Date: September 13, 2018

To: Writing Across the Curriculum Committee Members

From: Michelle LaFrance, Director, Writing Across the Curriculum
Thomas Polk, Assistant Director, Writing Across the Curriculum

CC: Bethany Usher, Associate Provost of Undergraduate Education
E. Shelley Reid, Director Center for Teaching and Faculty Excellence

Subject: **A Report on the Constraints that Impact Instruction in Writing Intensive Courses**

Executive Summary

What constraints do faculty members report impact their teaching in writing-intensive (WI) courses? This white paper summarizes our study of the constraints upon writing instruction that faculty who teach WI courses have shared with us in the course of our RE/V project interviews. The RE/V project, ongoing since fall of 2015, has collected over 60 interviews with faculty who teach WI courses and upper-level courses that include writing assignments. (This report was generated from the initial 27 responses collected during AY 2015-2016.)

In their interviews, participants reported a variety of constraints including issues with labor, faculty development, and departmental practices. Based on these findings, we recommend that the Mason WAC Committee continue efforts to increase the material support of writing-intensive courses, facilitate professional development programming, and enhance communications about the function of WI courses.

Detailed Report

WAC programs have fostered the ideal that disciplinary writing should be taught by experts in a field because those experts most fully understand how language practices work within their respective contexts. However, a recent review of the University of Michigan's upper-level writing requirement[1] revealed that the everyday realities of teaching writing might complicate that picture. In particular, Gere et al. (2015) argue that institutional priorities can interfere with and influence the priorities of faculty who teach disciplinary writing, making it difficult for instructors to share their expertise via writing instruction.
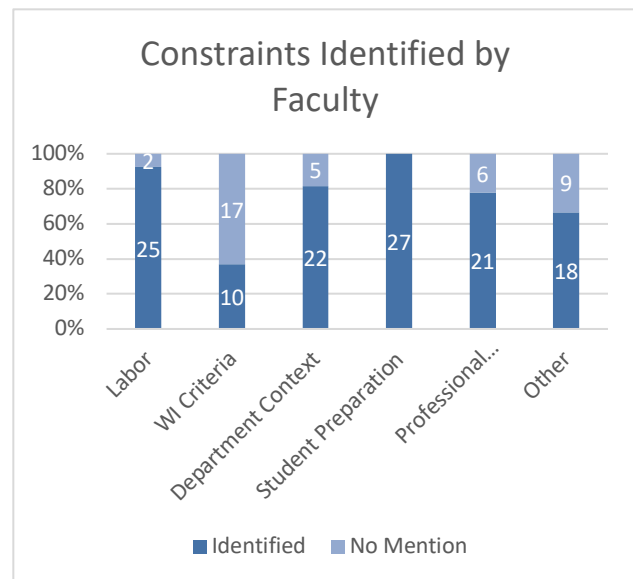
---

[1] Gere, A. R., Swofford, S. C., Silver, N., & Pugh, M. (2015). Interrogating disciplines/disciplinarity in WAC/WID: An institutional study. *College Composition and Communication*, 67(2), 243.

Based on this finding, WAC staff sought to understand the everyday experiences of instructors who teach writing-intensive courses at George Mason University. In particular, we wanted to learn what constraints faculty perceived to be most influential over their work with student writers. Responses are drawn from interviews with twenty-seven faculty members who have taught writing-intensive courses. Participants range from graduate teaching assistants to fully tenured professors and represent seven different colleges. Interviews were analyzed for the trends they revealed, using an In Vivo coding process. The team of coders established interrater reliability through a process of norming their responses to a shared coding scheme.

Findings

The chart below details the categories of constraints that faculty shared with us in their interviews. Here, we offer brief introductory remarks on each category. In the appendix, we provide representative selections from our participants' interviews.

- The most frequently identified category, one every participant discussed, was related to teaching in the diverse contexts of a 21st century institution, where the need to provide differentiated teaching often defined pedagogical contexts. These comments often appeared as the recognition of *student preparation*. Responses touched on a number of issues including the perceived range of student ability, meeting the challenge to teach reading, and students' difficulty with producing finely edited prose. It is important to recognize that we miss the larger picture when we interpret these responses as a perception of student ability. Instead, we see that faculty mention these concerns because they welcome diverse learners to their classrooms and wish to more adequately recognize the many resources (linguistic, cultural, and intellectual) that attend the diverse classroom environments that are a part of their central experience at Mason.

