

**Writing Across the Curriculum
Assessment Project 2010-2011
Executive Summary
August 23, 2011**

I. History and Rationale

In the 1980's, Gustavus received national recognition for its curricular innovation in writing, which combines a strong Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program and a thriving College Writing Center. The faculty at Gustavus created and implemented one of the first such programs in the country. The writing program embodies both faculty and College commitment to teach effective writing skills throughout all disciplines. We believe that students can best learn the conventions of academic writing by taking writing intensive courses in many disciplines. By doing so, students learn the many ways in which those writing conventions reflect ways of thinking, writing, and doing research within particular fields of study. Responsibility for writing instruction is shared across the campus, and faculty work together to help students learn to express themselves with clarity and precision. WAC at Gustavus draws a great deal from "writing to learn" theories (WTL), which suggest that students can use writing to think through challenging material, internalize what they know, and express themselves more effectively and fluently.

Although the goals of the WAC program at Gustavus are clear, the College has never attempted to study the quality of student writing and the effectiveness of the WAC program. How well do students write? What types of writing skills are emphasized within WRITD courses? What types of discipline-specific writing do students complete? What is the impact of WRITD courses on quality of student writing? Defining these types of questions, creating clear learner outcomes, and designing/implementing a process that could help faculty better understand the strengths and areas for improvement in student writing requires careful and regular assessment. This Executive Summary highlights what was learned from formal assessment of the WAC program and student writing, and offers recommendations for further improving student writing.

II. The Process Used to Assess Student Writing

During Fall 2010, the first phase of the WAC program assessment was initiated following extensive planning during the 2009-2010 academic year. A multi-phase approach was chosen to ensure that the process would be manageable, and that relevant constituencies of the College could be involved with the assessment process. The Writing Program Advisory Committee (WPAC) together with the Director of WAC collaborated on design and implementation of the assessment process. Members of WPAC include Rebecca Fremo, Kathy Tunheim, Aaron Banks, Sujay Rao (Director of FTS), Carolyn Dobler (Co-Coordinator, HLC), and Jeanne Herman (Director of Writing Across the Curriculum). Particular recognition must be given to Carolyn Dobler, who completed statistical analyses for the assessment process.

III. Brief Overview of the Assessment Process

***For complete description including surveys, tally sheets, and other elements of the assessment process, visit this site: <https://gustavus.edu/wac/>**

During 2009-2010, WPAC discussions focused on appropriate methods to assess student writing at Gustavus and the impact of the writing program. A review of several Writing Across the Curriculum programs in similar liberal arts colleges revealed there is little agreement about feasible ways to assess WAC program effectiveness. Some colleges collect samples of student writing for review but WPAC was committed to learning more about our faculty members' perceptions as well as reading student papers. Finding examples of faculty surveys that focus on the teaching of writing, student surveys, and other tools that might yield data proved difficult.

The committee also spent a significant amount of time developing student learner outcomes for each Writing Across the Curriculum program goal as a basis for the assessment process. We also focused the assessment process on the criteria for a WRITD course.

The next phase of development/design focused on determining what we could realistically assess and ways to do so. A three-phase process was determined to be the best way to assess both student writing and the impact of the WAC requirement. During summer 2010, Jeanne Herman in collaboration with WPAC members began to develop instruments and tools that could be used as part of Phase I.

Phase I of the assessment process involved identification of 20 sections of WRITD courses offered during Fall 2010. Selection of courses was not random since the committee wanted to ensure a balanced representation of academic departments and an equal number of 200 and 300 level WRITD courses. Phase I of the WAC assessment process included the following steps and did not require a faculty member to add new assignments or change anything within a WRITD course.

