

Date: April 20, 2019

To: Provost S. David Wu; Associate Provost Bethany Usher; Undergraduate Deans and Directors; Department Chairs; and Faculty Senate Chair

From: Michelle LaFrance, Director of Writing Across the Curriculum and Chair of Writing Across the Curriculum Committee; Writing Across the Curriculum Committee Members

CC: Shelley Reid, Director of Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning; Writing Across the Curriculum Committee Consultants

Subject: **Review of Spring 2019 Writing-Intensive Course Syllabi**

Executive Summary

In spring 2019, the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program staff conducted its sixth 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.)

- 120 syllabi were reviewed from the spring 2019.
- 26 (22%) of the 120 syllabi collected met all of the recommended guidelines for WI courses.
- The remaining 94 (78%) were missing one or more elements identified in the guidelines.

The WAC Committee asks for your assistance in encouraging departments to adopt the following recommendations:

- Offer explicit support for and encouragement of faculty development in teaching with writing.
- Acknowledge and reward faculty who consistently demonstrate their willingness to teach WI courses.
- Encourage departments to standardize their WI course syllabi.
- Encourage departments to assign WI courses to full-time faculty members.

Committee Members: Thomas Britt (CVPA – 2019); Lorelei Crerar (COS – 2020); Dimitris Ioannou (VSE – 2020); Gene Shuman (VSE – 2020); Douglas Irvin-Erickson (S-CAR – 2020); Doug Eyman (CHSS – 2020); Jacquelyn Brown (B-School – 2019); Amy Hutchison (CEHD – 2019)

Consultants to the Committee: Greg Robinson (CVPA); Peggy Brouse (Systems Engineering); Susan Lawrence (Writing Center); Karyn Kessler (INTO Mason); Esther Namubiro (INTO Mason); Larry Rockwood (Biology); Ellen Rodgers (CEHD); Sarah Baker (English – NVWP); Jen Stevens (University Libraries); Bethany Usher (Undergraduate Education); Laura Lukes (Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning); Jessie Matthews (Composition); Lisa Lister (Composition); Courtney Wooten (Composition)

WAC Program Staff:

Director: Michelle LaFrance

Assistant Director: Thomas Polk

WAC Program Graduate Research Assistant: Kelly Purtell

Detailed Report

As part of its charge from the Faculty Senate to conduct ongoing assessment of the WI requirement, in spring 2019 the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program staff conducted its sixth review of syllabi from WI courses. With the help of the Office of Undergraduate Education, the program reviewed 120 syllabi representing 58 WI courses taught during the spring 2018 semester. A detailed list of WI courses and number of syllabi reviewed is appended to this report.

Results of Syllabi Review

Approximately 22% of the 120 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 a minimum of 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.
- Syllabus indicates multiple class sessions that address different writing strategies

Approximately 78% 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), Rehabilitation Science (RHBS 499/001),

CHSS: Anthropology (ANTH 490), Communications (COMM 300.DL1), French (FREN 309), History (HIST 300 & HIST 499), Spanish (SPAN 370.002 and 370.DL1).

CVPA: Art & Visual Technology (AVT 395.001),

Volgenau: Bioengineering (BENG 495), Electrical and Computer Engineering (ECE 491)

BUS: Finance (FNAN 498.001 and FNAN.002)

CEHD: Human Development and Family Science (HDFS 401), Kinesiology (KINE 450.001, 450.003, and 450.DL1-3), Sports and Recreation Studies (SRST 450)

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

Of the 120 syllabi reviewed, 1 did not meet any of the WI requirements and 93 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 no assignment descriptions
- They contained little to no description of how or when the instructor would provide feedback to students
- They did not specify specific class sessions that address writing strategies
- They contained little to no description of the criteria by which the students' writing would be evaluated.

For syllabi in this category, the WAC program will work with the Office of Undergraduate Education to contact departments and individual faculty about revisions to the WI syllabi.

Conclusions

Overall, the program is pleased with its ability to review at least one syllabus from most of the WI courses taught during the spring 2018 semester. 14 courses, however, failed to submit a syllabus for review. While we weren't able to review as many courses as we have in the past, we were able to review more sections of the same courses than in previous years. For comparison, the most recent review collected 108 syllabi from 81 courses taught in the spring and fall 2015 academic semesters.

