



By **PAUL SHELDON DAVIES** | April 16, 2011

Weak Subjects at William & Mary

The forthcoming talk by Michael Poliakoff on the need for a core curriculum is indeed important. As Karla Bruno explained in an essay in Wednesday's Gazette, several curricular requirements at William & Mary fail to ensure that students acquire crucial skills and knowledge. They offer little more than an illusion of real substance.

In fact, the problems are worse than Bruno described. Consider the college's two writing requirements. Undergrads are required to earn a C- or higher in one lower level course (usually a freshman seminar) and in one advanced course within their major.

The first problem is that these requirements are too diffuse. Professors teaching advanced seminars are busy helping students master subject matter and scarcely have time to offer sustained, comprehensive advice about writing. Nor are there institutional mechanisms to enforce the requirement that all professors teach the mechanics of writing.

And why should there be? Why should professors with expertise in philosophy or anthropology (or whatever) be required to sacrifice time devoted to teaching their disciplines in order to teach the essentials of effective writing?

There is a further problem with the college's writing requirements: They are pathetically weak. I do not know the average course grade at W&M (I believe it is a B), but a C- is close to failing. One can earn a C- in many courses and still

be a highly ineffectual writer. The writing requirements are about appearances, not substance.

Consider, too, the general education requirement in "Literature and History of the Arts" (GER 5). According to college policy, students must acquire knowledge of "at least 2 major forms, genres, eras" or "at least 2 methods of analysis." Yet many of the courses that satisfy GER 5 are too narrow to satisfy this aim. How can anyone acquire knowledge of two genres or two methods by taking a single course in, say, 20th Century Italian Women, or Tolstoy in English Translation, or Russian Cinema, or Jazz?

If the aim is knowledge of a plurality of genres or methods, the courses must be pluralistic. But these (and several others) are not. The appearance of breadth is a façade.

Similar doubts apply to other alleged "requirements" at the college. I am pessimistic that this will change any time soon, since market forces and academic fads are against a core curriculum. Still, as Bruno suggests, Poliakoff's talk (4 p.m. this Saturday, April 16, at the Wren Building) may be a catalyst to serious self-criticism and change. It should be sobering, at least, to those who trust that the college's advertised requirements are indicative of substance.

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