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Introduction: Are We Requiring What Our Students Most Need?

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Why devote a special issue to the topic of writing requirements for business students? The answer, I believe, is relatively simple: any such requirement must reflect what business professionals should know and do in a knowledge economy. Because communication practices are changing radically, our requirements, too, must be reexamined. This issue provides a forum for such reexamination.

THE GLOBAL TRANSITION from a primarily industrial to a knowledge economy should not be news to any of us. According to Stephen R. Barley (1994) of Stanford University, 59 percent of the US workforce will be employed as information workers by the year 2000. To put this into perspective, only 17 percent of the US workforce served in an information-intensive capacity at the start of the 20th century. Additionally, Thomas A. Stewart (1997) asserts that knowledge-intensive companies (those that have 40 percent or more knowledge workers) account for 28 percent of the total US employment and are responsible for 43 percent of all new employment growth. Clearly, today's graduates are heading into a dramatically different workplace. To succeed in this knowledge-intensive environment, graduates will have to work cooperatively, generate and archive knowledge, and communicate effectively on demand.

For many people, the transition to a knowledge economy is inseparable from the rise of Information Technology, a topic often covered in this and many other periodicals, both popular and professional. The Internet and the World Wide Web are radically changing communication practices. One aspect of the change, for example, is the growing importance of visual literacy. To suggest a context in which we need to reexamine the writing requirement,

let me briefly discuss this need to prepare students to understand how to communicate visually.

The study of literacies received much attention in the 1980s. I think first of Walter Ong (1982) and his book, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World*. In this text, Ong discusses how written discourse fundamentally changes how we view and think about our environment. Learning how to read and write precludes us from understanding the world as peoples of a strictly oral culture understand it. According to Ong, "A literate person cannot fully recover a sense of what the world is to purely oral people" (p. 12). Just as learning how to read and write changes our sense-making behavior, learning how to communicate via digital technologies also leads to a new form of sense-making behavior. In their pioneering work with hypertext, George P. Landow (1992) and Theodor H. Nelson (1981) describe the special features of digital discourse. According to Nelson, hypertext is "text that branches and allows choices to the reader, [and is] best read at an interactive screen." Symbolic interaction via digital channels takes on a very different character, and requires a somewhat different form of literacy, than interaction via traditional print or oral channels. One of the primary differences, according to Landow, is the increased amount of nonverbal content (Landow). To illustrate his point, Landow looks at Microsoft Word: "In practice, popular word processing programs. . . have increasingly featured the capacity to include graphic materials in text documents. Linking, which permits an author to send the reader to an image from many different portions of the text, makes such integration of visual and verbal information even easier" (p. 44).

With the increasing importance of digital technology comes a related responsibility for faculty to prepare business students to use information graphics effectively in their presentations, their documents, and their postings on the Web. Many students, of course, arrive in our programs with a high degree of digital sophistication. We need to harness that interest. In business documents, text is often only an aide to the pictures; we have to ensure that students can produce and understand visual messages.

Other such concerns form the core of this special issue. In her introductory article, Melinda Knight surveys writing standards in 52 current undergraduate business programs to set the stage for our discussion. Molly Hill Epstein follows with a report on her survey of faculty in one business college concerning their perceptions of strengths and weaknesses in the writing of their students. Epstein also draws attention to some of the problems in writing across the curriculum programs. A final opening article, by Elizabeth Dorn, focuses on another set of problems in assigning writing: the limits of the case study approach.

These opening articles lead to a forum discussion that brings together shorter opinion pieces on the setting and strategies for requiring writing in business colleges. Through these articles and commentaries, we invite you to take a fresh look at requirements for writing in your own organizations.

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