THE ROLE OF WRITING IN NONTRADITIONAL EDUCATION

Carol T. Williams
Gary K. Wolfe

ABSTRACT: In order to determine the role of student writing in nontraditional life/experience credentialing programs, a questionnaire was compiled and results surveyed from nearly 50 such programs. Although there was little consensus among these programs as to what the proper role of student writing should be, most agreed that writing is a vital part of the credentialing process, but many felt it should not be overstressed. Few programs involved faculty whose main concern was writing despite evidence that essay grading provides a useful paradigm for portfolio assessment and that such faculty have much to offer and much to learn from nontraditional programs.

Despite all the attention being paid to writing in education circles, there has been little focus on the growing number of nontraditional programs that involve writing either as part of an assessment procedure or as part of independent, "external" study. In the area of writing, as in general, these new and experimental programs remain outside the mainstream of traditional disciplines, often scorned or ignored by the faculty whose involvement would ensure their legitimacy and perhaps their excellence. However, new programs that serve real student needs cannot be ignored.

First, some definitions. By "independent study" or "external degree" we refer to programs whose primary aim is to deliver college courses to students in something other than a traditional classroom setting, such as through correspondence, telephone, tutorial services, or other means. By "credentialing" we refer to programs that assess students'
informal learning experiences in order to award college credit where appropriate. These two kinds of programs have multiplied rapidly in the last decade. Peter Meyer, who surveyed assessment programs for credits in 1974, estimated that fewer than 10 institutions were involved in life-experience credentialing in 1963 but that by 1974 the number has risen to close to 200 (as cited in Trivett, 1975, p. 12). Today the Cooperative Assessment for Experiential Learning serves more than 250 institutions.

Very often both the independent study and credentialing programs are designed and administered by collegiate units separate from traditional departments; therefore, they frequently are not fully understood by the departmental faculty of their own institutions. Student response to these new offerings, particularly among adults, indicates that these programs will continue to grow. This, together with declining enrollments in traditional programs, suggests that in the future departmental faculty will have to become increasingly involved with the nontraditional offerings of their institutions. Meyer in 1974 noted the large number of schools granting credit for life or work experience "without thinking through the issues" (as cited in Trivett, 1975). In a later survey Meyer (1976) reiterated his concern that problems often arise in these programs because "the entire process has not been thought through thoroughly enough" (p. 164). One of the least addressed issues is that of writing.

This article will be concerned primarily with credentialing, the more controversial of the two major new types of programs. External degree programs, in most cases, constitute a new mode of education, a new way of delivering learning to the student; but they do not necessarily reflect new kinds of courses or requirements. The external degree thus seems to be the more conservative and hence the more traditionally acceptable concept. In our own external program at Roosevelt University we have simply developed new ways of teaching the courses in an existing degree program, the Bachelor of General Studies, which has been in operation since the mid-sixties. All work done externally by the students parallels work they would do on campus if they could attend classes; except for the lack of the classroom, nothing educationally radical is involved. External students work through modules—small books that approximate class discussions in which students respond, in effect, to each question the teacher asks. We have noted, in the three years that our external program has been in existence, that the added writing required of students working with modules seems to have improved their writing skills significantly, but the details of how that has happened are material for another study.