Constraints Identified by Faculty

- The second most commonly discussed category was *labor*; 93% of participants described the amount of time and effort required to effectively teach a writing intensive course as an impact on their teaching. This effort, which many felt was unrecognized, is amplified by the number of students in a course and can sometimes result in faculty making decisions that prioritize efficiency over pedagogy.

- 81% of participants touched on ***departmental practices and structures*** that complicated teaching. Participants described difficulties with staffing and recruiting quality instructors to staff WI courses, a conflict with identity and expertise, challenges with overextended courses, and some issues with communication and coordination of curricula.
- Our fourth most frequently reported category was ***professional development***; 70% of participants voiced concern about their training and often confessed that they felt underprepared to teach a WI course; 78% expressed interest in taking advantage of professional development opportunities.
- Participants frequently mentioned constraints that did not quite fit into our ***other*** categories. 67% of participants discussed concerns with available resources to support teaching WI courses and with transfer of learning between institutions and contexts.
- The least frequently cited constraint concerned the ***WI criteria***; 37% of participants discussed either an issue with course caps and/or a lack of awareness about the program criteria themselves.

Recommendations

Based on the above findings, WAC staff make the following recommendations:

- ***Maintain the current enrollment cap for all WI courses.*** Currently the WI course criteria requires departments to cap courses at 35 students. As the faculty we interviewed consistently noted the amount of time, attention, and personal resources working with student writers asks of them, this report argues implicitly for keeping low enrollments in WI courses. The WAC Committee might prioritize efforts to maintain and reduce enrollments in writing-intensive courses and to decrease student-to-faculty ratios in writing-intensive courses. Participants in this study revealed that many faculty perceive enrollment caps in the upper-teens appropriate.
- ***Provide professional development opportunities to support diverse learners as writers:*** Every participant in our study reported a need to develop the ways they approach diverse classrooms and differentiated learning. Participants identified a number of issues that they struggled to address adequately, including developing assignments and offering ongoing support for the range of student ability. **Given that 70% of our participants expressed low self-efficacy about their expertise in teaching writing and that 78% demonstrated interest in professional development, it is important to recognize that these perceptions derive from instructors' uncertainty about how to teach writing over a concern for who sits in their classrooms.** The issues that participants identified as challenges, working with sentence-level concerns, harnessing prior knowledge, and differentiating instruction, offer good starting points for

professional development programming. WAC Committee members should facilitate the expansion of the professional development programming that is offered to WI faculty.

- ***Increase material support for professional development:*** Increased material support for professional development programing for WI faculty would support faculty who expressed feeling underprepared or uncertain about teaching writing. The WAC Committee might consider working to expand institutional structures that facilitate and reward professional development.

- ***Enhance communications about the function of WI courses within curricula:*** Participants often reported that their departments seldom discussed writing and supporting student writers; some even admitted that writing simply wasn't a priority for their departments and that writing instruction could get lost among the many competing curricular demands. In other research conducted by WAC staff, however, participants revealed writing became more of a priority when they realized the purpose of writing intensive courses. The WAC Committee might consider developing a series of resources or workshops for department chairs about how writing instruction complements and enhances the disciplinary and professional goals that departments prioritize.

Appendix

In the following, we offer some representative selections from our interviews. We provide these selections with occasional commentary in order to provide a fuller glimpse into the nuanced perspectives of our participants. Many of these selections are presented as quotations; some responses, however, are paraphrased in order to convey the perceptions succinctly.

Labor

Concerns over the time/effort of teaching a WI course, particularly the number of students enrolled in WI courses, was a frequently identified concern among faculty. These concerns were mentioned by 25 of 27 participants (93%).