Student Pre-Course Survey

- All students enrolled in each WRITD class were asked via email to complete a short online pre-course survey during the first ten days of class. This survey asked students to reflect on their own writing and was designed based on the Mission, Goals, and Learner Outcomes for the WAC program. The survey was created by the WPAC and posted in Survey Monkey by David Menk, Director of Institutional Research.
To review the pre-course student survey, visit this site:
https://gustavus.edu/wac/assessment_plan/appx_e.php
- Three students enrolled in each of the 20 sections of WRITD were randomly chosen to share first and final draft papers for one assignment chosen by the course instructor. Carolyn Dobler coordinated the selection process to ensure that selection was random. Each of the students selected signed a permission form developed by the committee. To review the permission form, visit this site:
https://gustavus.edu/wac/assessment_plan/appx_d.php
- Each participating faculty member was asked to submit a course syllabus and related writing materials for the WRITD course included within the assessment. These materials were uploaded to a Moodle site created for the assessment process.
- In mid-December 2010, students enrolled in the 20 sections of WRITD included within the assessment were asked to complete a post-course survey. As with the pre-course survey, questions within this final survey were directly related to the Mission, Goals, and Learner Outcomes associated with the WAC program.
To review the student post-course survey, visit this site:
https://gustavus.edu/wac/assessment_plan/appx_f.php
- All faculty participants were asked to complete a Faculty WRITD Post-Course Survey during December of 2010. Survey questions were based on the three criteria for a WRITD course.
To review the faculty post-course survey, visit this site:
https://gustavus.edu/wac/assessment_plan/appx_c.php

Phase II of the WAC assessment process may focus on writing within FTS courses. Modification of the process used for Phase I may be modified/implemented to assess writing within a sample of FTS courses. The new director of WAC, Deborah Goodwin, will design and direct future steps within the assessment process.

The vision for Phase III of the writing assessment was designed to involve collection of papers from a sample of students enrolled in FTS during Fall 2011 and these papers would then also be used for the four-year cycle of evaluation. Phase III would follow students who submitted FTS papers with collection of papers during sophomore/junior, and senior year. This would potentially yield very useful data regarding quality of student writing and impact of the WRITI and WRITD program on student writing. Without doubt, Phase III is a significant undertaking that may or may not be possible.

*To see additional detail about the original plan for Phase II and III, visit this site:

https://gustavus.edu/wac/assessment_plan/description_of_phases.php

IV. Implementation of Phase I: Reading and rating of documents January 2011

Following the process of copying and organizing student papers, faculty survey responses, and course materials, members of the WPAC convened on three mornings during January 2011. These days were used to begin the process of reading and rating student papers, analyzing course materials using tally sheets, and interpreting faculty survey responses using tally sheets.

The committee modified the AACU Value Rubric for Writing, which was then used to rate student first and final draft papers. The committee did not intend to “pair” student first and final draft papers. The goal was to discern quality of student writing following completion of a WRITD course, to compare and contrast student pre and post-course perceptions of writing improvement, and to consider faculty perceptions of student writing based on the sample of 20 WRITD courses.

*To review the AACU modified rubric applied to student papers, visit this site:

https://gustavus.edu/wac/assessment_plan/appx_g.php

Prior to reading student papers, a “norming” procedure was lead by Dr. Rebecca Fremo, Director of the Writing Center and member of WPAC. Readers applied the modified AACU Value Rubric to practice papers to increase the likelihood that readers understood the four-point rubric and how to apply it. (Later data analysis, however, revealed that inter-rater reliability was not strong. Additional detail provided under Analysis of Data section.)

Following this exercise, readers began the process of reading first draft papers and applying the rubric using a tally form. On January 12, a similar process was used to read and rate final draft papers.

“Tally sheets” were developed by the director of Jeanne Herman during fall 2010 and modified based on input from members of WPAC. Tally sheets were used for analysis of course syllabi and writing materials based on elements of interest including, for example, types of writing within a course, how well writing assignments seem to match criteria for WRITD, balance of formal and informal writing, and feedback process used within WRITD courses. Tally sheets for interpreting and summarizing faculty open-ended survey responses were linked to the criteria for WRITD.

*To review tally sheets, visit this site: https://gustavus.edu/wac/assessment_plan/appx_g.php

Data gathered from these documents, in addition to student pre and post-course survey data and Faculty Post-Course Survey data, were then analyzed by Dr. Carolyn Dobler.

V. Analysis of Data (Completed by Carolyn Dobler with input from Jeanne Herman, Deborah Goodwin, Barbara Kaiser, and Becky Fremo)

All data summaries and tables may be viewed at the WAC website:

<https://gustavus.edu/wac/>

Because the full report is extremely detailed, only summaries and recommendations will be included within this sub-section of the Executive Summary.

Preliminary Comment

As part of the assessment process, ratings of student papers and analysis of materials provided by faculty required application of rubrics and rating scales. Although steps were taken to address and ensure rater agreement, there was still considerable variation between raters within Phase I ratings. In particular, within each group of three raters, there consistently seemed to be one “high,” one “medium,” and one “low” rating. Therefore, Carolyn Dobler collapsed the data from the three raters as follows:

1. If all raters were in complete agreement, then that category was the value assigned.
2. If two of the three raters were in agreement, then the category of agreement was the value assigned.
3. If there was no agreement between the raters, the middle category was the value assigned.

