

Date: April 12, 2011

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

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

CC: *WAC Committee Members and Consultants**

Subject: **Review of Fall 2010 Writing-Intensive Syllabi and Spring 2011 Resubmissions**

Executive Summary

In fall 2010, the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) committee conducted its fourth review of syllabi from all writing intensive (WI) courses in fulfillment of its Faculty Senate charge for ongoing assessment of the requirement. Following is a brief summary of our main findings. (See http://wac.gmu.edu/program/wi_requirement/ for a description of the requirement.)

- 47 designated WI courses were taught in fall 2010 (out of a total of 52 representing all majors).
- Approximately 75% of the 72 syllabi collected met all of the guidelines for WI courses.
- The remaining 25% were missing one or more elements identified in the guidelines; of these, most were taught by faculty new to the requirement. For this group, the individual faculty members and/or undergraduate coordinators were contacted, informed about the criteria for WI courses, and asked to submit a revised syllabus for the spring. All did so.
- Some correlation was noted between the amount of information about writing given on WI syllabi and positive departmental results for writing questions on the Graduating Senior Survey.

The WAC committee asks for your assistance in encouraging your faculty to incorporate the following best practices for teaching with writing into their WI courses:

- assign shorter papers due at intervals throughout the semester or divide a single term paper project into stages that receive feedback;
- give written assignments rather than verbal instructions or a short note in the syllabus;
- explain how the assignment connects to learning goals in the course;
- offer advice on what constitutes successful writing in the course;
- provide evaluation criteria with the assignment to convey writing expectations;
- align feedback and evaluation criteria to course learning and writing goals.

** WAC Committee Members:* Joan Bristol (CHSS), Susan Durham (CHSS), Tamara Maddox (IT&E), Tom Owens (CVPA), Ellen Rodgers (CEHD/RHT), Daniel Rothbart (ICAR), and Nicola Scott (SOM); *WAC Committee Consultants:* Melissa Allen (ELI), Peggy Brouse (IT&E), Irene Bruno (IT&E), Anna Habib (Writing Center), Peter Farrell (IT&E), Dan Joyce (CVPA), Shelley Reid (Composition), Larry Rockwood (Biology), Paul Rogers (English), Sia Rose-Robinson (SOM), Bethany Usher (CTE), and Scott Watkins (Library); Sarah Baker, Assistant Director, Writing Across the Curriculum.

Detailed Report

As part of its charge from the Faculty Senate to conduct ongoing assessment of the WI requirement, in fall 2010 the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) committee conducted its fourth review of syllabi from all of the 47 designated WI courses taught that semester in all colleges and schools offering undergraduate majors (52 in total). The committee contacted all WI instructors teaching a fall WI course, to request the syllabus for their course. In response, we received information on 46 of the 47 WI courses listed in the catalog, represented by 72 syllabi. Most departments were prompt in their response to the syllabi collection email and to follow-up requests for revised syllabi if necessary. (See detailed list of WI courses and number of syllabi submitted at the end of this report.)

Results of Syllabi Review

Approximately 75% of the 72 syllabi collected met *all* of the guidelines for WI courses as outlined by the Faculty Senate. Guidelines established by Faculty Senate in 1993 include

- Students must take one upper-level WI course in their major
- WI syllabi should state explicitly that the course fulfills the WI requirement
- Students will write at least 3,500 words and have the opportunity for feedback and revisions
- Students will receive major- or course-specific instructions in writing.

Approximately 25% of the submitted WI course syllabi were missing information about one or more of these requirements. As in previous years, the WAC director contacted the undergraduate coordinator, and/or faculty members whose syllabi did not meet the WI requirements, to ask for revision and resubmission.

Based on the WI categories reviewed, all of the syllabi submitted from the WI courses in the following departments met *all* of these requirements:

CHHS: Health and Human Services (HHS 465)* and Social Work (SOCW 471);

CHSS: Art History (ARTH 499), Bachelor of Individualized Study (BIS 390), Communications (COMM 300), Criminology, Law, and Society (CRIM 303), Global Affairs (EVPP 337), French (FREN 309), Philosophy (PHIL 421), Sociology (SOCI 412), Spanish (SPAN 370);

COS: Biology (BIOL 307, 453), and Geology (GEOL 317);

CVPA: Art and Visual Technology (AVT 395), Dance (DANC 390), Film and Visual Studies (THR 482), Music (MUSI 332), and Theater (THR 351);