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 suggest that reviewers target 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 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:

- 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 assignment prompts rather than verbal instructions or short notes in the syllabus;
- explain how the assignment connects to learning goals in the course;
- provide evaluation criteria with the assignment prompt to convey writing expectations;

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

- align 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.* This 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 Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning .
- *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 faculty members.* 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, 2, 3, 6	Spring 2018	4
FNAN	498	1, 2	Spring 2018	2
MGMT	313	1, 3	Spring 2018	2
MIS	330	1, 4	Spring 2018	2
MKTG	471	1, 2, 3	Spring 2018	3
			TOTAL	13

College of Education and Human Development

Course Prefix	Course Number	Section	Semester	Number of Syllabi Reviewed
HDFS	401	1	Spring 2018	1
KINE	450	1, 3, 4, DL1, DL3	Spring 2018	5
PHED	340	1	Spring 2018	1
SRST	450	1, 3, DL1	Spring 2018	3
			TOTAL	10

College of Health and Human Services

Course Prefix	Course Number	Section	Semester	Number of Syllabi Reviewed
GCH	411	1, 2	Spring 2018	2
HAP	465	1, 2, 3, 4	Spring 2018	4
NURS	465	DL1	Spring 2018	1
RHBS	499	1	Spring 2018	1
			TOTAL	8

College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Course Prefix	Course Number	Section	Semester	Number of Syllabi Reviewed
ARAB	331	1	Spring 2018	1
ANTH	490	1	Spring 2018	1
ARTH	420	1	Spring 2018	1
ARTH	472	2	Spring 2018	1
BIS	390	1, 2	Spring 2018	2
COMM	300	1, 2, 4, DL1	Spring 2018	4

CRIM	495	1, 2, 3, 4	Spring 2018	4
ENGH	305	2, 4	Spring 2018	2
ENGH	373	1	Spring 2018	1
FREN	309	1	Spring 2018	1
HIST	300	2, 4	Spring 2018	2
HIST	499	1, 2, 3, 4	Spring 2018	4
NEUR	411	1, 2	Spring 2018	2
PHIL	421	1	Spring 2018	1
PSYC	304	1, DL1	Spring 2018	2
PSYC	301	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	Spring 2018	5
PSYC	309	1	Spring 2018	1
SOCI	412	2	Spring 2018	1
SPAN	370	2, DL1	Spring 2018	2
			TOTAL	38

Schar School of Policy and Government

Course Prefix	Course Number	Section	Semester	Number of Syllabi Reviewed
GOVT	490	1, 4, 5, 6, 7	Spring 2018	5
			TOTAL	5

College of Science

Course Prefix	Course Number	Section	Semester	Number of Syllabi Reviewed
BIOL	308	1, 2	Spring 2018	2
CDS	302	1	Spring 2018	1
CHEM	465	201, 202, 203, 204	Spring 2018	4
CHEM	336	201, 203	Spring 2018	2
CLIM	408	1	Spring 2018	1
EVPP	337	8 , DL1, DL2	Spring 2018	3
FRSC	302	1, 3	Spring 2018	2
GEOL	305	1	Spring 2018	1
GGG	415	1	Spring 2018	1
MATH	290	1, 2	Spring 2018	2
PHYS	407	1	Spring 2018	1
			TOTAL	20

College of Visual and Performing Arts

Course Prefix	Course Number	Section	Semester	Number of Syllabi Reviewed
AVT	395	1, 2, 3	Spring 2018	3
DANC	391	1	Spring 2018	1
FAVS	470	1	Spring 2018	1
GAME	332	1, 2	Spring 2018	2
THR	350	2, 3	Spring 2018	2
			Total	9

Volgenau Engineering School

Course Prefix	Course Number	Section	Semester	Number of Syllabi Reviewed
BENG	304	1	Spring 2018	1
BENG	495	1	Spring 2018	1
CEIE	301	1	Spring 2018	1
CS	321	1, 2, 4, 5	Spring 2018	4
CS	306	1, 2, 3, 4	Spring 2018	4
ECE	333	1	Spring 2018	1
ECE	491	1, 2	Spring 2018	2
ME	444	1, 2	Spring 2018	2
			TOTAL	16

School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution

Course Prefix	Course Number	Section	Semester	Number of Syllabi Reviewed
CONF	302	3, DL1	Spring 2018	2
			TOTAL	2