Learning Outcome 1A: Make consistent, appropriate choices regarding purpose, context, form, and style.

SUMMARY

Based on examination of a random sample of student writing and on analysis of student perceptions obtained by surveying all students in twenty WRITD courses, students in WRITD courses (in Fall 2010) make consistent, appropriate choices regarding purpose, context, form, and style.

In the examined student work from Fall 2010, most (86%) demonstrated clear purpose and appropriately considered the audience, although there was no statistically significant difference in student work in the Level 2 (81%) and Level 3 (90%) courses. In addition, most (89%) used appropriate disciplinary conventions including organization, content, format, and style, with a statistically significant difference in the Level 2 (81%) and Level 3 (97%) courses.

Among students enrolled in these courses in Fall 2010, most (73%) reported improvement in their ability to make appropriate choices in purpose, content, and style of writing within this discipline after taking this WRITD course, with about ¼ reporting no change in this ability. There was no statistically significant difference in the reported improvement by course level.

At the beginning of the Fall 2010 semester, about ¼ of the students enrolled in these WRITD courses report a need for improvement in their ability to make effective choices regarding voice and language to suit the needs of specific audiences (24%), to effectively structure a paragraph to enhance clarity for readers (29%), and to use convention such as grammar and mechanics appropriately to produce clear, concise writing (23%). Of those expressing concern (needing improvement) in these aspects at the beginning of the semester, about 40% perceive their ability as strong at the end of the semester to use convention, while over 60% perceive their ability as strong at the end of the semester to make effective choices regarding voice and language to suit the needs of specific audiences and also to effectively structure a paragraph.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Although a high percentage of students meet expectations for this student learning outcome, there are still some students who do not.

These results suggest that WRITD courses should emphasize appropriate choices in purpose, content, and style of writing within the discipline since about ¼ of students reported no change in this ability after completing a WRITD course. Similarly, about ¼ of students within the sample believe they need further work on how to make effective choices regarding voice and language to suit the needs of specific audiences (24%), to effectively structure a paragraph to enhance clarity for readers (29%), and to use conventions such as grammar and mechanics appropriately to produce clear, concise writing (23%).

Although the results suggest the majority of students are making consistent, appropriate choices regarding purpose, context, form, and style, teachers of writing should consider ways to reemphasize these skills and reach the ¼ of sample students who need further work in achieving this goal. One way to help students practice and emphasize how to make effective choices regarding voice and language is via informal writing exercises. For example, students might be asked to write a short précis of a research-based article for a scholarly audience; they might then revise that summary for a newsletter or another publication intended for a lay audience. Or, students might be asked to read a particular excerpt of published writing from a scholarly journal, and then distill that excerpt into language that might be shared with a different audience. Such exercises help students develop rhetorical strategies to make their work reach multiple audiences effectively. Finally, it may be beneficial for all WRITD course syllabi/ writing materials to include specific expectations regarding discipline-specific writing. For instance, teachers might include guidelines for students related to genre, format, audience, style, and types of sources.

Learning Outcome 2A: Opportunities to use formal and informal writing.

SUMMARY

Based on the analysis of course materials provided by the faculty, the opportunities to use informal writing appear to be limited. This, however, does not mean that informal writing is not being used in WRITD courses, as it may appear on essay exams or homework.

Analysis of course materials suggests that the majority (65%) of WRITD courses in the sample require a draft for one assignment. Although number of pages required for an assignment varies widely, as does the total number of graded assignments within a course, most WRITD courses within this sample require 3-5 formal assignments. In some 300 level courses, one more in-depth writing assignment was used with multiple drafts of sub-sections.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Faculty teaching WRITD courses should include language about the value of informal writing within course materials and provide opportunities for students to write informally. Exercises designed to help students value and use informal writing can be very brief. Students can write a short response to a video, speaker, or reading with follow-up discussion of the response. In small groups, students can be asked to write a group analysis of the arguments used within a short reading. Completing thinking or concept maps can also be used as informal writing. This style of brief writing exercise can relate to a lecture, reading, speaker, or other information source. These are just a few examples of informal writing that can engage students and encourage them to explore and refine writing skills. Informal writing is typically not graded nor do faculty need to collect and read it. Discussion of the response can help students improve writing and demonstrate understanding of course material.

