5167 Open forum for all University College faculty (including BIS faculty and advisors) to discuss anything related to composition (e.g., courses; course content; teacher training; administration; etc.) Not present: FI chair, associate chair, or members of the FI leadership team)

4:00 - 4:45 p.m. Faculty Lounge Rm 5173 Open forum for GTAs and adjunct faculty to discuss anything related to UNIV 111/112/200 (e.g., courses; course content; teacher training; administration; professional/career prep, etc.) Not present: FI chair, associate chair, or members of the FI leadership team

4:45-5:30 p.m. HHALL 5167 Open Forum with FI students, including UTAs (with pizza)

Evening free; dinner on your own.

Tuesday, April 30

7:30 a.m. Pick-up from Hotel [Have coffee, water, fruit and pastries in 5173 all morning]

8:00-8:45 a.m. Faculty Lounge Rm 5173 Meet with Focused Inquiry Campus Colleagues:

Scott Oates, Director, Office of Academic Integrity and Assessment

Maggie Tolan, Senior Associate Vice Provost for Student Success

Jenny Stout, Teaching & Learning Librarian, Cabell Library

Erin Webster Garrett, Assistant Vice Provost for the REAL Initiative

Lynn Pelco, Associate Vice Provost, Division of Community Engagement

8:45-9:30 a.m. Faculty Lounge Rm 5173

Les Harrison, Assoc. Prof. English & Co-Chair, GenEd 30 Curriculum Committee

Michael Rosenberg, Dir., Center for Biological Complexity & Co-Chair, GenEd 30 Curriculum Committee

Jennifer Johnson, Chair, Dept of Sociology and Co-Chair, GenEd30 Task Force, member GenEd30 Curriculum Committee

Scott Street, Associate Prof. Statistical Sciences & Chair, Faculty Senate

Angela Reynolds, Associate Prof, Dept. of Mathematics, GenEd Curriculum Committee Member, GenEd30 Task Force member

Michael "Pete" Peters, Engineering, GenEd Curriculum Committee Member,

LaRon Scott, Education, GenEd Curriculum Committee Member

9:30 -11:00 a.m. Faculty Lounge Rm 5173 Review Team time--Prepare for exit interviews with chair, dean, and provost

11:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m. Exit interview with Provost & Senior Vice Provost for Academic Affairs

12:30-2:30 p.m. Lunch: Exit interview with Chair and Dean

3:00 p.m. Leave for airport/drive to Norfolk (Relihan to Norfolk; Johnson to airport)

Appendix B: Brief Biographies of WPA Consultant-Evaluators

David Jolliffe is Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Arkansas, where he was the initial occupant of the Brown Chair in English Literacy. He earned a B.A. in English, magna cum laude, from Bethany College in 1974; an M.A. in English from West Virginia University in 1980; and a Ph.D. in English from the University of Texas in 1984. Jolliffe began his career as an educator at Triadelphia High School and then at Wheeling Park High School, where he taught both English and theatre. Jolliffe has also taught at West Virginia University, Bethany, the University of Texas, the University of Illinois at Chicago, and DePaul University. At the University of Illinois at Chicago, he served as the Director of Composition, Director of the Writing Center, and Director of Writing in the Disciplines in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. At DePaul, he was Director of Writing Programs for one year before becoming the initial Director of the Interdisciplinary First-Year Program. He moved to Fayetteville in 2005 to inaugurate the work of the Brown Chair, whose mission is to promote critical and effective literacy among Arkansans in all walks of life. Jolliffe is the author or editor of 14 books and more than 40 articles on the history and theory of rhetoric, the teaching of writing, and the preparation of writing teachers, most recently *The Arkansas Delta Oral History Project: Culture, Place, and Authenticity*.

Louise Wetherbee Phelps is Emeritus Professor of Writing and Rhetoric at Syracuse University, where she led development of a Department of Writing Studies, Rhetoric, and Composition that offers a full range of programs from a lower division general education sequence to a major in writing and rhetoric and a PhD in Composition and Cultural Rhetoric. She is currently a Scholar-in-Residence in Rhetoric and Writing at Old Dominion University, where she serves as a graduate advisor in the English Department's interdisciplinary PhD program. Dr. Phelps is a long-time consultant to writing programs and departments of English and writing/rhetoric, including a 6-week consultancy at the University of Winnipeg on a Fulbright Specialist Grant. Her publications in rhetoric and composition/writing studies range from *Composition as a Human Science* (1988) and numerous journal articles and chapters to the co-authored book *Cross-Border Networks in Writing Studies* (2017). Her most recent writings include work on literacy and aging and two book chapters on independent writing programs.

Appendix C: Description of the WPA Consultant-Evaluator Service

The Council of Writing Program Administrators is a national association of college and university faculty with professional responsibilities or interests as directors of writing programs. Operating on a method similar to regional accreditation agencies, WPA evaluations have several stages. The WPA Consultant-Evaluator Service requests a written program self-study in advance of the campus visit, sends a team of two trained consultant evaluators to campus for interviews and on-site evaluation, and then compiles a final report. A six-month follow-up report from the campus completes the process. The select panel of WPA Consultant-Evaluators comprises leaders in the field of composition. They come from four-year colleges, community colleges, and universities. All are experienced writing program administrators and recognized scholars with a national perspective on composition teaching and program administration; several are past presidents of the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and other professional organizations.

As evaluators, their primary goal is to determine a program's unique strengths and weaknesses, not to transform all writing programs into their own. They recognize that every program must retain its individual character, serve a particular community, and solve special problems. The director of this program is Dr. Shirley Rose, Arizona State University. Dr. Rose reports on the Consultant-Evaluator program to the CWPA Executive Board, which oversees its operation. Its Associate Director is Dr. Michael Pemberton, Director of the University Writing Center at Georgia Southern University.

Council of Writing Program Administrators website: <http://wpacouncil.org/>
WPA Consultant Evaluator Service web page: <http://wpacouncil.org/consultant>