

Subcommittee to Assess Writing Across the Curriculum

Report

May 5, 2003

I. Origin and Formation of the Subcommittee

In Fall Quarter 2002, Faculty Senate President Jim Sayer charged the Undergraduate Curriculum and Academic Policy Committee (UCAPC) to "study and assess the effectiveness and impact" of WSU's Writing Across the Curriculum policy, then commencing its seventh year of implementation, and directed UCAPC to complete such assessment "no later than the beginning of spring quarter 2003."¹ Accordingly, the Subcommittee to Assess Writing Across the Curriculum (SAWAC) was formed, comprising faculty from each undergraduate college, the WAC Coordinator, and a representative from Student Government. Committee members are Carol Morgan Bennet (CoLA), Rudy Fichtenbaum (CoBA), Leo Finkelstein (CECS), Jeanne M. Fraker (UC), Carol A. Holdcraft (CONH), Christopher D. Leapley (SG), Joe Law (WAC), Carol S. Loranger (chair, CoLA), Richard Mercer (CoSM), Kenneth Schatmeyer (CEHS), and James W. Steinberg (LC).

II. Prevalence of WAC Assessment Nationally

According to a recent report in The Chronicle of Higher Education² dissatisfaction with the caliber of undergraduate writing is both continual and endemic at public and private universities in the United States. Disagreement about how best to improve student writing is likewise widespread. There appears, however, to be near-universal agreement that writing instruction must be offered or emphasized positively in every discipline's curriculum; that sufficient and reliable funding must be earmarked for writing instruction; and that instructors of writing should be accorded more tangible institutional respect and support than they are usually accorded, if quality of writing instruction is not to suffer. According to the External Review Committee which assessed WSU's WAC program in 2000, inertia often sets in after a period of initial enthusiasm and widespread, active support among faculty and administrators for WAC programs--especially as senior faculty involved in these programs at their inception retire or move on, while newer faculty lacking context of the particular institution's WAC history and/or needs are assigned to teach existing WAC courses. Many universities are assessing and/or creatively overhauling their Writing Intensive (WI) or WAC programs with an eye toward revitalizing their programs and raising levels of commitment to and understanding of the program among WI and non-WI faculty.³ Most such WAC assessment activities are multi-phased processes, carried out over several years. For example, at George Mason University, in the fifth year of assessment, impact of WAC on student writing is assessed

¹ A copy of President Sayer's charge to UCAPC may be found in the appendix to this report.

² Thomas Bartlett, "Why Johnny Can't Write, Even Though He Went to Princeton," The Chronicle of Higher Education 3 January 2003: A39-40.

³ Bartlett, 39-40.

via study of portfolios of student writing assembled by a cohort of junior- and senior-level students who have completed their WAC requirements.⁴

III. Limitations Imposed by SAWAC's Deadline

The two-quarter limitation placed on SAWAC's assessment activities by President Sayer's charge to UCAPC limited the types of meaningful assessment activities that could be responsibly performed. Specifically, the collection and examination of writing portfolios by a representative cohort of students who have completed their WI requirements was not feasible. The committee considered and dismissed a suggestion that it conduct a spot assessment of WSU student writing skills by having randomly selected undergraduates write to a prompt. The committee noted that assessment specialists nationally and on our own faculty reject the validity of such assessments, particularly for WAC--in no small part because, as has been reported in The NEA Higher Education Journal, problems arise "when investigators attempt to design controlled studies to test WAC's impact on subject-specific learning and general writing ability. Investigators, for instance, are often unable to randomly assign students to control and study groups. They are not able to completely eliminate nonwriting variability in instruction. Nor can they assure that all instructors are equally skilled at the evaluation of writing assignments."⁵ SAWAC believes that too many uncontrolled variables exist in the pedagogical milieu to permit effective assessment using accepted empirical methodology.

Additionally, given that WSU's WAC program has conducted annual self-assessment activities and that an external review of this program was conducted in 2000, SAWAC determined that the imperative to duplicate pre-existing assessment activities does not exist. Instead, to help determine the program's impact and to assess the mechanics of the program, SAWAC elected to focus on current WAC implementation as an indicator of impact.

