

Date: May 5, 2008

Subject: Report on Review of Writing-Intensive Syllabi for Fall 2007 and Spring 2008

To: Provost Stearns, Undergraduate Deans and Directors, Department Chairs, and Faculty Senate Chair

From: Terry Zawacki, Director, Writing Across the Curriculum
Stanley Zoltek, Chair, Writing Across the Curriculum Committee
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2007-08 WAC Committee members: Pam Cangelosi, CHHS; Irene Bruno, ITE; Tom Owens, CVPA; Ellen Rodgers, RHT/CEHD; Beth Schneider, SOM. Consultants: Guiseppina Kysar, COS; Dan Joyce, CVPA; Glenda Morgan, TAC; Shelly Reid, English; Andrew Wingfield, NCC; and Sarah Baker, Program Assistant

Summary

As part of its charge from the Faculty Senate to conduct ongoing assessment of the writing intensive (WI) requirement, the Writing Across the Curriculum Committee periodically collects and reviews syllabi from WI courses in all undergraduate majors. In Spring 2008, the Committee conducted its third review of syllabi from designated WI courses taught in Fall 2007 and Spring 2008, collecting WI syllabi from majors in all of the colleges and also in the Institute for Conflict Resolution. Of the 65 syllabi collected, approximately 81% 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. This percentage is higher than the 70% compliance rate from the WI syllabi review conducted in 1999-2000 and the 71% compliance rate from the 2003-2004 review. As in past years, the WAC director contacted faculty whose syllabi did not meet the WI requirements and asked for revision and resubmission. In a few cases, WI syllabi submitted by departments did not match with the WI course designated in the catalog; these departments were also contacted about the discrepancy. Finally, in three cases, WI courses had not been designated for new majors. Directors/coordinators for these majors were contacted and have submitted WI courses for committee review. The Committee is satisfied that all of these listed concerns have now been addressed. For fuller comparative details, see the "Conclusions" section in the attached report. For a full description of the WI requirement, see <http://wac.gmu.edu/wi/wirequirement.html>.

Recommended actions, described in the final section of the report (p. 4), include: 1) increased administrative support for WAC, a critical need given the growth in enrollment and numbers of majors; 2) increased faculty development efforts, including expansion of discipline-based undergraduate Writing Fellows program to provide support to faculty teaching with writing; 3) redesign of WAC website and expansion of both informational and resources pages, including discipline-based online writing guides; 4) expansion of departmental student writing awards; 5) creation of profiles of writing in the colleges.

Syllabi Collection

In fall 2007, 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. The response to this request for information on WI syllabi was quite good: we received information on 31

of the 57 WI courses (or course sequences) listed in the catalog, represented by 65 syllabi. Some of the departments, such as the four departments in CVPA, Psychology and Economics, were very prompt in their response to the collection letter. As of this report date, six departments had not provided syllabi in response to our request. We also note that not all of the WI courses listed in the catalog are necessarily taught in the semesters for which we collected syllabi.

Results of Syllabi Review

There are 40 undergraduate units in the university, and at least 51 WI courses for which 65 syllabi were collected. Of the syllabi reviewed, 11 did not meet all of the WI requirements. In a positive light, 81% met all requirements. All of the syllabi submitted from the WI courses in the following departments and academic units were in compliance:

- Art and Visual Technology, Dance, Music, and Theater (CVPA);
- Computer Science, Civil and Infrastructure Engineering, and Information Technology (ITE);
- Administration of Justice, Art History, Communication, Economics, English, History, NCC, Philosophy, Psychology, Sociology, Religious Studies, and Spanish (CHSS);
- Astronomy, Biology, Chemistry, Geology, Geography, and Physics (COS).
- School of Management
- Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution (ICAR)
- School of Recreation, Health and Tourism and Parks, Recreation and Leisure Studies (CEHD).
- School of Nursing, Health Administration and Policy, Global and Community Health and Social Work (CHHS).

For the 11 syllabi that did not fully meet the WI requirements, the corresponding units were notified by the WAC committee of the particular areas where the requirement was unmet. 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 11 syllabi were not fully in compliance for one or more of the following reasons:

- They did not state on the syllabus that the course fulfills the writing-intensive requirement for the major;
- they 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;
- they contained no description of the writing procedures (e.g., drafts, feedback, revision, class time given to instruction in writing the assignment) described in 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; or
- They did not meet the minimum writing requirement.

In addition to evaluating these WI courses, we note that three new undergraduate majors are in the process of designating a WI course and have been in close contact with the WAC committee: Global and Environmental Change; Film and Video Studies, and Electrical and Computer Engineering.

Conclusions from WI Syllabi Review:

Overall, the high level of compliance to the WI requirement—81%--pleased the committee. These results are higher than the 70% compliance rate from the WI syllabi review conducted in 1999-2000

and the 71% compliance rate from the 2003-2004 review. That said, however, the results in general are difficult to compare. For past reviews, the number of syllabi submitted varied because some units submitted a syllabus for every section of the WI course being taught, even if a common syllabus was used for all sections (e.g. SOM 301). In addition, during the first years of reviewing syllabi, syllabi were collected from all 300 and 400-level courses for departments that had no one course designated WI but, instead, counted all upper-division courses toward meeting the requirement; majors where this is/was the case include history and art history, philosophy, and public and international affairs. This meant, then, in 1999-2000, 101 syllabi were submitted for review compared with 65 this year.

