A Report of the 2013 Writing in the Disciplines (WID) Assessment Project

Submitted to:  Dr. Richard Eglsaer, Vice Provost
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                Jeff Roberts, Office of Academic Planning and Assessment
Executive Summary
During AY 2012-2013, Dr. Richard Eglsaer, Vice Provost, charged the Writing in the Disciplines Committee to determine whether the university’s W requirement is working. That is, to what extent can we demonstrate that SHSU graduates are competent writers? In addition to evaluating student documents, a secondary purpose of the study was to determine how well the W guidelines are diffused throughout the university’s colleges and departments. The research design required faculty assignments be collected and matched with the corresponding student artifacts. Thus, the committee was also able to evaluate the ways faculty assignments meet the mission of the writing intensive requirement, though not the primary focus of the review.

This study was necessitated after an earlier review of W-course syllabi revealed that the methods faculty use to design W courses and assign writing may not be consistent with the original mission of writing intensive courses. Additionally, a shifting context in the higher education landscape necessitates periodic review and no university-wide assessment has yet been completed. The W program is in its 25th year; assessment and program review is overdue. Currently, students take six W courses: two freshman composition courses; two of their choice anywhere within the curriculum, and two at the advanced level in their major.

A total of 430 student artifacts from 152 course sections were received, from which 395 were chosen for scoring, based on a random stratified sampling process. A panel of 14 cross-disciplinary faculty scored the student artifacts over a two-day period, using a locally-developed rubric, divided into four domains: Ideas/Critical Thinking/Synthesis; Style; Organization; and Conventions. The Office of Academic Planning and Assessment redacted all artifacts of any student or faculty identifying information prior to scoring by the WID Committee, and assigned a tracking code.

Based on the assessment discussed below, an initial answer is that our W requirement is working, but only up to a point. Data suggest that students’ writing is minimally competent and so has room to improve, but we must also improve the design and support of the W program overall. Thus, the following recommendations are made; full descriptions are in the Recommendations section of this report.

1. Refine the W course.
2. Renew W course statuses.
3. Develop a process for ongoing review.
4. Increase information and accessibility to WID materials.
5. Increase support for faculty teaching W courses.
6. Include W courses in FES reports.
Background and Methodology
In partnership with the Writing in the Disciplines committee, the Office of Academic Planning and Assessment assisted in facilitating the Writing in the Disciplines (WID) Assessment Project. The purpose of this project was initially to determine how well the W requirement was functioning. To accomplish this goal, a sample of student work from W courses was selected. All 4000-level W courses with enrollments of ten or more students from the Spring 2013 semester were included within the requested sample. The WID committee decided that approximately 500 student artifacts would be sought for evaluation, with committee members and volunteer faculty to evaluate these essays using a locally-developed writing assessment rubric. Expecting that not all targeted artifacts would be received, we decided to oversample and so requested a total of 646 artifacts from 203 total course sections.

The student papers were selected using a stratified random sampling process. First, all enrolled students who were not classified as either juniors or seniors were excluded from the sample pool. The remaining population was then divided into a separate stratum, by college. Students were randomly selected, with the number of students targeted based on the percentage of Juniors and Seniors who were declared to have been majors in each of the respective colleges for the Spring 2013 semester. The desired number of sample artifacts for each college was then divided by the total number of courses in each stratum to determine the number of students that needed to be randomly selected from each course. The effect was to have a sample population that was representative of the size and diversity of SHSU’s student population.

The instructor of record for each of the 203 courses in the sample was e-mailed the names and Sam IDs of the students selected. Near the end of the semester, each professor collected and sent the targeted papers to the Office of Academic Planning and Assessment. Ultimately, a total of 430 student artifacts were received from 152 course sections, from which 395 were chosen for scoring. Twenty-seven of the received artifacts were unusable for this assessment, including student foreign language papers, handwritten student work that was unreadable, and short answer responses that were unable to be scored using the rubric. Eight artifacts were also used as anchor papers and were not included in the final totals. All artifacts were redacted of any student or faculty identifying information prior to scoring by the WID Committee and assigned a tracking code. The total number of scored artifacts from each college is provided in Table 1.
### Table 1: Number of Artifacts Scored

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College</th>
<th>Artifacts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College of Education</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College of Science</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College of Fine Arts and Mass Communication</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College of Humanities and Social Sciences</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College of Business Administration</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College of Criminal Justice</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>395</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Rubric**

To score the selected artifacts, the WID Committee (See Appendix A) developed a writing assessment rubric that was broken down into four different categories: (1) Ideas/Critical Thinking/Synthesis; (2) Style; (3) Organization; and (4) Conventions (See Appendix B). Each artifact received a separate score for each of the four categories using a 4-point scale, where 1 indicated that few of the desired characteristic features for each category were present, 2 indicated that features were not often present, 3 indicated that features were often present, and 4 indicated that the desired characteristic features were almost always present. Two readers evaluated each essay independently, with each reader assigning a score of 1 to 4.