IV. Overview of Assessment Activities Conducted by SAWAC

SAWAC's first step was to review existing self-assessment materials amassed by WAC over the first six years of implementation. Then, to meet the three prongs of President Sayer's charge, SAWAC conducted three assessment activities during the Fall 2002 and Winter 2003 Quarters. To *assess the impact of the program vis-à-vis the program's stated goals*, SAWAC reviewed syllabuses for WI courses taught during academic year 2001-2002, to determine if WI courses in GE and the majors were attempting to meet those goals. Additionally SAWAC reviewed staffing of WI courses to learn how faculty resources are allocated to WAC in colleges and departments and where responsibilities for WI courses are borne. *Assessing the mechanics of the program* was folded into the *request for deans' and chairs' analyses* of the WAC program. Specific recommendations are made at the end of this report.

⁴ George Mason University, "Assessing WAD / WID," <http://wac.gmu.edu/program/assessing/assessing.html>)

⁵ David E. Harris and Robert Schaible, "Writing Across the Curriculum Can Work," The NEA Higher Education Journal (Spring 1997): 31-40.
Online: <http://www.nea.org/he/heta97/s97pg31.pdf>

A. Review of On-going Assessment Activities Conducted Annually by WAC

WAC self-assessment activities reviewed by SAWAC include annual surveys of WI faculty and data collected from student evaluations of WI GE courses each Spring Quarter. Responses to these are non-standardized, impressionistic and so varied that the committee was unable to determine a dominant trend in faculty and student perceptions of WAC. SAWAC notes, however, that WAC has established a continual pattern of self-assessment.

The report from the External Review Committee⁶ was overall laudatory of program administrators and WI faculty. Nevertheless, after reviewing 1. Perception and Placement within the Institution, 2. Professional Development, and 3. Resources for WAC at WSU, the External Review Committee made numerous specific recommendations for strengthening the program, many of which SAWAC later found to be echoed in the Deans'/Chairs' analyses. The validity of these recommendations appears to have been confirmed by SAWAC's reviews of WI syllabuses and staffing. Some of the External Review Committee's recommendations have already been followed by WSU: for example, the recommendation calling for a more professional space than a dark basement cell in which the WAC Coordinator can conduct WAC-related activities appears to have been met (via the Millett Hall rehabilitation). Implementation of the new GE in Fall Quarter 2003 should lower somewhat the number of high enrollment WI courses in GE; reducing the number of large enrollment WI courses was another recommendation of the External Review Committee. Other recommendations have not, to SAWAC's knowledge, been implemented. Some of these, such as "clearly stipulat[ing] that participation in WAC 'counts' in promotion and tenure and in merit review" appear to be bargaining, rather than administrative, issues; others, such as eliminating the dual grade for WI courses, while not yet implemented, appear to be strongly seconded by faculty, department chairs, and deans, judging from responses to SAWAC's query of deans and chairs.

Conclusion: On-going assessment activities are carried out by WAC. SAWAC finds it difficult to sort out useful information from these, but is unable at this time to suggest a more informative method of regular self-assessment. The external review of WAC initiated by the university administration indicates a worthwhile program which yet has significant unmet needs. According to the external review, flaws in the program arise from its initial conception; i.e., the dual grade, "ghettoization" in lower division large enrollment courses, etc., and "absence of systems of faculty reward."

B. Results of Syllabus Review

SAWAC attempted to review all syllabuses for WI courses for academic year 2001-2002 (the sixth full year of WAC/WI implementation) to determine whether these courses complied with WI guidelines. Committee members developed a simple assessment rubric to evaluate all WI syllabuses submitted to the WAC office for that year.⁷ Unfortunately, although syllabuses for WI courses are required to be submitted to WAC, and WAC sends letters requesting these

⁶ Included in the Appendix to this report.

⁷ Included in the Appendix to this report.

materials to each WI faculty, department chair and college dean every quarter,⁸ no college consistently supplies this information to WAC during the regular school year. The committee estimates that only about half of WI courses each year actually provide syllabuses for review by WAC. SAWAC observes that failure to provide this information to WAC might impair the program's ability to facilitate a consistent WI experience for students.

Among the available syllabuses, the following observations can be made:

- only 70% of GE syllabuses identified the course as WI; in major courses the percentage drops to 45%.
- only one quarter of syllabuses state the goals of WAC.
- most syllabuses indicate how grades are distributed.
- about three-quarters of GE syllabuses indicate writing assignments; just over half of WI courses in the major do so. Fewer specifically indicate that writing is required for passing the course.
- slightly more than half of all syllabuses reviewed indicate the quantity of writing required. Of these, about three-fourths clearly meet or exceed WI minimums.
- very few syllabuses--just over 10%--indicate that opportunity for revision exists. Among these, the understanding of "revision" varies widely.