Overall, the WAC committee feels certain that we are making progress with each syllabi collection and review. In this past collection and review, using the large College of Science as an example, every one of the COS units was in compliance with the exception of Med Tech, which did not submit a syllabus because they did not yet have a designated WI course. We believe that the interviews with the undergraduate chairs and WI faculty within the College of Science (COS), conducted by Terry Zawacki and Sue Durham during the academic year 2006-2007, reinforced the importance of the WI requirement within COS.¹ Interviews with undergraduate chairs and coordinators in ITE, among other colleges, are planned for the 2008-09 academic year.

While the majority of syllabi generally met all of the guidelines for WI courses, we note that some faculty seem to have been unaware that explicit descriptions of the guidelines and procedures for WI courses must appear on the syllabus. These faculty were notified that their syllabi did not fully meet the guidelines, and they have been asked to indicate on future syllabi the ways in which the course meets the requirement. In a few instances, faculty indicated they were unaware that their course had been designated writing intensive, as we learned in follow-up emails.

The syllabus review process enabled us to detect and address other issues related to the WI requirement. For example, the committee identified WI courses that were either incorrectly listed or not listed at all in the university catalog. When this situation arose, the departments were notified so that the discrepancy could be corrected. It was discovered, for example, that

- Both ____ and _____ had listed two courses as WI when both had reduced the WI designation to one course because of enrollment caps required of WI courses and the lack of FTE to support two WI courses requiring smaller enrollment.

Note: This is a point the committee will need to take up; that is, is it preferable to have more than one designated WI course even though each course may not fully meet the requirement. For pedagogical reasons, the WAC director believes that it is better for students to have more writing opportunities even if these opportunities are not fully within the WI guidelines. In history, for example, students write in every course, a point that has been recognized at events celebrating writing at the university.

¹ In fall of 2006 and spring of 2007, Terry Zawacki and Susan Durham interviewed all of the COS undergraduate coordinators for the purpose of gathering information on writing within their disciplines, reinforcing the need to maintain the WI requirement and supporting WI instructors in their efforts to teach writing effectively to undergraduate students. Based on these interviews, we have created a profile of undergraduate writing in the College of Science, which is a website resource that we believe will be useful to administrators for promoting the culture of writing that exists at Mason and for faculty interested in seeing the range of writing assignments in various courses. Profiles are currently being developed for all of the colleges with undergraduate majors.

Another result of the syllabi review has been that some departments have reexamined the way in which they satisfy the WI requirement.

- Even though PHIL 421 is the designated WI course, the faculty continues to integrate multiple writing assignments into all upper-level philosophy courses.
- In departments such as philosophy, history, and art history, all of their 300-level courses and above meet WI requirements; however, they have found that designating one or two courses as the WI course(s) for the major allows them to keep enrollment at the 35 student cap required of WI courses.
- Because of the WI syllabi review, units with new undergraduate majors have been contacted about the WI requirement and have appreciated the support that they have gotten from the WAC committee in assisting them in integrating the WI requirements into the newly designated WI courses. This has been the case for Global and Environmental Health and Electrical and Computer Engineering.

Other important features of this kind of ongoing attention to WI courses have included the following:

- Pre-semester reminder emails to faculty teaching WI courses of the requirements for WI courses.
- Semesterly check of enrollments in WI courses to be sure that enrollment caps are being followed.
- Regular reminders to undergraduate chairs and unit leaders asking them to make sure that new or adjunct faculty who have been assigned to teach WI courses are aware of and comply with the WI requirements. For example, Dr Lawrence Rockwood who coordinates the WI course for biology works consistently with adjuncts and teaching assistants who teach their WI course to ensure compliance with WI standards and to support these new faculty in teaching the WI course.
- Email contacts with faculty omitting one or more of the requirements from their syllabi and asking them to submit a revised syllabus.

Clearly a systematic review of WI syllabi allows for ongoing oversight of the WI requirement. The WAC Committee agrees, in fact, that we should conduct ongoing WI syllabi review, targeting particular departments and units on a rotating basis.

