

MEMORANDUM

To: Senate

Subject: For Information - Literacy

From: Senate Committee on
Undergraduate Studies

Date: 1980-06-18

I am attaching for the information of Senators a memorandum from Dr. J.M. Munro, Academic Vice-President, on the subject of a University response to a perceived "Literacy" problem. SCUS has devoted part of two recent meetings to a general discussion of Dr. Munro's recommendations and has not as yet formulated a recommendation for Senate. However, I am taking the liberty of informing Senate of the discussions in order to encourage active participation by any Senator or other member of the University who may wish to participate.

I have been asked by SCUS to obtain additional information prior to the next discussion. Among the questions raised are the following:

1. To what extent is evidence available which would suggest that a pre-admission test would not be feasible or useful?
2. Would it be useful to limit the problem we are addressing to "writing skills" rather than "literacy" even though we recognize that the latter has several other important dimensions?
3. How do other Universities deal with this "problem" and what are the costs and benefits of alternative approaches?
4. Should we adopt the approach proposed, are there tools for assessment adequate for the purpose?
5. What are the current mission, enrolment and costs of the Reading Study Centre and English 010 (Writing) and how do these relate to an overall strategy for improving writing skills?

Some members of the Senate Committee on Undergraduate Studies were strongly inclined toward an approach which would require one or more course(s) in writing and related fields of all undergraduates at the University. It was noted that many Universities have had such mandatory courses and that it has become somewhat unfashionable to mandate particular courses in recent years but that it may be a direction we should seriously consider.

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If it is possible to do so, the Senate Committee on Undergraduate Studies will bring forward a recommendation for consideration by Senate in September. It may be that such a recommendation will be for "in principle" approval of a particular course of action so that implications could then be fully explored and detailed planning undertaken.

Don Bird

cc: J. Chase

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

MEMORANDUM

SCUS 80-19

D.R. Birch
Chairman, SCUS
Subject Literacy

From J.M. Munro
Vice-President, Academic
Date 2 May 1980

Major concern over the literacy problem - low quality writing by undergraduate students - has existed at Simon Fraser University for over five years. Discussion and action to provide solutions to the problem have involved a large number of people and a variety of initiatives. Despite these efforts, we still have no general policy and no comprehensive program that address the literacy problem.

Last fall I undertook a review of our literacy problem. My review included reading (in many cases, re-reading) the various reports and memoranda that had been written on this subject over the past five years, discussing literacy with the Deans and the President, and meeting with a group of interested Simon Fraser faculty and professional staff to discuss a draft paper.

Based on this review, I would like to request the Senate Committee on Undergraduate Studies to consider the following proposals for subsequent presentation to Senate.

1. That Simon Fraser University require all undergraduate students to achieve an adequate competence in the written use of the English language.
2. That the standard of "adequate competence" be maintained by a system involving referral of students with apparent writing problems by course instructors for assessment of writing skills. If warranted, completion of a basic writing course, or courses would be required.

The first of these proposals is recommended to establish the principle that, although this University does not have a required English course in its curriculum, it cares as much about the writing skills of its graduates as universities that do. At present, this basic statement of academic philosophy is lacking. Acceptance of this proposal is required before measures to improve literacy can be considered.

The second proposal will involve the whole University in what is a University problem. The mechanism for using course instructors to refer students for assessment of their writing will create an increased awareness of the need for adequate writing skills among our students. At the same time, it will avoid imposing the assessment procedure on students who do not need it.

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Chairman, SCUS

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Some have argued for an alternative version of the second proposal. A compulsory admissions test could be used to screen students into the assessment process. Such a test would have the advantage of establishing a consistent literacy standard across the University and of ensuring that all students were evaluated. However, a test would have special disadvantages. It would be expensive to administer, create problems in the recruitment of part-time students, and make the transfer student process difficult.

The proposals being advanced in this paper are designed for undergraduate students. The admissions process for graduate students seems to provide enough opportunity for assessment of individual qualifications to avoid major literacy difficulties. The standard recommended in the first proposal would apply, of course, to all undergraduate students, whether they were native or non-native speakers of English. The second proposal is intended to apply only to native speakers. I will be writing to the Senate Undergraduate Admissions Board concerning an admission-linked program of compulsory assessment of writing skills for non-native speakers of English. Those who have lived in an English-speaking environment for a number of years would be admitted without this compulsory assessment. I will also be recommending to SUAB that the TOEFL score minimum for undergraduate admission be raised.

If SCUS and Senate accept these two proposals, a number of important tasks will remain before this literacy policy could be put into effect.

1. Establishing procedures for referring students and ensuring their compliance with the requirements of this policy.
2. Designing and testing the assessment procedure.
3. Developing a program of basic writing courses.
4. Ensuring that students and all instructional staff understand the objectives and requirements of the policy.

It is my view that the University cannot afford to commit substantial financial resources to this program. I would expect that the majority of its costs would be borne directly by the students enrolled in the courses following the policies applied to other non-credit programs in the University.

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Chairman, SCUS

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I believe this to be an important matter for the quality, actual and perceived, of our undergraduate program. I know that the measures that are proposed here will not have universal support. However, I believe that a broad cross-section of the University will recognize the urgent need to take measures to deal with the literacy problem. I urge your Committee to consider these recommendations with dispatch. I would be pleased to assist in any way I can.


J.M. Munro

JMM/em

cc. H.M. Evans
K.G. Pedersen