Conclusion: Interviews conducted with WI faculty by SAWAC committee members during this review suggest that more WI faculty are in compliance with WI guidelines than available syllabuses indicate. However, it is not certain that students in WI courses will grasp this without better information on the course syllabus. More standardization of WI syllabuses may be in order; but it is difficult to see how this can be achieved if WAC does not have regular access to these documents.

C. Results of Staffing Review

SAWAC collected staffing data for all WI courses taught during academic year 2001-2002. The committee identified all WI Instructors by their rank during that year and compared the staffing of WI courses in GE and the majors. The table shows percentage of WI courses taught by each rank:

For the major:

Professors	23.11%
Assoc. Professors	29.20%
Assist. Professors	19.54%
Instruct/Lecturers	9.87%
Adjunct/Emeritus	15.55%
Staff	2.73%

Professorial Faculty	71.85%

⁸ Included in the Appendix to this report.

For GE

Professors	17.18%
Assoc. Professors	28.24%
Assist. Professors	4.20%
Instruct/Lecturers	11.45%
Adjunct	32.8 %
Staff	6.11%

Professorial Faculty	49.62%

Conclusion: No clear conclusion about the impact of WAC on student writing can be reached based on this data. The WAC Coordinator notes that high rates of turnover among part-time WI instructors impede WAC's ability to train WI instructors and coordinate the program.

D. Results of Query of Deans and Chairs

The charge to study and assess WAC specifically directed the subcommittee to solicit specific analyses of WAC impact from each college dean and department chair. To streamline the process, SAWAC posed two questions and requested each college dean solicit analyses from chairs, who would in turn solicit analyses from department faculty. Deans were asked to base their analyses on those received from the departments.⁹ All college deans returned thorough reports. Copies of these are on file in the Faculty Office.

The first question asked, "*Do you . . . think WAC is a worthwhile program a) in terms of WI courses in General Education? b) in terms of the major?*"

In general, and as a concept, the majority view expressed in each college is that WAC is a worthwhile program in GE and the major. Disagreement centers on just what makes it worthwhile, whether it is more worthwhile in GE or the major, and whether and how that worth can be quantified. There appears to be much diversity of opinion over the purpose of WAC and its perceived impact on student writing. No specific data on actual student writing was supplied by respondents to support claims that WAC had not improved student writing. Some few respondents described a specific set of course writing exercises on which they had seen student improvement over the course of a quarter. No samples were provided. SAWAC regards all claims about impact, or lack of impact, on actual writing skills as unproven at this time.

All respondents agree that more writing at all levels is itself a good thing; some disagreement arises over whether WAC is necessary to promote more writing at all levels.

Respondents also disagree as to whether WAC offers sufficient training and "moral" support to WI faculty. Some claim that no support is offered. Those who have availed themselves of WAC training uniformly praise it. In this case,

⁹ A copy of the request to college deans is included in the Appendix to this report.

SAWAC regards these claims as provable. Informational booklets and training sessions are offered throughout the school year.¹⁰

More material institutional support for WI faculty is seen as a critical need by most respondents. Specifically identified are

- lower enrollments for all WI sections
- WAC mentors or representatives in each department
- real, significant incentives offered to faculty who teach WI courses
- real, significant incentives for faculty who attend a number of WI workshops
- sufficient funding to allow hiring of graders for WI sections
- institutional acknowledgement that teaching WI substantially increases faculty workloads

The second question asked, "*Do you . . . think the current WI requirement of four WI courses in GE and two WI courses in the majors is appropriate for achieving the goals of WAC? Is the separation of course grade from writing grade appropriate to achieving the goals of WAC?*"

Responses to the first half of this question were diverse. Some would like to see more WI in the major and less in GE. Other faculty would like to see WI in GE increased, leaving the different majors to decide how to handle writing. Others indicate satisfaction with the current architecture of the program. Some faculty see the minimum word counts for WI courses in GE and the major as too low; others feel describing WI requirements in terms of word count emphasizes quantity over quality.

Most respondents are dissatisfied with the scheduling of WI courses in GE. Specifically, respondents argue that the fact that some sections of GE courses are WI and some are not is a significant problem, especially as the status of these sections changes from term to term. This makes advising difficult and leads to problems with students who have completed their WI requirements resisting having to write in a WI section.

Most respondents agree that completion of WI in the GE should be a requirement for enrolling in WI major courses. Additionally, the English Department repeats its recommendation that students be required to complete English 101 and 102 before enrolling in WI GE courses.

