

Date: April 20, 2016

To: Provost S. David Wu, Associate Provost Janette Muir, Undergraduate Deans and Directors, Department Chairs, and Faculty Senate Chair

From: Michelle LaFrance, Director, Writing Across the Curriculum and Gregory Robinson, Chair, Writing Across the Curriculum Committee

CC: *WAC Committee Members and Consultants**, Associate Provost Kim Eby

***Subject:* Review of Writing-Intensive Course Syllabi**

Executive Summary

In spring 2016, the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program staff conducted its fifth 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.)

- 108 syllabi were reviewed from the spring 2015, fall 2015, and a few previous semesters.
- 29 (27%) of the 108 syllabi collected met all of the recommended guidelines for WI courses.
- The remaining 79 (73%) were missing one or more elements identified in the guidelines.

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

- schedule multiple class days for discipline-specific writing instruction and/or workshops;
- offer models for and advice on what constitutes successful writing in the course;
- specify due dates for assignments, including drafts and revisions;
- assign shorter papers due at intervals throughout the semester or divide a single term paper project into stages that receive feedback;
- provide at least one week or more for students to revise assignments after receiving feedback from instructors; the period of time should increase as the length of the assignment increases;
- 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;
- provide evaluation criteria with the assignment to convey writing expectations;
- align feedback and evaluation criteria to course learning and writing goals.

***Committee Members:** Gregory Robinson (WAC Committee Chair, CVPA – 2017), David Gallay (B-School – 2017), Margaret Miklancie (CHHS – 2017), Kristien Zenkov (CEHD – 2017), Steve Holmes (CHSS – 2016), Johri Aditya (VSE – 2016), Mary Ewell (COS – 2016), Stanley Zoltek (COS – 2016)

Consultants to the Committee: Charlene Douglas (CHHS – 2016); Julie Stoll (INTO Mason Language Specialist); Peggy Brouse (Systems Engineering); Peter Farrell (VSE); Susan Lawrence (Director, Writing Center); Karyn Mallet (INTO Mason); Larry Rockwood (Biology); Lorelei Crerar (Biology); Jacquelyn Brown (B-School); Ellen Rodgers (CEHD); Sarah Baker (English – NVWP); Jen Stevens (University Libraries); Bethany Usher (Center for Teaching Excellence, OSCAR); Laura Lukes (Center for Teaching Excellence); Jessie Matthews (Composition)

WAC Program:

Director: Michelle LaFrance

Assistant Director: Tom Polk

WAC Program Graduate Research Assistant: Emily Chambers

Detailed Report

As part of its charge from the Faculty Senate to conduct ongoing assessment of the WI requirement, in spring 2016 the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program staff conducted its fifth review of syllabi from all WI courses on record in all colleges and schools offering undergraduate majors (62 academic units in total). With the help of the Office of the Associate Provost of Undergraduate Education, the program contacted all departments and instructors teaching a WI course to request WI syllabi from Spring 2015 and Fall 2015. In response, we received 108 WI course syllabi representing 81 WI courses. (See detailed list of WI courses and number of syllabi reviewed at the end of this report.)

Results of Syllabi Review

Approximately 27% of the 108 syllabi collected met *all* of the guidelines for WI courses as outlined by the Faculty Senate. Guidelines established by Faculty Senate’s Writing Across the Curriculum Committee include

- WI syllabi should state explicitly that the course fulfills the WI requirement,
- Students will write 2 essays totaling at least 3,500 words,
- Students will receive feedback from their instructor,
- Students will receive specific information about how their writing will be evaluated.

Approximately 73% 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, syllabi submitted from the WI courses in the following departments met *all* of these requirements:

CHHS: Health and Human Policy (HAP 465), Department of Global and Community Health (GCH 465), and Nursing (NURS 465);

CHSS: Bachelor of Individualized Study (BIS 390), Communications (COMM 300), Criminology Law, and Society (CRIM 495), English (ENGH 305), Global Affairs (EVPP 337), History (HIST 499), Philosophy (PHIL 421/2), and Psychology (PSYC 301);

COS: Environmental Studies (EVPP 337) and Forensic Science (FRSC 304);

CVPA: School of Art (AVT 395), School of Dance (DANC 390), Film and Video Studies (FAVS 470), School of Music (MUSI 332), and Theater (THR 350);

Volgenau: Computer Science (CS 321);

BUS: School of Management (SOM 301), and Marketing (MKGT 471);

CEHD: Athletic Training/Tourism and Events Management (PRLS 450) and Human Development and Family Science (HDFS 401); and

S-CAR: none

**NOTE: Some of the above courses also submitted syllabi that did not meet all criteria.*

Of the 108 syllabi reviewed, 2 did not meet any of the WI requirements and 77 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;
- They contained little to no description of how or when the instructor would provide feedback to students; or
- They contained little to no description of the criteria by which the students' writing would be evaluated.

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 reviewers were pleased with their ability to review at least one syllabus from nearly all WI courses. Only two courses failed to submit a syllabus for review. This allowed us to review a broader span of courses than previous years. For comparison, the most recent report reviewed 72 syllabi from courses taught in the Fall 2010 academic semester.

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). The review also cannot evaluate all aspects of an instructor's course planning. For instance, several syllabi

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

mentioned schedules that would be posted in Blackboard, but the program is unable to review these schedules. What we can ascertain is the degree to which many teachers seem to be following recommended best 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;
- dedicating class time to discipline-specific writing instruction;
- 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.
- *Encourage departments to standardize their WI course syllabi.* When a course is taught by a new faculty member each semester or offering, the requirements and the expectations of the course can drift away from the original descriptions approved by the WAC committee. Even small changes can make a substantial impact on the writing instruction that takes place within a course. Departments that standardize the WI syllabus could prevent some of the drift when the course is taught by a new faculty member each semester.
- *Encourage departments to assign WI courses to full-time professors.* If this is overly difficult or not possible, departments should consider assigning a full-time faculty member to coordinate WI courses and mentor new or part-time instructors.