- **Time and Effort:** Of all of the subthemes related to labor, the most frequently mentioned was how time and labor-intensive teaching writing can be. Some of our interviewees expressed challenges with the amount of work they feel is necessary to teach writing effectively. Others felt that they were not able to dedicate the time necessary to plan and prepare for classes, provide quality feedback, meet/conference with students one-on-one (a pedagogy many suggested they believe essential), and grade assignments.
    - Participant 4 (COS, term): "There isn't time to go through it all. Not if I want to focus on anything else too."
    - Participant 12 (CHSS, tenure): "There's just more help needed than I am humanly able to give."
- **Hidden Labor:** A few of our participants shadowed the comments above but also noted that they felt a lack of recognition of their workload within their departments. That is, those who touched on this theme expressed concern that their colleagues and departmental administrators were not always aware of the time and effort necessary to teach writing. Other participants noted the impossibility of working within the hours contracted for the position.
    - Participant 8 (CVPA, tenure): "The total time required to teach three [WIs], with 90 students in 3 sections of something that isn't as...revision-heavy--I wish there was some way to formally acknowledge that, instead of just the enrollment and the credit hours. To acknowledge that a WI course, if you're doing it 'right,' can take more time than other courses."
- **Class Size:** Participants also regularly acknowledged that their teaching efforts were negatively impacted by the size of their classes.

- o Participant 7 (COS, tenure): "And, I go to your website, and it has this little footnote, 25 [students in a course] is advisable. But your big, bold number is 35, and the university needs to make money, so classes are all going to be capped at 35, and you get 35 kids in there. At that point, you're not really developing anything in-depth. They're just giving surface glosses again. And so, how do we change this in such a way where the students get that kind of [educational experience]?"
  - o Participant 25 (CHSS, term): "The resources I need are more time and the only way to have that is to have fewer students in the class."
  - o Participant 8 (CVPA, tenure): "Knowing that when I have a small class, the level of which I can engage individual students is so much more valuable for them, and, rewarding for me---I don't have to worry as much about 'Are people getting it?'"
  - o Participant 5 (CHSS, tenure): "We have no means in the department to keep the numbers of students at a reasonable number for teaching a writing intensive course."

Writing Intensive Criteria

Issues related to the nature of a WI course were the least frequently coded category; only 10 of the 27 participants (37%) mentioned issues that might constrain their teaching. Those issues largely related to course caps and uncertainty about the nature of a WI course. Other faculty suggested the criteria were easy enough to accommodate, but some faculty struggled with the expectation to teach writing and/or integrate that teaching into courses and programs that require an intensive focus on content. These issues are discussed in the Professional Development and Departmental Context sections respectively. Therefore, it should be noted that this category might have been more frequently coded if we had chosen a different structure for our coding scheme; issues with class size and the work required of instructors (such as providing feedback) were not coded under labor. This challenge in coding here reveals what might be considered a major theme of our participants' interviews: the interwoven nature of constraints identified by our faculty.

- **Enrollment Caps:** Our participants mentioned class size quite frequently in their interviews. As reported above, the workload required to teach a large number of student writers was often perceived as a constraint to effective instruction. Here, we briefly gloss enrollment numbers that participants revealed during interviews.
  - o Participant 5 (CHSS, tenure): "... the reason those courses were chosen as the writing intensive courses was because they're generally the smallest classes we teach, but that doesn't work out very well all the time. So the last time I taught,

which was in the Spring, I think I had 34 students, and the time before that, 48. So we have no means in the departments to keep the numbers of students at a reasonable number for teaching a writing intensive course."

- Many of our participants reported enrollments consistently in the upper 20s and 30s, with three participants mentioning enrollments reaching into the 40s, 50s, and 60s.
- Participant 28 (CVPA, tenure): "The main thing is the size. Like I said, if it was capped at 15-17. The class I taught at [another university] was capped at 17, and I found that much more manageable. Somehow, I don't know, like 20 feels like a threshold."
  - Participant 25 (CHSS, term): "These classes should be 15, 16, to be effective."
  - Participant 6 (CHHS, term): "I would like it to be, ideally, somewhere around 15."