Although there is fairly wide disparity in number of required formal assignments within WRITD courses included within this sample, we encourage faculty to consider requiring no fewer than three formal writing assignments with required drafts for at least two of those assignments. To enhance clarity of writing, students should be expected to write drafts of papers, receive faculty and/or peer feedback, and revise. Exploring the genres of writing within the discipline through varied assignments and informal writing may also be beneficial.

Learning Outcome 3A: Analyze and create arguments, explain, persuade, and communicate with varied audiences.

SUMMARY

Based on examination of student writing samples and on analysis of student perceptions, students in WRITD courses (in Fall 2010) are able to analyze and create arguments, explain, persuade, and communicate with varied audiences.

In the examined student work in Fall 2010, most (86%) demonstrated clear purpose and appropriately considered the audience, although there was no statistically significant difference in student work in the Level 2 (81%) and Level 3 (90%) courses. In addition, slightly fewer (84%) used appropriate content to illustrate mastery of the subject, with a statistically significant difference in the Level 2 (73%) and Level 3 (93%) courses. Finally, slightly less (78%) used appropriate support for arguments, with a statistically significant difference in the Level 2 (61%) and Level 3 (93%) courses.

Among students enrolled in these courses in Fall 2010, most (74%) reported improvement in their ability to analyze and create arguments, explain, and persuade within this discipline with about ¼ reporting no change in this ability. About 2/3 (65%) reported improvement in their ability to find, evaluate, and incorporate appropriate resources to support the thesis/premise/points of view within a paper, with about 1/3 reporting no change in this ability. Half of the students reported improvement in their ability to write for multiple audiences across disciplines. There was no statistically significance in the previous reported abilities by course level.

At the beginning of the Fall 2010 semester, about ¼ of the students enrolled in these WRITD courses report a need for improvement in their ability to state a clear thesis and properly develop an argument (27%), to find, evaluate, and select primary and secondary sources (26%), and to effectively integrate and cite primary and secondary sources as evidence within a paper (22%). Of those expressing concern (needing improvement) in these aspects at the beginning of the semester, about 37% perceive their ability as strong at the end of the semester to state a clear thesis and properly develop an argument, while 73% perceive their ability as strong at the end of the semester to find, evaluate, and select primary and secondary sources and to effectively integrate and cite primary and secondary sources as evidence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is exciting to see the high percentages of students who can analyze and create arguments, and explain, persuade, and communicate with varied audiences. The results clearly suggest the majority of students are improving these skills through completion of WRITD courses but there are still some students who need to refine these skills.

The results suggest that teachers of Level 2 WRITD courses may need to further emphasize how to incorporate appropriate support for arguments since many students indicate concern about their ability to do this effectively. Faculty might respond by developing Level 2 WRITD courses that focus on methods of argumentation across similar fields of study. Colleagues within a given division could share and rotate responsibility for teaching these courses. For instance, courses might be offered in Arguments in the Sciences, Arguments in the Social Sciences, Arguments in

the Humanities, etc. Or, individual departments could develop courses that re-emphasize argumentation within their existing Level 2 offerings. Given that about ¼ of students reported no change in this ability after completing their WRITD course, it would be beneficial for WRITD courses to include opportunities for students to analyze and create arguments, explain, and persuade within the context of the discipline. Emphasis on incorporating appropriate resources to support the thesis/premise/points of view within a paper might be yet another goal for WRITD courses. This seems important given that about 1/3 of students report no change in this ability after completing the WRITD course. We recognize, of course, that WRITD courses vary not only by discipline but by type of writing assignments incorporated. The above recommendations must be considered within the context of the discipline and course.

Learning Outcome 4A: Complete writing exemplifying structures, genre, and conventions of discipline.

SUMMARY

Based on examination of a random sample of student writing and on analysis of student perceptions obtained by surveying all students in twenty WRITD courses, students in WRITD courses (in Fall 2010) complete writing exemplifying structures, genre, and conventions of the discipline.

In the examined student work collected Fall 2010, most (89%) demonstrated appropriate use of conventions within the discipline/writing task including organization, content, format, and style, with a statistically significant difference in student work in the Level 2 (81%) and Level 3 (97%) courses. In addition, most (87%) used appropriate voice, clarity, readability, and conventions, although there was no statistically significant difference in the Level 2 (81%) and Level 3 (93%) courses.