To increase the number of courses that are meeting the WI course criteria in the future, it is recommended that the WAC director re-implement the following actions:

- 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.

The WAC program staff and Committee extend their thanks to all faculty members 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 Reviewed

College of Business

Course Prefix	Course Number	Section	Semester	Number of Syllabi Reviewed
ACCT	461	1	Fall 2015	1
FNAN	498	1	Fall 2015	1
MGMT	313	1	Fall 2015	1
MIS	330	1	Spring 2015	1
MKTG	471	1	Fall 2015	1
SOM	301	1	Fall 2015	1
			TOTAL	6

College of Education and Human Development

Course Prefix	Course Number	Section	Semester	Number of Syllabi Reviewed
HDFS	401	1	Fall 2015	1
PHED	340	1	Fall 2014	1
PRLS	450	5	Fall 2015	1
			TOTAL	3

College of Health and Human Services

Course Prefix	Course Number	Section	Semester	Number of Syllabi Reviewed
GCH	465	1	Fall 2015	1
HAP	465	1	Fall 2015	1
SOCW	471	1, DL 1	Fall 2014	2
NURS	465	1	Spring 2015	1
			TOTAL	5

College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Course Prefix	Course Number	Section	Semester	Number of Syllabi Reviewed
ANTH	490	1	Spring 2015	1
ARTH	430	1	Fall 2015	1
ARTH	440	1	Fall 2015	1
ARTH	499	1	Fall 2015	1
BIS	390	DL 1	Fall 2015	1
CHIN	480	1	Fall 2015	1

COMM	300	1, 4, 5	Fall 2015	3
CRIM	495	3	Fall 2015	1
ECON	470	1	Fall 2014	1
ECON	355	1	Spring 2014	1
ECON	435	1	Spring 2013	1
ECON	365	1	Fall 2014	1
ECON	345	1	Spring 2013	1
ENGH	305	3	Fall 2015	1
FREN	309	1	Fall 2014	1
HIST	499	3, 4	Fall 2015	2
HIST	300	3	Fall 2015	1
HIST	499	2	Spring 2015	1
LAS	300	1	Fall 2015	1
NEUR	411	1	Spring 2013	1
NEUR	410	2	Fall 2013	1
PHIL	421 or 422	1	Fall 2015	1
PSYC	304	1	Fall 2015	1
PSYC	301	207, 209	Fall 2015	2
PSYC	309	1	Fall 2015	1
PSYC	301	209	Spring 2015	1
RELI	420		Spring 2015	1
RUSS	302	1	Fall 2013	1
SOCI	412	1	Spring 2013	1
SPAN	370	1	Spring 2013	1
			TOTAL	34

School of Policy, Government, and International Affairs

Course Prefix	Course Number	Section	Semester	Number of Syllabi Reviewed
GOVT	490	1, 2, 3, 4	Spring 2015	4
GOVT	491	1	Fall 2015	1
			TOTAL	5

College of Science

Course Prefix	Course Number	Section	Semester	Number of Syllabi Reviewed
ASTR	402	1	Spring 2015	1
BIOL	308	1	Fall 2015	1
CHEM	465	1	Fall 2015	1
CHEM	336	1	Fall 2015	1

CLIM	408	1	Fall 2015	1
EVPP	337	1, 2, 3, 6, DL 1, DL 2	Spring 2015	6
FRSC	304	1	Fall 2015	1
FRSC	302	1	Spring 2013	1
GEOL	317	1	Fall 2014	1
GEOL	305	1	Fall 2015	1
GGS	415	1	Spring 2015	1
MATH	290	2	Fall 2015	1
MLAB	300	1	Spring 2014	1
PHYS	407	1	Spring 2015	1
			TOTAL	17

College of Visual and Performing Arts

Course Prefix	Course Number	Section	Semester	Number of Syllabi Reviewed
AVT	395	1, 2	Fall 2015	2
AVT	395	2, 3	Spring 2015	2
DANC	390	1	Fall 2015	1
FAVS	498	4	Fall 2015	1
FAVS	470	1	Spring 2013	1
GAME	332	1	Spring 2015	1
GAME	332	2, 3	Fall 2015	2
MUSI	332	1, 1	Fall 2015	2
MUSI	438	1	Spring 2015	1
THR	350	1	Fall 2015	1
THR	482	1	Fall 2012	1
THR	350	1	Spring 2015	1
			Total	16

Volgenau Engineering School

Course Prefix	Course Number	Section	Semester	Number of Syllabi Reviewed
BENG	304	1	Spring 2015	1
BENG	495	1	Spring 2015	1
CEIE	301	1	Spring 2015	1
CS	321	1	Fall 2015	1
CS	306	1, 2, 3	Spring 2015	3
CYSE	491	1	Spring 2015	1
ECE	445	1	Spring 2015	1
ECE	333	1	Spring 2015	1

ECE	491	1	Fall 2015	1
IT	343	1	Fall 2015	1
SYST	489	1	Fall 2014	1
			TOTAL	13

New Century College

Course Prefix	Course Number	Section	Semester	Number of Syllabi Reviewed
NCLC	312	2	Fall 2015	1
NCLC	334	1	Fall 2015	1
NCLC	336	1	Fall 2015	1
NCLC	333	1	Fall 2015	1
NCLC	345	1	Fall 2015	1
			TOTAL	5

School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution

Course Prefix	Course Number	Section	Semester	Number of Syllabi Reviewed
CONF	302	1	Fall 2015	1
			TOTAL	1