- **Awareness of WI Criteria:** A couple of participants mentioned that university constituents (faculty and students) have trouble identifying WI courses.
  - Participant 1 (CHSS, tenure) observed that her students and colleagues couldn't always distinguish between a WI and courses that include written work, a distinction she believed to be critical given that she felt many courses that include writing do not always attend to the pedagogical concerns of a WI course.
  - Participant 8 (CVPA, tenure) added that his students sometimes didn't understand the difference between ENGH 302 and their WI course, a struggle that manifested itself as much in his role as an advisor as an instructor.
  - Another challenge identified by coders more than by participants revolves around the fact that some faculty reported not being aware of the WI criteria. Some also had not seen the "master syllabus" (the syllabus originally approved or subsequently reviewed by the WAC Committee). Participant 4 (COS, term) succinctly encapsulated the challenge here: "Do my courses count as writing intensive courses? I don't even know."

Departmental Context

Since all WI courses are administered and taught by all undergraduate departments, each course is subject to unique constraints that affect its delivery. 22 of our 27 participants (81%) reported issues related to their departmental and/or disciplinary contexts.

- **Recruitment and Staffing:** Recruitment and staffing were often challenges for faculty who had some administrative role related to the WI course or were frequently the only person who taught the WI course. Both of these concerns often concentrated on the

necessity and availability of expertise, particularly for instructors who had expertise in the disciplinary-knowledge and with (teaching) writing.

- o Participant 8 (CVPA, tenure) wished for another WI faculty member in his department, so that he might have the opportunity to teach other courses and take a break from the workload.
- o Participant 28 (CVPA, tenure) mentioned that she recently took over her department's WI course because the only other faculty member who had taught it became "burnt out."
- o Participants from STEM disciplines seemed more concerned with finding faculty with the right mix of disciplinary and writing expertise. Participant 4 (COS, term), for instance, hoped that his department could hire "someone who knows the discipline and knows the material but also has worked in the field of writing and editing, so that they can kind of teach in the context of the subject, teach the material, the writing material that is."
  - Other participants expressed a similar hope, but "the combination of good writing skills and technical skills is kind of hard to find" (Participant 11, VSE, tenure).

- **Identity and Expertise:** While several of our participants expressed their comfort with and enjoyment of teaching writing, a significant contingent also expressed anxiety and discomfort with it. These faculty attempted to distance their identities away from writing and the teaching of (disciplinary) writing, often expressed through the words like "English," "mechanics," and "grammar."
  - o Participant 11 (VSE, tenure): "We are not well equipped to instruct them, right? I don't have a background in English or ... I'm an engineer by background, too. The most that I can tell or teach them is to give them the resources and there's also various links that we provide to them about writing, but we don't have someone come in there and actually instruct the concepts of writing."
  - o Participant 23 (VSE, adjunct) clarifies that "the writing assignments that they have—my job is not to teach them that. How, how to write: that's not my job. […] So, I'm not in the business of writing or teaching English. And I make that clear right from minute one."
  - o Participant 4 (COS, term): "I use writing as a tool in the classes and try to teach it to some degree, but I am not a writing teacher."
  - o While it might be tempting to say this challenge was primarily a STEM concern, we should note that faculty from a range of colleges expressed similar unease. Hiring writing experts seemed to be a common solution for departments, but Participant 22 (VSE, adjunct) revealed a potential problem with this solution; she doesn't know the discipline: "It's not my discipline; that's what's unusual. I'm

not an engineer. I'm a writer and an editor. So, my only experience in my discipline is this course."