Among students enrolled in these courses in Fall 2010, over half reported improvement in their ability to recognize different kinds of writing (57%) and to use discipline-specific conventions (62%) after taking this WRITD course. Further, most reported improvement in their knowledge and understanding of styles of writing within this discipline (75%) and in their ability to read and interpret professional discipline-specific articles and literature (74%). Many (66%) reported improvement in ability to write for audiences within their discipline. There was no statistically significant difference in the reported improvement of any of the previous abilities by course level.

At the beginning of the Fall 2010 semester, only 14% of students enrolled in these WRITD courses report a need for improvement in writing effective sentences and paragraphs. Of those expressing concern (needing improvement) at the beginning of the semester, half perceive their ability as strong at the end of the semester to write effective sentences and paragraphs.

Review of course syllabi/writing materials submitted by faculty within this sample show that 55% stated very clear directions and expectations about structures, genre, and conventions of their discipline. Another 30% included some language about genre and conventions, and 15% did not provide examples or clearly explain expectations. In terms of appropriate audience for writing assignments, 85% of faculty clearly described audience and 70% of faculty explained expectations regarding voice and tone of writing assignments. Furthermore, 80% of faculty described in some detail expectations regarding format and length of the paper, and editing and grammar.

Results from the Faculty Post-Course Survey show wide variation in types of discipline-specific writing faculty asked students to complete in the WRITD courses included within this sample. Students were asked to review research-based academic papers or articles, case study papers, lab or field reports, and many other styles of writing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Clearly, WRITD courses included within this sample are helping students become better writers, with particular strides being made in terms of their knowledge of conventions within the discipline, including organization, content, format, and style. Likewise, gains are being made in terms of how their papers demonstrate appropriate voice, clarity, readability, and sentence level conventions (grammar, syntax, mechanics). The statistically significant difference between students' knowledge in these areas in level two and level three courses supports the idea that as students move forward within their disciplines, their knowledge of disciplinary conventions improves.

At the same time, although a high percentage of students meet expectations for this student learning outcome, there are still some students who do not. One way to help this group of students is to provide more opportunities to read and explore examples of writing that exemplify the genre and conventions within the discipline. Faculty members might upload samples to their course MOODLE pages, for instance, or include one full article - perhaps even annotated by the faculty member him/herself - from the discipline as an attachment to each syllabus. Having such models readily available might also facilitate the discussion of appropriate voice, organization and conventions.

Still, models alone may not communicate expectations clearly. Instead, faculty members could be encouraged to include explicit descriptions of their expectations regarding discipline-specific writing. Results suggest that only 55% of WRITD course instructors included within this sample clearly describe their expectations regarding discipline-specific writing. Clear expectations for writing assignments appropriate within the discipline should be included within the syllabus or other writing materials. For instance, instructors might develop:

- annotated examples of past student papers
- annotated examples of professionally authored materials
- handouts that state generic and/ or other discipline-specific expectations explicitly
- exercises or assignments based on a required style manual

Additionally, sharing expectations regarding audience, voice, and tone for each assignment could be beneficial to students. Again, these might be communicated directly via handout or modeled with sample texts.

In addition to providing clear expectations regarding discipline-specific writing, WRITD teachers should consider creating a broad variety of writing assignments appropriate to the discipline. By showing students that disciplinary discourse is not monologic, instructors help them understand the nuances of structure, voice, and other rhetorical strategies used within a discipline. When they produce literature reviews, research-based papers, field reports, and other forms, they benefit from being exposed to the multitude of genres that create and maintain a particular knowledge community.

Learning Outcome 5A: Write drafts, receive peer and faculty feedback, revise and edit.

SUMMARY

Based on examination of a random sample of student writing and on analysis of student perceptions obtained by surveying all students in twenty WRITD courses, students in WRITD courses (in Fall 2010) are able to write drafts, receive peer and faculty feedback, and revise and edit.

At the beginning of the Fall 2010 semester, only 19% of students enrolled in these WRITD courses reported a need for improvement in revising successfully with the help of instructor or peer feedback. Of those expressing concern (needing improvement) at the beginning of the semester, over half (64%) perceived their ability to revise successfully with feedback as strong by the end of the semester.

Among students enrolled in sample courses during Fall 2010, over half (58%) reported improvement in their ability to write a good first draft of a paper after taking this WRITD course. Furthermore, many (64%) reported improvement in ability to incorporate faculty/peer feedback when revising a paper. There was no statistically significant difference in the reported improvement of any of the previous abilities by course level.