**Raters**

An interdisciplinary group of fourteen raters (See Appendix A) evaluated the student artifacts over a two-day period. Twelve served as both first and second raters, with two serving only to address any issues identified between the first and second raters. A third rater was introduced when a discrepancy of two was found between the two average total scores. There were 196 varying combinations of raters, which reduced the chance effect of any one rater over-influencing the assessments.

**Inter-rater Agreement and Inter-rater Reliability**

To compute the agreement between the initial and second rater on the overall and four domains of the assessment, intra-class correlation coefficients (ICCs) were used. There were two levels of the ICC analysis. First, the four domains (i.e., Ideas/Critical Thinking/Synthesis; Style; Organization; and Conventions), were calculated, each with an individual domain possibility ranging from 1 (few features present) to 4 (features are most always present). Second, domain sum scores for all domains were tabulated by adding the sum of all domains for a total assessment possibility ranging from 4 to 16. Convention holds that ICC values below 0.40 are to be interpreted as poor, from 0.41 to .75 as fair, and above .75 as demonstrating excellent agreement (Fleiss, 1981). Inter-rater agreement for this project was assessed as excellent, with a degree of agreement of .89, and inter-rater reliability agreements for the overall score also demonstrated excellent agreement at .79. The ICC agreement values for each of the domains were fair, ranging from .58 to .69.
Results
Each artifact received a total of eight scores from two raters, two per category. The scores from both raters were then averaged to provide a total score in each category for every artifact. An overall score for each artifact was also calculated by averaging the total scores from both raters.

Average results were then calculated for both the University as a whole and for each individual College. College averages can be compared back to the University average. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: University and College Averages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>University Average</th>
<th>COE</th>
<th>COS</th>
<th>FAMC</th>
<th>CHSS</th>
<th>COBA</th>
<th>COCI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ideas/Critical Thinking/Synthesis</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>2.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>2.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>2.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conventions</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>2.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>2.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusions
The results of the study show that students are writing about average across the board. While this statistic could be interpreted as a lack of student writing ability, the current status of the WID program should be taken into consideration.

Paradoxically, this average rating for our students’ writing samples is sustained despite the fragmented nature of the current WID initiative in general, which seems to fall into three distinct categories as outlined below.

1. Faculty writing assignments, from which the artifacts for assessment were written, indicate that faculty across the disciplines are not consistent in their interpretation of what the W means in terms of course objectives and the nature of the assignments that meet the W requirement. This finding supports an earlier Across the University Writing Committee study which found that faculty across the university are not aware of university policy on W classes and syllabi often reflect a misunderstanding of those W policies and the individual instructor’s role in adhering to those standards in their departments’ course offerings.

2. In responding to the request for artifacts, several faculty members indicated they were unaware that the course they were teaching was officially labeled as a W course; therefore, they had not been using writing as a major learning focus in their classrooms and could not supply the study with the requested artifacts. A
repercussion of that dilemma is that students’ transcripts are being marked with a W to indicate they are earning W credit; however, it is unlikely students have actually taken the required minimum of six courses in their college coursework that meet the W course criteria. The overall university rating of 2.64 is thus achieved despite the inconsistencies of opportunities for students to gain writing skills within the disciplines.

3. The WAC initiative at SHSU is 25 years old, and its efficacy has waxed and waned. Efforts to instruct individual faculty in the principles of WID courses and assignments are effective but have not reached critical mass. Faculty turnover, retirements, and misinterpretation of the purpose of the writing program initiatives all serve to undermine the efforts of the current initiative, as it is structured, to make significant differences in how the W is applied to courses across disciplinary boundaries.