- **Coordination and Communication:** Several participants mentioned a lack of conversation about writing and coordination of their WI courses within departments.
    - Participant 10 (COS, term) observed that her department's WI faculty never "get together and discuss our approach or our strategies." While she thought that exchange would "probably" be helpful, she admitted, "there's just so many things going on sometimes that gets lost in the shuffle." While a lack of communication might not constrain this individual instructor, other participants believed its presence could help their instruction.
    - As a new instructor, Participant 18 (CHSS, GRA) observed that his department didn't disseminate standardized teaching materials to him and his colleagues; he believed that such coordination would benefit instruction particularly in programs with regular turnover like his.
    - Participant 15 (B-School, adjunct): "Being just an adjunct is hard because I'm not immersed in the Business school culture, so I don't really know what anyone else is doing in their courses, so it's hard to integrate what they're learning in other areas into my curriculum or even just being aware of it."
    - Participant 1 (CHSS, tenure) wondered if the lack of coordination impacted the alignment of courses. She observed that her department is "no longer negotiating across faculty, to share books, to organize a performance. The labor power is no longer there to have a coordinator, which we had in the past. There's nothing coordinated except for there are a few things it [the WI course] has to do, right?" Reflecting on this observation, she wondered, "How do you make sure that it does these things?"
- **Course Labor, Curricula, and Program Priorities:** A further challenge for a number of departments and participants was the labor of the course itself and the difficulty of locating it in a degree program that best serves students.
    - Many faculty reported that their WI courses were expected to cover too much, like Participant 11 who stated that "… fitting writing into our technical courses—that are overloaded as it is—is a challenge."
    - Participant 16 (CEHD, term) revealed that her department's WI course has to satisfy three different accrediting bodies.
    - Participant 21 (CHSS, tenure) adds, "… Our courses aren't just writing intensive; they're also research intensive, scholarly inquiry, you know; in fact, it's kind of amusing all of the things you have to put on the front page of the syllabus to talk about all the designations of the course that it's trying to meet."

- Several participants reported that it was difficult for them to accommodate the writing of multiple disciplines, particularly in ways that would be relevant to all students. This was a particular challenge for faculty who didn't feel comfortable outside of their specialties, like Participant 7 (COS, tenure) who reported that she lacked the vocabulary of a certain concentration in her department.

Providing Differentiated Instruction

The most commonly cited challenge expressed by our participants was the desire to provide more effective, differentiated teaching to an increasingly diverse student body; 27 out of 27 participants (100%) discussed needing to substantially differentiate their methods of writing instruction in upper level and writing intensive courses. Concerns expressed are detailed below.

- **The Diversity of Our Student Writers:** Many participants stratified the abilities of their student writers and expressed concern about how their teaching methods supported a range of learners. Some participants perceived some student as under-prepared for the work of an advanced disciplinary course, let alone a writing-intensive course. Faculty also felt uncertain about how to best instruct students with nontraditional backgrounds, but primarily cited the need to teach to a range of ability as its own challenge.
  - Participant 14 (CHSS, term) reported that the biggest challenge for his teaching is "the wide diversity of skill sets," noting that "it's really hard" to teach students when "they're sort of all over the place."
  - Participant 25 (CHSS, term): "One of the problems in any writing intensive course, is that there may be a similar level of problems with different people in the class, but they're never the same problems. You have to become an individual writing coach for each student."
    - This faculty member felt that this dynamic significantly increased his workload and offered a strong reason for capping WI courses at "15 or 16 to be effective."
  - Participant 3 (VES, term) said that his students were on "a continuum from very poor writers to very good writers."
- **Surface-level Conventions of Academic Writing:** Several of our faculty expressed concern over their ability to address sentence-level pedagogies, such as working through issues of grammar and other mechanics, while also needing to address higher order concerns in writing. They noted that this disjunction of pedagogical focus made it difficult to support diverse learners, evaluate assignments, and assess student learning.
  - Participant 20 (COS, term): "I think when the constructing sentences part isn't good it's really hard to grade the content."

- o Other faculty noted that they were uncertain how to support students in developing context-appropriate organizational structures for their writing.
  - o Faculty also commonly observed that students often required further instruction in citing information appropriately.
- **Reading Issues:** Some faculty discussed students' challenges with reading and were uncertain about how to support effective reading practices (such as reading frequently and widely inside and outside of classes). Largely, faculty expressed this sentiment through a recognition that their students didn't seem to "read assignments," (Participant 26, CHSS, tenure); "aren't very good readers," (Participant 28, CVPA, tenure) and struggle to read longer, complex texts such as disciplinary scholarship.
  - o Participant 14 (CHSS, term): "[Students have difficulty] read[ing] an article that's more than three or four pages" and "critically analyz[ing] the work they're going to research."
- **Student Labor:** A constraint that several of our participants deemed worthy of mentioning was the amount of work that a WI course requires of its students.
  - o Participant 2 (COS, term) revealed that she advises her student to take easy courses when they take her department's WI because "It's a huge amount of work: it's not just lab; it's also three lecture credits and a final. It's a huge amount of work. And they have to do math and that freaks them out. And sometimes they get so freaked out that they multiply one times zero and get one."
  - o Participant 6 (CHHS, term) observed that her students' "time constraints of other course requirements" cause her students to "minimize their efforts" in her WI course.

