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Director of Composition, MSU Core Writing Program

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Summary

The W Core is assessed by the MSU Core Writing Program (CWP) on a 3-year cycle of two readings of student portfolios (years 1 and 2) and a development year (3) to implement curricular and faculty development based on assessment findings. The 2014-2017 cycle was the first instantiation of this plan. Readings conducted in summer 2014 and summer 2015 indicated that WRIT 101, the sole W course, did meet its outcomes target, with 80 percent of student work scoring 2.2 in 2014 and 2.5 in 2015 on a 4 point scale, across all outcomes. (Target score is 2.) In addition, the cycle validated all aspects of the assessment procedure (collection of writing portfolios, reading and scoring of portfolios, and analysis of results to generate curricular and faculty development goals and initiatives) and plan (first year reading leading to a refined second year reading and the findings of both readings shaping an additional year of curriculum and faculty development). While the 3rd year of the cycle, implementation of findings in curriculum and faculty development, was delayed by a 1-year funding cut, funding was restored so that 2017-18 will serve as year 3 of the first assessment cycle, with a new cycle beginning summer 2018.

W-Core Learning Outcomes

The W Core at MSU is satisfied by the completion of WRIT 101, so MSU’s WRIT 101 learning outcomes are shared with the W-Core. After completing WRIT 101 / fulfilling the W Core requirement, students will

- Demonstrate themselves to be reflective writers
- Show willingness to take risks in new writing situations
- Collaborate with other writers
- Demonstrate ability to read rhetorical situations
- Demonstrate control of situation-appropriate conventions of writing
- Integrate source material in their writing

Measures for each outcome are included in the full outcome sheet at the end of this report. Outcomes are assessed in student writing in WRIT 101, the sole W course at MSU. Performance related to each outcome is scored in student writing on a 0-4 scale (0 Not Present, 1 Lacking, 2 Sufficient, 3 Significant, 4 Extensive). Target performance is 80 percent of assessed writing scoring 2, Sufficient. Given the holistic nature of writing assessment, all outcomes are scored in each assessment reading.

Implementation of Assessment Plan

For more detail on the assessment plan, please refer to the 2014 W Core Assessment Plan. The plan was implemented as designed, and is summarized here.

Year 1 (Summer 2014-Spring 2015)

A sample of student portfolios was collected as described in the plan. 75 portfolios (25 each rated by their instructors as high, medium, or low achieving) were submitted for the assessment reading, each read by 2 of 6
readers. The readers, as faculty for the course being assessed, did not read their own students’ work. The two pieces of student writing in each portfolio were evaluated for performance in each of the six W-Core learning outcomes, scored on a 0-4 scale as described above. The daylong reading included an hour for reader preparation and norming, 7.5 hours of reading, and a 45-minute closing discussion of observed trends and comments on student work and on the assessment system and reading itself. Readers were paid $200 for the day.

The CWP’s Director of Composition (who served as Assessment Leader throughout this cycle) compiled scores and prepared a verbal report to WRIT 101 faculty at their 2015 retreat prior to Fall semester. Drawing from both quantitative scoring and reader commentary after the reading, the assessment team determined to update some procedures in the second reading year:

- Requiring electronic files of student writing with changes tracked (rather than separate paper drafts), for ease of review of revision and collaboration during the assessment reading
- Revising the scoring sheet to be more intuitive for readers to complete
- Increasing the number of readers from 6 to 8 to reduce total reading time
- Using the gained time to expand the preparation/norming period to 2 hours, with special emphasis on assessing Outcome 3 Collaboration, and extend discussion time at the end of the reading.

Because year 1 was treated as the first half of a baseline assessment, no recommendations were made to WRIT 101 faculty regarding curriculum, though we noted reader dissatisfaction with student performance on Outcome 6, Source integration.

Year 2 (Spring 2015-Spring 2016)

Sampling of student writing and conducting of the assessment reading were completed as detailed in the plan (again resulting in submission of 75 portfolios), with the modifications identified after the Year 1 reading. (These modifications are both anticipated by and called for in the plan.) While most of the modifications had positive results, we continued to have trouble collecting drafts of the major assignment, again impacting readers’ ability to assess Outcome 3 Collaboration. Detailed results of the Year 2 reading are discussed in Assessment Findings below.

Year 3 (Spring 2016-Spring 2017)

Ordinarily the third year will design and implement curricular and faculty development based on the Year 1 and 2 findings. This cycle, however, was interrupted by a one-year withdrawal of faculty development and assessment funds, during which no assessment-related activities were conducted. See Curriculum and Faculty Development Based on Assessment below for our plan for 2017-18 with funding restored. We will complete the assessment cycle in Spring 2018 and commence the following cycle in Summer 2018 with another reading of student portfolios.