Despite what might be read as a dwindling support for and interest in WID initiatives across the board, the experiences of Sam Houston’s program seem to be in line with other programs nationwide. In an international mapping study of WAC/WID programs, researchers derived a consensus definition for WAC/WID initiatives from the characteristics of the 1100+ institutions they tracked. Sam Houston’s WID initiative falls well within this definition (See Appendix C). Specifically, programs with more than 15 years’ experience identified a need to revamp, increase visibility, and develop new methods of support for faculty who teach the W courses across the institution. To that end, the results of the student writing samples suggest students could improve writing outcomes through better access to consistent writing opportunities across the disciplines and more consistent applications of writing-to-learn principles throughout the W course offerings.

**Recommendations**
Timing for the revision of the WID initiative is advantageous as we can coordinate with the curricular changes as the new core curriculum goes into effect. In order to progress with a plan to revamp the W course offerings, we seek these major areas of change.

1. **Refine the W course.** W requirements should be reassessed and revised as necessary by an ad hoc committee made of faculty from across the university and members of the WID committee. Best practices from WAC/WID scholarship should be appropriated as suitable to SHSU.

2. **Renew W course statuses.** The W designation should be removed from all existing courses, and departments should reassess their W offerings, devise a plan appropriate for their discipline, and seek certification for their choices. A major component of this recommendation is that the W courses will be determined within the departments with
decisions about content left to the specialists in each field. Submitted syllabi, with an sample writing assignment, would be reviewed by members of the WID committee. Because members of the WID committee represent each college of the university, each can advocate for particular differences in academic approaches and disciplinary needs.

3. **Develop a process for ongoing review.** A system for continual review of W syllabi should be incorporated such that all departments would have their W course syllabi reviewed and recertified once every three years.

Members of the WID committee can be used as resources to departments in their respective colleges. Members might also conduct workshops and serve as consultants to departmental curriculum committees to make the transitions as easy as possible, yet provide consistency across colleges.

4. **Increase information and accessibility to WID materials.** We strongly encourage the annual WID Faculty Workshops continue, but that annual event is not enough. We suggest a dynamic website be developed to support faculty efforts with W courses or for those who seek ideas for writing-intensive assignments.

   Faculty should have a local clearinghouse for materials and information about the program. Additional workshops and learning activities can be developed in response to departmental requests. The site could also contain the material and means to assist with course development process, and give faculty direct access to writing specialists. An additional resource could be a blog to engage faculty in the ongoing conversation of teaching writing-intensive courses.

5. **Increase support for faculty teaching W courses.** Incentives should be developed to assist faculty who are teaching W courses, particularly those at the advanced level or in courses with high enrollments. To this end we suggest investigating the feasibility of a Writing Fellows program, perhaps in conjunction with the supplemental instruction initiative. A writing fellow pilot was completed in Fall 2013 in Sociology 2399, Writing in Sociology. Many models of embedded support exist; the WID committee should investigate how embedded writing support might become effective component of WID efforts at SHSU.

6. **Include W courses in FES reports.** Faculty should be given recognition for developing and teaching W courses, much like the current policy for ACE courses in the CHSS.

In sum, our assessment finds that students exhibit average writing abilities in the courses most closely tied with writing in their fields, a senior-level W course in their respective majors. Our assessment also finds that faculty members are not as aware of the WID philosophy and
program requirements to the degree that they are unable to implement and maintain the spirit of their departments’ respective W course offerings. The WID initiative must make support materials more accessible and transparent. Therefore, we suggest we restructure the W program to meet the needs of the faculty to support and develop a strong W program within all disciplines as the first step toward seeking improvement in student writing achievement.

References


Appendix A: AY2012-2013 Members of the University WID Committee and Faculty Raters

Bill Bridges, Chair     Department of English
Diane Dowdey     Humanities and Social Sciences
Renee Gravois Lee     Business Administration
Howard Henderson     Criminal Justice
Sheryl Murphy-Manley     Fine Arts and Mass Communication
Carroll Nardone     Humanities and Social Sciences
Todd Primm     Sciences
Ann Theodori     Writing Center
Nancy Votteler     Education

Faculty Raters

Tracy Austin     COBA
Tracy Bilsing     CHSS
Bill Bridges     CHSS
Diane Dowdey     CHSS
Howard Henderson     COCJ
Renee Gravois Lee     COBA
Ruth Massingill     FAMC
Sheryl Murphy-Manley     FAMC
Carroll Nardone     CHSS
Todd Primm     COS
Jack Sears     COE
Kevin Steinmetz     COCJ
Nancy Votteler     COE
Sunny Yung     COS
Appendix B: Assessment Rubric

This rubric asks you to identify features of the writing present in the sample. You should apply the numerical score based on degree of presence of the characteristic features. The writing features selected for the rubric are those most likely present in any disciplinary writing sample represent a writing level expected of a senior-level college student.