It is also interesting to note that about 73% of students completed three or more papers that included instructor and/or peer feedback while 27% completed one or two papers that included instructor and/or peer feedback.

Examination of syllabus/course materials shows that 30% of faculty require revision of more than one assignment and set clear expectations, 50% require revision of one or more assignments but provide minimal reference to expectations, and 20% invite written drafts but do not require revision.

Review of syllabus/course materials also suggests that 50% of faculty in this sample dedicate class time for peer review and feedback on one or more writing assignments, 10% of faculty recommend peer review outside of class time, and 40% of faculty do not include information about peer review and feedback in writing materials.

Further analysis of syllabus/course materials suggests that the most common kinds of revision students were asked to make after faculty review of a first draft include: development of a thesis, structural changes, and quality of evidence or analysis of argument.

Patterns of concerns still noted by faculty in final drafts of student papers include: development of thesis, structure, conventions, quality of evidence, and appropriate use of citations and citation style. Although faculty identify types of improvements students need to make in final papers, it is interesting that the majority of faculty view revision as valuable or extremely valuable as a means to improve student writing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Results suggest that after completing a WRITD course, students improve their ability to write first draft papers effectively, and incorporate peer and instructor feedback. The number of students who improved these skills suggests that instructors are being purposeful in designing discussions and assignments. Although a high percentage of students meet expectations for this student learning outcome, there are still some students who do not.

What does data suggest about feedback and revision of writing assignments?

Were revisions required by WRITD courses included within the sample?

Given that the majority of WRITD courses required a first draft for just one assignment, WRITD courses could provide more opportunities for peer/faculty feedback, perhaps by requesting a first draft of at least two different types of assignments. Since about half of students show improvement when writing second drafts, and are better able to apply instructor comments when revising, more experience with feedback and revision is desirable. On the Faculty Post-Course Survey all faculty within the sample who responded to a question regarding the "value of revision" indicated they believe revision is of value in improving student writing.

If revisions were required, how clearly were expectations regarding a revision communicated?

Because examination of syllabus/course materials suggests that 50% of WRITD courses in this sample require revision of one or more assignments but provide “minimal reference to expectations”, more detail about expectations for revising and writing drafts of papers is needed.

Was peer review utilized, and if so, was time designated for that activity during class?

Review of syllabus/course materials shows that 40% of faculty do not include information about peer review and feedback in writing materials. If faculty believe peer feedback is of value in improving student writing, some explanation of how peer feedback will be used and its importance should be addressed within the course syllabus. It is certainly possible that students learn about the importance of peer feedback through information shared verbally in the classroom.

In this sample, 50% of faculty provide class time for peer review and feedback activities. To ensure that peer feedback is of good quality and that it actually occurs, in-class opportunities for students to review peer assignments may be of value because these experiences allow the faculty member to observe and intervene when necessary. In addition, Writing Center staff members can often be available to help facilitate peer response.

Peer review activities can be brief. For example:

Students might be asked to complete a concept map to provide feedback on the thesis and arguments used to support it;

As students are in the process of writing a paper they might be asked to examine one element of the writing process, such as effective use of transitions. As they review one student paper, they could be asked to use a highlighter to identify transitions within the paper with follow-up class discussion about types of transitions and effectiveness.

Peers might be asked to apply a short rubric to one page or one sub-section of another student's paper.

There are many techniques that provide peer feedback on writing assignments, and many can take as little as 10-15 minutes.

What concerns do faculty who teach WRITD courses have about revision and quality of first and final papers?

Faculty survey responses identified some of the following as areas of concern in first drafts of student papers: structure within paper or essay, development of thesis or argument, and quality of evidence used. Similarly, when asked about concerns regarding final drafts of papers these same issues were mentioned, although less frequently. This reinforces the idea that quality feedback, from both instructors and peers, could be of value.

The literature suggests that many students find brief feedback offered at intervals to be just as valuable as feedback on “one complete draft” at the end of the writing process. Perhaps faculty members might communicate their expectations more clearly and specifically by commenting on one section of a paper or focusing on one specific type of revision rather than attempting to explain multiple issues within a draft. By commenting in more specific ways multiple times during the writing process, students may better understand and address suggestions and concerns.

