Collaborative Teaching and Students’ Writing Competencies: The New Pre-Physical Therapy Seminars at the University of Hartford

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Background
The Core Learning Outcomes Committee of the Faculty Senate at the University of Hartford recently reidentified written communication as a focus of baccalaureate competency assessment. In the process of discussing the goal of effective written communication for all undergraduates, approaches for fostering the development of written communication were explored by the Core Learning Outcomes Committee. Faculty members of different disciplines thought that written communication was a skill that was taught by the Department of Rhetoric and Professional Writing. First-year writing courses are taught to undergraduates in six colleges, but after the first two courses, concentration on academic writing is generally program-specific and varies across colleges. The university decided to examine the extent to which undergraduates across disciplines demonstrate academic writing competency as they approach commencement, and this resulted in curricular changes in the Physical Therapy major.

Using the Written Communication Value Rubric of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, the university began its examination of undergraduates’ written communication competencies. The authors and their Hartford colleagues are aware of the challenges and implications of using an externally-designed instrument for internal assessment; however, the AACU rubric itself is not a focus of this paper. Nonetheless, the use of the AACU rubric proved satisfactory, and perhaps most importantly, the rubric prompted much general conversation about students’ writing, particularly discipline-specific writing.

In spring 2011, three physical therapy professors were among a team of approximately twelve faculty across disciplines who participated in the AACU half-day rubric training project. After training, the physical therapy faculty members were paired with first-year writing instructors and / or professional writing tutors from the university’s Center for Reading and Writing, and, using the AACU rubric, they assessed a pool of papers written for required, upper level pre-physical therapy and graduate physical therapy courses. That partnership heightened awareness of the importance of undergraduate and graduate PT students’ effective written communication and their familiarity with specific discursive conventions of the profession. There was a paradigm shift in the Department of Physical Therapy to embrace the concept of writing across the curriculum as a methodology for developing the requisite professional behaviors, especially written and oral communication but also interpersonal skills, use of constructive feedback, and professionalism and ethics that resulted in a change in curriculum at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Thus, what began as an exercise in applying the rubric evolved into conversations about restructuring physical therapy pre-professional seminars and accordingly redesigning written and oral communication assignments.