Professional Development

Participants expressed concern about the opportunities and support for professional development; 19 of 27 participants (70%) voiced concern about their training while 21 of 27 participants (81%) expressed interest in potential development opportunities.

- **Foundational Knowledge and Instructional Self-Efficacy:** Several participants observed that their professional training did not include training in the teaching of writing. They express that this lack of foundational training is a source of anxiety.
  - o Participant 20 (CHSS, term): "Part of my problem, too, is not coming from a background where, like an English background or writing background, like, I don't know the terms … like just the vocabulary that you use when you're talking about writing. Which is part of the trouble when you're giving feedback to

people. You're like, 'Well, this is really bad,' but I don't know how to explain why it's so bad."

- o Participant 9 (CHSS, tenure): "I've been doing this for 20 years, and I'm not sure how much of it is right."
- o Participant 7 (COS, tenure) added that she is uncertain if she is effectively teaching writing since she receives no evaluation of her writing instruction.
- **Differentiation**: Another common concern for our faculty was their ability to differentiate their instruction. Because they observed a broad range of student facility with writing, our faculty reported interest in learning how to engage that range effectively. This interest included support of particular populations, such as basic, multilingual, and international writers, but many faculty weren't sure how to support both basic and advanced writers simultaneously. These responses seemed to reflect the many ways in which faculty are seeking to welcome diverse learners into their classrooms and more adequately recognize the many resources (linguistic, cultural, and intellectual) that attend diverse learning environments.

Other

While the above categories captured the majority of concerns our faculty expressed about the teaching of WI courses, they did not capture a few relevant themes discussed below. These themes were discussed by 18 of our 27 faculty participants (67%).

- **Additional Resources:** Our participants frequently mentioned a desire for more resources to support their teaching
  - o Participant 22 (VSE, adjunct) described the university's resources as "woefully inadequate" and inferred that writing isn't a priority for the university.
  - o A majority of these conversations touched on the need for increased funding, which was seen as a (partial) solution to other constraints, such as class size and recruitment.
  - o Many faculty members also thought the university could do more to support the writing center, which they felt was overwhelmed and not able to support all of the students who could benefit from their services.
  - o Other interests included writing fellows, handouts about writing, access to cheaper copying, and room designs that better facilitated the teaching of writing (though no clear consensus on what that would be).
- **Prior Learning and Transferring Between Institutions:** Some of our interviewees expressed concern about student's prior learning and the impact of transferring from other institutions. These faculty most frequently referenced high school and community

college preparation as a concern, but some wondered about our students' learning at Mason both within and outside of their home departments.

- o Participant 2 (COS, term) believed that her students ought to take what they learn about writing from one course in her department to another, but she admitted, "I just don't think there is enough of it."

- o Participant 16 (CEHD, term) expressed concern about inappropriate transfer: "That's probably the biggest challenge I see, is that the kids come out of English class, and they're like, they write, like, a proposal topic paragraph and it's like this whole story about this idea, and what it means to them, and it's very first person, and I'm like, ohhhhhh, we have a lot of work to do."

- o A number of faculty worried about transfer out of their WI courses; many of these faculty, feeling particularly constrained by the amount of time they had to work with students on their writing, felt uncertain about their own ability to impact student writing development. Participant 5 (CHSS, tenure), for instance, observed improvement in her students' writing after they revised a project, but "I have no means to know, and very little faith, that I made any changes in the ways that they would write the next time they had to write a paper for somebody. I don't think it lasted. I think it was particular. That was what was, in part, painful."