Volgenau: Civil, Environmental, and Infrastructure Engineering (CEIE 360), Computer Science (CS 306), Electrical and Computer Engineering (ECE 492/493), Systems Engineering (SYST 489);

SOM: School of Management (SOM 301)*;

CEHD/RHT: Parks, Recreation, and Leisure Studies (PRLS 450); and

ICAR: Institute for Conflict Analysis & Resolution (CONF 302)*

**NOTE: Regardless of concentration, students in these academic units take this designated WI course.*

Of the 72 syllabi reviewed, one did not meet any of the WI requirements and eighteen only partially met the WI requirements¹ for one or more of the following reasons:

- They did not state on the syllabus that the course fulfills the WI requirement for the major;
- They did not indicate that students will be graded on a minimum of 3,500 words, divided among two or more assignments or a longer project divided into stages; or
- 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.

For syllabi in this category, the individual instructors and/or the undergraduate coordinators/associate chairs were contacted, informed about the WI criteria, and asked to submit a revised syllabus for the spring or fall section(s) of the course that explicitly indicated the ways in which the course meets the requirements.

Conclusions

Overall, the WAC committee was pleased by the high level of adherence to all or nearly all of the syllabus guidelines for WI courses, necessitating far fewer requests for revised syllabi to be submitted in comparison to reviews from previous years. The initial collection process through email yielded a high number of syllabi, reducing the number of follow-up requests that were necessary. Moreover, changes in the WI requirement for some majors (e.g., Public and International Affairs) reduced the number of courses from which syllabi were collected, which reduced, in turn, the total number of syllabi reviewed. In 1999-2000, for example, 101 syllabi were submitted for review compared to the 72 this year.

We believe that the overall level of adherence to the WI guidelines is due, in part, to the following actions the WAC director implemented based on the results of the previous review:

- Pre-semester reminder emails to all faculty teaching WI courses listing the requirements for WI courses along with attachments on assignment design, responding to writing and managing the paper load, and writing in large classes.
- Semesterly check of enrollments in WI courses to be sure that enrollment caps are being followed (i.e., nothing higher than 35).
- Reminder emails to undergraduate chairs and unit leaders asking them to make sure that new or adjunct faculty who are assigned to teach WI courses are aware of the requirements.

Clearly, a systematic review of WI syllabi allows for ongoing oversight of the WI requirements. The WAC committee has recommended, in fact, that WI syllabi be reviewed annually, but targeting particular departments and units on a rotating basis. A review of WI syllabi alone, however, cannot reveal the effectiveness of the writing assignments or of the instruction in writing that is being given (if any). What we can ascertain is the degree to which many teachers seem to be following recommended best

¹ Names of specific courses and sections are available on request.

practices for assigning writing and responding to student writers, as these are described in their syllabi. These include, for example:

- assigning shorter papers due at intervals throughout the semester or dividing a single term paper project into stages that receive feedback;
- giving written assignments rather than verbal instructions or a short note in the syllabus;
- explaining how the assignment connects to learning goals in the course;
- offering advice on what constitutes successful writing in the course;
- providing evaluation criteria along with the assignment so that students understand expectations;
- aligning feedback and evaluation criteria to course learning and writing goals.

Recommended Actions

Based on some of the gaps in the WI syllabi and the questions around teaching-with-writing practices that surfaced in this review, and given that papers from WI courses are being assessed as part of the university's efforts to respond to criteria for Academic Program Review and to the SCHEV mandate to assess student writing competence, we make the following recommendations to departments:

- *Offer explicit support for and encouragement of faculty development in teaching with writing, which can be achieved at the department level through short workshops on, for example, assignment design and managing the paper load; through departmental writing assessment workshops; and, more generally, through venues such as the Innovations in Teaching and Learning Conference sponsored by the Center for Teaching Excellence.*
- *In annual reviews, acknowledge and reward faculty who consistently demonstrate their willingness to teach WI courses because they are committed to helping students learn to write well in the major.* This is particularly important given studies that show that course evaluations tend to be lower for faculty in the disciplines when they take student writing seriously in their courses.
- *Create or expand and provide funding for student writing awards in the major as a demonstration of the importance placed on writing by the department, the university, and the professions students will enter.* Currently the WAC program helps to fund these awards if a department is unable to fund them or can provide only limited funding.
- *Correlate writing-related data from the Senior Survey (Office of Institutional Assessment) with WI syllabi review results.* See: <https://assessment.gmu.edu/Results/GraduatingSenior/senior.html>
- *Consider participating in the Writing-infused Initiative.* This initiative recognizes departments that are committed to infusing writing into courses throughout the major, with attention paid to the learning goals and outcomes for students at each stage of their development as writers in the major.

