

December 18, 2000

Subject: Report on Review of Writing-Intensive Syllabi for Fall 1999 and Spring 2000

To: Deans, Directors, Chairs

From: Terry Zawacki, Director, Writing Across the Curriculum and  
Stanley Zoltek, Chair, University Writing Across the Curriculum Committee

### Summary

As part of its charge from the Faculty Senate to conduct ongoing assessment of the Writing-Intensive (WI) requirement, the University Writing Across the Curriculum Committee periodically collects and reviews syllabi from WI courses across the university. In Spring 2000, the Committee conducted its second review of syllabi from designated Writing-Intensive (WI) courses taught in Fall 1999 and Spring 2000. Approximately 70% of the 101 syllabi collected from the departments met the guidelines for WI courses as outlined by the Faculty Senate, which mandated in 1993 that all students must take one upper-level WI course in their major. For a full description of the WI requirement, see <http://wac.gmu.edu>.

The WAC Committee's review of WI syllabi seems especially timely in the context of the new General Education guidelines, which describe written communication as one of the foundation skills to be developed in English 100/101, English 302, and the approved writing-intensive course in the major. Moreover, in the description of the "Synthesis" requirements, the guidelines call attention to the importance of the student's writing experience in the required writing courses and in the major.

Syllabi Collection. In Spring 2000, the Committee sent Chairs and/or undergraduate coordinators in academic units with undergraduate majors a form letter asking for information on their departments' WI courses.<sup>1</sup> The response to this request for information on WI syllabi was quite good: we received information on 57 of the 67 WI courses listed in the catalog, represented by 101 syllabi.<sup>2</sup> We note, however, that not all of the WI courses listed in the catalog are necessarily taught in the semesters for which we collected syllabi. After receiving the syllabi and the report from the departmental member assigned to reviewing his/her department's WI syllabi, the Director, with the assistance of a graduate student, noted syllabi which omitted one or more of the WI requirements.

Results of Syllabi Review. Of the 101 syllabi we received, 31 did not fully meet the WI requirements. According to the Faculty Senate motion passed in May 1997, all syllabi must contain 1) an explicit statement that the course "fulfills all or in part the writing-intensive requirement for the major" and 2) a specific description of the assignments and procedures by which the course fulfills the WI criteria. The 31 syllabi omitted one or more of the following requirements:

- 26 did not state that the course fulfills the writing-intensive requirement for the major;
- 15 did not indicate that students will be graded on a minimum of 3500 words, divided among two or more assignments or a longer project divided into stages;

---

<sup>1</sup> New Century College and Public and International Affairs were not asked to submit syllabi as, by prior agreement, all courses above the 300-level are considered to be writing intensive.

<sup>2</sup>See attached list for number of syllabi submitted for each WI course.

- 19 contained no description of writing procedures (e.g., drafts, feedback, revision, class time given to instruction in writing the assignment) prescribed by the WI requirement; in some cases, a collaborative project is being used to fulfill the 3500-word requirement with no indication that individual students are writing and receiving feedback on that number of words.

In addition, according to section sizes listed on the web, 6 WI sections enrolled more than the maximum number of 35 students.

Conclusions from WI syllabi review. Approximately 70% of the WI syllabi collected and reviewed met the requirements.<sup>3</sup> It seemed to the WAC Committee that syllabi not fully meeting the requirements may have been prepared by faculty who were not aware that the Faculty Senate has asked that explicit descriptions of the guidelines and procedures for WI courses appear on the syllabus. In a very few cases, faculty seem unaware that their course has been designated writing-intensive. Other faculty members have questioned whether individual departmental agreements, negotiated when the requirement first went into effect, are still valid.

WAC Committee Follow-up. As a follow-up to these findings, faculty with WI syllabi omitting one or more of the requirements received an e-mail message from Stanley Zoltek on behalf of the WAC Committee. This e-mail message was intended to educate faculty regarding the WI requirements. Similarly, faculty who were going to be teaching Fall 2000 WI courses received an e-mail message from the WAC Committee prior to the start of the semester, reminding them to be sure their syllabi met the requirements. In addition, Chairs were sent a memo reminding them of the guidelines for WI courses. (Contact Stanley Zoltek or Terry Zawacki to receive copies.)

Recommended Actions. The WAC Committee will work to ensure that all WI courses meet the WI requirements and guidelines laid out by the Faculty Senate. Given the issues which surfaced in our review of WI syllabi and given the renewed emphasis on WI courses in the new plan for general education, we recommend the following actions:

- The Director will revisit departmental agreements, which were negotiated when the requirement was first mandated, to determine whether these agreements are still viable. In a few cases, the designated WI course has been changed, but the Director may not have been notified. In other cases, it's not clear whether the series of courses intended to fulfill the requirement must each meet all of the WI criteria. Furthermore, if a department or unit says that any course above the 300-level fulfills the requirement, do we expect that all of the criteria will be met in all courses?
- The Committee will draft guidelines and policies to submit to the Senate regarding collaborative writing assignments, minimum page requirements, and the revision-with-feedback requirement. Note: In early Fall 2000, the Committee drafted a policy statement regarding the use of collaborative writing projects, which will be presented to the Senate for approval. The Committee will also address questions about the need for explicit WI criteria to be present on all syllabi.
- The WAC Director will continue her efforts to provide faculty development in a number of venues, to wit:

---

<sup>3</sup> Note that we are not making the claim that we have seen all of the syllabi for every WI course offered during these semesters. In some cases, there may have been multiple sections of the same course and we may not have seen syllabi from each of those sections. In other cases, one syllabus is prescribed for all of the sections of the WI course taught in any given semester.

- Visits department meetings to remind faculty of the WI requirements.
- Hold faculty development workshops. As many faculty are new to departments, new to teaching a WI course, or have not recently taught such a course, we see a need for a series of short workshops devoted to writing topics, such as designing good assignments and grading rubrics, responding to student writing, addressing bothersome errors, and so on. These workshops might be given at new faculty orientations, scheduled throughout the semester, or, as is done at some institutions, offered regularly as drop-in, free lunch meetings. No matter in what format they are offered, we think that the workshops will be better attended if they are directed to the faculty at large rather than focused on specific departments, a recommendation which came out of the 1997 study of the WI requirement wherein the Chairs said department-specific workshops would be more productive for faculty. While we agree with this finding in principle, in practice the Director has found it difficult to get Chairs to commit to sponsoring departmental WAC workshops.
- While it is difficult to gauge the influence of the Writing at Center Newsletter, we believe that a newsletter is currently one of the best ways to highlight good teaching practices and to give information and advice on teaching with writing. This academic year the newsletter is being published in a one-page, two-sided format, approximately twice a semester. We think more faculty will be inclined to read, or at least skim, the newsletter in this format. At some point, the Director may need to survey faculty to evaluate the effectiveness of the newsletter.

All but the first of these recommended faculty-development activities require funding. The WAC Committee and the Director of WAC would like to note that, thanks to the efforts of the Provost's Office and CAS, the WAC Program has received, for the first time in its history, a line-item budget to support its assessment and faculty development efforts. The Director has also received a general education grant from the Provost's Office to support the development of web-based writing guides for students in WI courses. This work will be a continuation of a project funded by former Provost Potter; thus far web-based writing guides have been created by NCC, PIA, and SOM and are in production in School of Nursing, Biology, Psychology, and Communication.