Studies also suggest that conferencing with individual students during the semester can improve quality of revision. This technique can help faculty determine which students do/do not understand peer/instructor comments and guidelines on papers, and provide individual assistance with the writing process.

Clarity of expectations for assignments is also needed within course syllabus/writing materials. Although we cannot assess how many faculty convey expectations regarding assignments verbally, additional detail within writing materials may promote student understanding of expectations.

Without doubt, time is always a concern and we offer these recommendations with the understanding that being cognizant of faculty time is important.

VI. Challenges Within the Assessment Process

- Lack of appropriate guidelines and direction for college-level Writing Across the Curriculum assessment beyond use of a portfolio by some colleges. There simply is no widely used process for assessing writing across the curriculum. Without doubt, assessing writing is a highly subjective and qualitative process.
- Lack of relevant tools or instruments to facilitate interpretation of information-gathering elements such as writing course syllabi and writing materials.
- Absence of valid and reliable surveys to assess student knowledge and perception of writing.
- Absence of valid and reliable faculty post-course surveys related to teaching writing across the curriculum.
- Low interrater reliability when multiple readers applied the rubric to the same set of papers.
- The variation within writing assignments in 200 and 300 level WRITD courses, and the difficulty this creates in choosing a rubric and applying it to papers in a cross-disciplinary program such as Writing Across the Curriculum.
- Time commitment for members of WPAC and the director of WAC.
- The need for a multi-phase writing assessment that spans four years to truly understand the impact of WRIT courses on student writing, and the difficulties this creates including maintaining a viable sample, maintaining records regarding paper submissions, and other logistics of the process.
- Maintaining a high student sample for pre and post-course surveys required numerous emails and follow-up contacts.

Securing faculty participation, submission by faculty of WRITD course documents and student sample papers, and collection of faculty post-course surveys were NOT challenges. Faculty members that participated in the assessment process were very accommodating and helpful.

VII. Final Recommendations and Thoughts

Results of the WAC Assessment suggest that students within the 20 sample WRITD courses are being positively impacted by the WRITD program and in fact, are very capable writers.

During 2011-2012, the director of writing and members of WPAC may wish to consider ways to use results of the assessment process to further discussion among faculty, strengthen the WRITD program and provide support to faculty who teach writing courses.

- Provide faculty development opportunities with a clear focus on strengths and areas for improvement in student writing. Having data that identifies those strengths and areas for improvement can help focus faculty development on actual student needs.
- Consider the time and possible compensation for such faculty development opportunities carefully. January Term and June are times when faculty might be more likely to participate.
- Assessment results will also be invaluable in stimulating serious faculty conversation about the criteria for WRITD and WRITI courses, which are very brief and difficult to interpret in their existing format. Discussions might begin within WPAC, and then include

faculty who currently teach WRITD/WRITI courses. An open meeting for all faculty to share ideas is also recommended.

- Other conversations with faculty might focus on ways to ensure that WRITI and WRITD courses address the appropriate criteria; perhaps some consideration of a re-approval cycle might be worthwhile.
- The results of the assessment can also be used to inform the Teachers Talking Writing program offered to faculty members. It would be very helpful to focus each session on one learner outcome, the results from the study, and then engage faculty in discussion of ways to address areas for improvement.
- The results of the assessment will also help WPAC focus their attention on ways to further improve student writing at Gustavus. It would be useful to discuss possible modifications to the assessment process in order to make it even more effective during Phase II and III.

The Director of WAC (2008-2011) and members of WPAC (2009-2011) would like to thank all faculty who participated in the assessment process. Their input was invaluable in so many ways, and they were both gracious and supportive as the process evolved. Similarly, students were very willing to participate in the assessment through completion of surveys and submitting papers. Appreciation in the form of follow-up emails was expressed to each student as they completed tasks.

This first formal attempt to assess student writing at Gustavus, and the impact of WRITD courses on student writing, clearly suggests that the majority of students possess sound writing skills and that they are engaged in writing across the disciplines. Additionally, the assessment process shows that WRITD courses are positively impacting student writing in many ways.

The Writing Across the Disciplines assessment process also provides a sound foundation for thinking about ways to further improve the program and student writing. During 2011-2012, opportunities for faculty discussion and development can be based on actual data gathered from both faculty and students. Hopefully, data summaries and recommendations will provide direction for the writing across the curriculum program, and what was learned about assessment of writing can be further refined as part of Phase 2 and 3 of the assessment process.