Recommended Actions:

Based on the issues that surfaced in our review of WI syllabi and given that papers from WI courses are being assessed as part of our efforts to respond to criteria for Academic Program Review and to the SCHEV mandate to assess student writing competence, we make the following recommendations:

- **Increase administrative support for the WAC program:** Funding for an Assistant WAC Director position, which had been funded for fiscal year 2007-08, should be added to the proposed budget for fiscal year 2009-10. Currently our nationally ranked WAC program is being run by a director with one course release. As the university and the WAC program have grown, the duties and responsibilities of the director have grown accordingly. It is vitally important that the assistant director position be funded if we are to ensure the quality and oversight of our program.
- **Increase faculty development efforts:** 1) The WAC Director should continue to work closely with the Office of Institutional Assessment on the assessment of student writing in WI courses with this collaborative effort being supported by an assistant who works for both programs. In

addition to providing information about students' writing competence in their majors, the departmental assessment workshops have proven to be a valuable venue for faculty development work in teaching with writing. 2) All faculty teaching WI courses for the first time should receive a packet of information on the requirement and best practices for teaching with writing. 3) The Writing Fellows program should be expanded to provide support to faculty teaching with writing.

- **Redesign WAC website, which has outgrown its pages and which is the university guide to all matters related to writing-intensive courses (in progress).** The Writing Across the Curriculum website (wac.gmu.edu), currently cited as one of the best WAC sites in the country by experts in the field, has outgrown its pages. A redesigned website will be launched in fall 2008.
- **Expand student writing award initiative to include more departments/majors across the disciplines.** The WAC program should continue to support recognition of student writing excellence across majors with financial support for the award being provided in the WAC budget. Currently there is adequate funding to support the awards; however, as more and more departments give awards, more funding may need to be allocated for this purpose. In 2007-08, writing excellence awards were to 23 students across majors.
- **Continuation of efforts to create online writing guides for the majors.** Currently there are eleven writing guides posted on the WAC site, with another in production.
- **Correlate writing-related data from the Senior Survey (Office of Institutional Assessment) with WI syllabi review results.** See <http://www.assessment.gmu.edu/Results/GraduatingSenior/senior.html>.

We believe that our continued high national ranking in the *U.S. News and World Report College Issue*, the national recognition that's been given to our WAC website among others in the profession, and the countless e-mail inquiries and requests for on-site consultations sent to the Director of WAC on a daily basis from universities throughout the United States *all* speak to the success of our WAC program and the hard work of the GMU faculty. We conclude by thanking all of those whose efforts have contributed to our success.

MASTER LIST – WI COURSES FROM CATALOG (20073-20084)

College of Humanities and Social Sciences	Number of Syllabi Received
ADJ 303	1
ANTH 490	0 No form or syllabus submitted
ARTH – any 400 level	6
BIS 390	1
COMM 300	4 (multiple sections of course)
ECON 320, 345, 360, 365	5 (one for each course; two for ECON 365)
ENGL 325	5 (multiple sections of courses)
FREN 352	- (course not held)
GOVT – any 300 or 400 level	0 (no syllabi requested; see footnote #1)
HIST 300	7 (multiple sections)
PHIL 421	1
PSYC 301, 304, 309, 323	3 (one for each course, PSYC 323 not held)
RELI 420	1
RUSS 302, 325, 407	0 (None submitted; RUSS 407 not held)
SOCI 412	2 (multiple sections)
SPAN 452	1

Total Number of WI Courses (or Course Sequences) in CHSS: 26
Total Number of Syllabi Received for CHSS: 54

College of Science	Number of Syllabi Received
ASTR 490	1
BIOL 307	1
CHEM 336, 337, 465	3 (one from each course)
GEOG 303	1
GEOL 317	1
MATH 290	1
MED TECH	0 (none submitted)

Total Number of WI Courses (or Course Sequences) in COS: 8
Total Number of Syllabi Received for COS: 8

College of Health & Human Services	Number of Syllabi Received
NURS 465	1
HHS 465 (for HAP & GCH)	1
SOCW 471	1

Total Number of WI Courses (or Course Sequences) in CHHS: 3
Total Number of Syllabi Received for CNHS: 3

College of Visual & Performing Arts	Number of Syllabi Received
AVT 395	3 (multiple sections)
DANC 390, 391	2 (one for each course)
MUSI 332	1
THR 350, 351	1 (THR 351 not held)
PHYS 416	1

Total Number of WI Courses (or Course Sequences) in CVPA: 6
Total Number of Syllabi Received for CVPA: 7

School of Information Tech & Engineering	Number of Syllabi Received
CEIE 360	1
CS 306, 421	2 (one for each course)
ECE (new)	- new major no course id'd yet
IT 343	1
SYST 489	0 (no information submitted)

Total Number of WI Courses (or Course Sequences) in IT&E: 5
Total Number of Syllabi Received for IT&E: 4

School of Management	Number of Syllabi Received
SOM 301	1

Total Number of WI Courses (or Course Sequences) in SOM: 1
Total Number of Syllabi Received for SOM: 1

College of Education and Human Development	Number of Syllabi Received
PHED 365	1
PRLS 450	1

Total Number of WI Courses (or Course Sequences) in RHT: 2
Total Number of Syllabi Received for RHT: 2

Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution	Number of Syllabi Received
CONF 302	1

Total Number of WI Courses in ICAR: 1
Total Number of Syllabi Received for ICAR: 1

Total Number of Undergraduate Units at GMU: 40
Total Number of WI Courses (or Course Sequences) in GMU: 51
Total Number of Syllabi Received for review: 65