The separation of course grade from writing grade elicited the strongest and most unified response. Most respondents deplore the separation, especially in GE courses, claiming that it causes confusion among students, implies that writing is of only marginal importance, sends wrong signals, etc. The strongest support for the dual course grade comes from Lake Campus, where the dual grade is seen as making the importance of writing clear to students.

Conclusion: Many thoughtful, particular and complementary suggestions for improving the overall WAC experience for students and faculty appear in the

¹⁰ See Appendix.

Deans' reports. Many of these suggestions echo those made by the External Review Committee three years ago.

V. Committee Remarks

SAWAC believes that teaching is in many ways an act of faith, and that teaching writing is a most perfect act of faith. As with other faith-based acts, results may be neither imminent nor immanent, and are unlikely to be empirically quantifiable in a meaningful way. SAWAC was impressed with the WSU faculty's expressed commitment to improving student writing, with the diverse and creative ways that writing happens in courses all over campus, and with the commitment of WI faculty to an onerous and often thankless task. Committee members believe, with many faculty who responded to their deans' queries, that writing instruction doesn't have to be successful in every case, with every student, to be worthwhile. The impact of writing instruction is cumulative and may not be fully realized until some time after students complete their education at WSU. In the meantime, WSU's commitment to WI instruction makes it clear to students that they cannot *avoid* writing, whether in their academic, or in their future professional, lives. Every instructional program can benefit from thoughtful scrutiny and sensitive, situationally-responsive development with an eye toward strengthening it. The recommendations given below represent, in the view of the Subcommittee to Assess Writing Across the Curriculum, significant opportunities to strengthen this worthwhile program

VI. Recommendations:

- The WAC committee and interested faculty and administrators should review the recommendations made in the External Review Committee report and the deans' reports and consider implementation where possible.
- The dual grade for WI should be eliminated, since it creates more problems than it solves.
- The administration should, through the Office of the Provost, ensure that WAC receives all syllabuses for WI courses from every department and college each quarter, in a timely manner.
- All sections offered of WI-eligible GE courses should be WI.
- Further investigation of the staffing of WI courses in GE is necessary. Use of part-time faculty and staff should be justified in terms of quality of instruction, not cost savings. At the very least, the percentage of part-time faculty teaching WI courses in GE should not exceed the percentage of part-time faculty teaching non-WI courses in GE.
- The WI requirement of 4 WI coursed in GE and 2 in the major should be understood as a *minimum* requirement. There is no maximum limit on these courses. Similarly word counts should be understood as *minimum* requirements; achieving these word counts should not be taken as a sign of proficiency.
- If Faculty Senate wishes to have an accurate record of WAC impact, a long-term plan for assessing WAC effectiveness on student writing should be developed and implemented. Such a plan should factor out variables in student preparedness and progress through their WI requirements and include significant follow-up after graduation. Given that the new GE, with its concomitant increase in contact hours and revision of all WI GE offerings, commences next academic year (2003/2004), this would be a good time to begin such serious and detailed assessment. SAWAC cautions, however, that such thoroughgoing assessment will be costly to develop and implement; the committee believes strongly that the best use of financial

resources in regard to WAC would be toward better support of the existing program, thus:

- Faculty Senate should use its influence to encourage the university administration to move forward with the recommendations of the External Review Committee, in particular, increased material support for WI instruction, in particular:
 - increased material support for WI instruction, training and staffing
 - lowering enrollments in all WI sections

VII. Appendix

For consistency with the above report, WAC materials included in this appendix reflect the last full year of WAC implementation, academic year 2001-2002.

Charge to Study & Assess Writing Across the Curriculum	A1
Report of the External Review Committee	A2-A9
WI Syllabus Assessment Rubric	A10
WAC Letters to Deans, by quarter 2001-2002 (listed enclosures omitted)	A11-A14
WAC Letters to Chairs, by quarter 2001-2002 (listed enclosures omitted)	A15-A17
WAC Letters to WI Faculty, by quarter 2001-2002 (listed enclosures omitted)	A18-A21
Request for Deans'/Chairs' Assessment of Impact of WI Courses	A22
List of WAC Workshops offered 2001-2002	A23
WAC Newsletters 2001-2002	A24-A63
September 2001	A24-A33
November 2001	A34-A43
January 2002	A44-A53
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<i>A Brief Guide for Faculty</i> , booklet mailed annually to each WI faculty	A64