In addition to these recommendations, the WAC committee is deliberating changes to the requirement that students produce 3,500 words of formal graded writing. The syllabi we reviewed indicated that, in many courses, students are doing a substantial amount of informal writing, e.g., blog entries, course and lab notebooks, wiki posts, reading responses, posters, and in-class writing exercises. Because informal writing is an important tool for teaching students how to do the work of the discipline, we want to value

that writing along with formal graded assignments. To that end, the committee continues to work on revised guidelines for the kinds of writing that count towards fulfilling the WI graded-word-count requirement.

The WAC committee extends its thanks to all faculty who are committed to teaching effectively with writing and to helping students achieve the learning and writing goals valued in the course and the curriculum.

MASTER LIST – WI Courses Fall 2010

<i>College of Humanities and Social Sciences (CHSS)</i>	<i>Number of Syllabi Received</i>
ARTH 420.....	2
ARTH 499.....	1
BIS 390.....	1
COMM 300.....	3
CRIM 303.....	2
ECON 345.....	2
ECON 365.....	1
ENGL 325.....	3
EVPP 337.....	1
FREN 309.....	1
GOVT 490/491 ²	4
HIST 300.....	5
HIST 499.....	4
PHIL 421/422 ²	1
PSYC 301.....	1
PSYC 304.....	1
RUSS 302.....	1
SOCI 412.....	2
SPAN 370.....	2

Total Number of WI Courses offered in CHSS in Fall 2010: 21
 Total Number of Syllabi Received for CHSS in Fall 2010: 38

<i>College of Science (COS)</i>	<i>Number of Syllabi Received</i>
BIOL 307.....	1
BIOL 453.....	1
CHEM 336.....	2
CHEM 465 ³	0

² Honors class

³ No syllabus submitted

GEOL 317.....	1
MATH 290.....	2
PHYS 407.....	1

Total Number of WI Courses offered in COS in Fall 2010: 7
Total Number of Syllabi Received for COS in Fall 2010: 8

<i>College of Health & Human Services (CHHS)</i>	<i>Number of Syllabi Received</i>
HHS 465.....	2
SOCW 471.....	1

Total Number of WI Courses offered in CHHS in Fall 2010: 2
Total Number of Syllabi Received for CHHS in Fall 2010: 3

<i>College of Visual & Performing Arts (CVPA)</i>	<i>Number of Syllabi Received</i>
AVT 395.....	1
DANC 390.....	1
GAME 332.....	1
MUSI 332.....	2
THR 351.....	1
THR 482.....	1

Total Number of WI Courses offered in CVPA in Fall 2010: 6
Total Number of Syllabi Received for CVPA in Fall 2010: 7

<i>Volgenau School of Engineering (VSE)</i>	<i>Number of Syllabi Received</i>
CEIE 360.....	1
CS 306.....	1
CS 421.....	1
ECE 492.....	1
ECE 493.....	1
IT 343.....	3
SYST 489.....	1

Total Number of WI Courses offered in VSE in Fall 2010: 7
Total Number of Syllabi Received for VSE in Fall 2010: 9

<i>School of Management (SOM)</i>	<i>Number of Syllabi Received</i>
SOM 301.....	1

Total Number of WI Courses offered in SOM in Fall 2010: 1

Total Number of Syllabi Received for SOM in Fall 2010: 1

College of Education & Human Development/ *Number of Syllabi Received*
School of Recreation, Health & Tourism (CEHD/RHT)

PHED 365..... 2
PRLS 450..... 4

Total Number of WI Courses offered in CEHD in Fall 2010: 2
Total Number of Syllabi Received for CEHD in Fall 2010: 6

Institute for Conflict Analysis & Resolution (ICAR) *Number of Syllabi Received*

CONF 302..... 1

Total Number of WI Courses offered in ICAR in Fall 2010: 1
Total Number of Syllabi Received for ICAR in Fall 2010: 1

Total Number of Undergraduate Units at GMU in Fall 2010: 52
Total Number of WI Courses offered at GMU in Fall 2010: 47
Total Number of Syllabi Received for Fall 2010 Review: 72