Legend:  
4 = features are most always present  
3 = features are often present  
2 = features are not often present  
1 = few features are present  
N/A = Not Applicable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Ideas/Critical Thinking/Synthesis**  
The depth of sophistication of thoughts and ideas. Features may include research, reasoning, evidence, detail, and development (appropriate to the field and genre) | • Central subject or argument of the assignment is easily identified, clearly emphasized, consistent with the evidence, and intriguing  
• Reasoning is fully developed throughout the assignment with logical examples, details, and evidence where and as appropriate  
• Assignment contains information that addresses counterarguments, biases, or reader’s expectations as appropriate |       |
| **Style**  
The choices the writer makes for specific audiences. Features may include word choice, tone, and sentence length and structure | • Sustained awareness of audience throughout the assignment  
• Writing tone suits the audience and enhances the assignment’s purpose  
• Sentence structure varies according to the content, purpose, and audience  
• Sentences are consistently clear and logical  
• Word choice is appropriate to the writing task |       |
| **Organization**  
The coherence of the writing. Features may include balance and ordering of ideas, flow, transition, and appropriate format (as defined in assignment) | • Text is purposefully organized and substantially developed in a way that clarifies the argument and enhances style  
• Arrangement of ideas (overall structure) is clear, logical, and compelling as appropriate to the assignment; the reader moves through the text easily  
• Internal structure is cohesive and coherent; text flows and ideas are clearly and logically connected  
• Transitions used appropriately |       |
| **Conventions**  
Adherence to standard American edited English. Features include grammar, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and documentation. | • Grammar and mechanics support the reader’s understanding of the writer’s purpose without distracting errors  
• Documentation style is consistent, if appropriate to assignment  
• Sources, when appropriate, are effectively integrated into the body of the assignment  
• Minor errors do not interfere with readability or damage the writer’s credibility (as appropriate to the assignment parameters) |       |

Total:
V. Conclusion

So, back to our opening question: “How alive and well is WAC?” Toward answering the wellness question, we have sought throughout our analysis and in this essay first to define just what, to our respondents, is this “WAC” about which we are so concerned. The different parts of our analysis support the following consensus definition:

- Writing across the curriculum (WAC) is an initiative in an institution to assist teachers across disciplines in using student writing as an instructional tool in their teaching. The program strives to improve student learning and critical thinking through writing and to help students learn the writing conventions of their disciplines.

- The WAC program is led by a director who, in most cases, holds a tenure-line faculty position (most of these directors are tenured) and who receives a reduction in teaching in order to administer the program. The director commonly reports to an administrator at the rank of dean or higher; primary funding for the program comes from this administrative office.

- The WAC program achieves its goals through offering workshops to groups of faculty on ways to improve teaching. Faculty seminars, informal gatherings, and follow-up meetings after workshops are among other common activities. A significant minority of these programs also offer support for travel to pertinent conferences, encourage collaborative research, and maintain in-house publications.

- In most cases, these faculty-development activities support a curriculum that requires students to write across disciplines, very frequently in courses designated “writing intensive” or by other labels that indicate attention to the program goals. The WAC program commonly works in concert with a writing center that directly serves students from across disciplines. Other offices, such as the library and technology services, often collaborate with the WAC program in fulfilling its mission.

How alive and well is WAC? In comparison with the healthy statistics from the McLeod and Shirley survey of 1987, WAC looks well indeed: a jump from 38 percent of 1,113 to 51 percent of 1,126 reporting institutions in the United States, as well as data in response to the other questions that support the rich, multifaceted definition above. Whereas many of the programs reported on in 1987 no longer exist, many more schools have built programs in the succeeding years, and another 152 beyond the 568 reporting a WAC presence have plans to begin programs. Meanwhile, WAC/WID scholarship grows and diversifies.

Of course, in the midst of an economic recession, with news of cutbacks and furloughs coming daily, it is perhaps unwise to predict continuing health. After all, WAC is still a 50–50 option in American higher education—and a distinct minority presence in the community college—and, as a program that depends on the co-operation of more stable entities (i.e., departments and deans’ and provosts’ offices), can rather easily be diminished, if not eliminated.

Still, the record of the past twenty years, replete with its own periodic recessions, has been one of growth for WAC, and the current statistics bode well for a healthy, if not always illness-free, future.