Assessment Findings

Quantitative Scores

The scoring target for achievement of learning outcomes in WRIT 101 is 80 percent of portfolios scoring 2 (Sufficient) on a 0-4 point scale. To develop the chart below, two readers’ scores of each outcome for each piece of student writing were averaged, and all average scores for each outcome were averaged for each year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>2014 Portfolios (N=75)</th>
<th>2015 Portfolios (N=75)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All Pfolios</td>
<td>80 Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Reflective Writer</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Risk-taking</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Collaboration</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Rhetorical Reading</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Conventions</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Source Integration</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Means</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 2014, the first year of this assessment system on the current plan, scores mostly averaged close to our outcomes target, with Outcome 3, Collaboration with other writers, missing the target 2 score for 80 percent of
portfolios. (Only 66% of portfolios met the goal of 2 on that outcome.) The 2015 reading (plan year 2) showed higher scores across the board that largely reflect improved preparation and norming of readers. Quantitatively, no problem areas appear in the 2015 reading. In future assessment cycles, we would like to see scores stabilize between year 1 and 2 readings (in the absence of significant curricular changes) for confidence in the reliability of our scoring. We would also like to see these scores rise with. While our target scores and thresholds are fair, realistic, and reasonable, faculty would like more students to demonstrate greater ability on W-Core outcomes.

Qualitative Observations
At both the year 1 and year 2 readings, before scores were compiled, the assessment team discussed patterns and trends emerging in the student writing and course materials they reviewed.

- While the numerical scores reflect students meeting the target for Outcome 6, Source Integration, readers believed students were consistently underperforming in this area, and requested development of the 101 curriculum to address it. Readers’ discomfort with much of the performance they saw on this outcome even as students met our numerical target suggests that we should consider adjusting the threshold score for this outcome to better reflect readers’ actual expectations.

- The difficulty of identifying Outcome 3, Collaboration with other writers, in papers that did not come with a draft and with reflection on revision based on feedback (the chief traces of collaboration) was a problem for readers in both years. The low score in this area both years (problematically low the first year) seemed as much a result of difficulty in tracing collaboration with the data in hand as an accurate measure of student’s collaboration with other writers. We need a better means of assessing this outcome.

- The next most troublesome outcome to assess was Outcome 2, Risk-taking. Readers found that what constituted “taking a risk” was a significant judgment call most of the time, and also noted that risk was difficult to objectively assess when differing writers appeared to have different thresholds for recognizing a writing move as risky, and when what might not be a risk in one instructors’ classes might be in another’s. Readers concur that the risk-taking outcome is important, but find measuring it difficult.

- The highest-scored outcome in both years’ readings was Outcome 5, Control of situation-appropriate conventions. This reflects a well-known effect in the evaluation of writing: Conventions are the most “surfaced” or obvious features of writing, and therefore tend both to get the most attention in writing instruction and to be the most visible outcome during assessment. In future assessments, we should try to distinguish whether the consistently higher scores on this outcome compared to others mean that readers are simply noticing the presence of this learning more easily than other kinds, or whether faculty are underemphasizing other outcomes relative to control of conventions.

- Our outcomes, courses, and assessment put great weight on reflective writing, which helps students explain choices in their writing and offer perspective on how they’re experiencing writing in their course. But readers were frequently frustrated by silence in the reflective writing on outcomes that needed direct discussion to be best assessed (particularly collaboration and risk-taking). While we continue to value assessment that lets choose diverse assignments, we need to create a standardized reflection prompt to be sure that students address their reflection to serve not only our assessment of their learning outcomes, but prompt them to reflect better on the outcomes themselves, enhancing their learning.

- Instructors in WRIT 101 use many major paper assignments. As long as the assignments emphasize learning relevant to the W-Core outcomes, we see this diversity as a feature, not a bug. Having to “learn” a wide variety of assignments during the assessment reading does stress readers. However, observing this variety creates another strong benefit of assessment: The opportunity to review course materials not simply in the abstract (as when instructors submit them for annual review) but in concert with several pieces of writing the assignment actually leads to. Readers were thus able to identify assignments that, while interesting, did not seem to engage the activities emphasized in W-Core outcomes, and we now have a basis to talk amongst instructors about how to revise such assignments.
The relatively even and realistic averages of scores on the 0-4 point scale suggest that our process of high/mid/low sampling is working to produce a representative sample of student achievement across varying levels of performance. *We expect to continue to use it in future assessment cycles.*

**Curriculum and Faculty Development Based on Assessment**

As noted, our Year 3 implementation of assessment data in curricular and faculty development has been delayed one year due to cut funding. Funding was restored at the end of Spring 2017 and the third year of our assessment cycle will now conclude Spring 2018. Based on two years’ assessment data, our foci in this third year are these:

- **Develop a standard reflection prompt for WRIT 101 that guides students in reflection specifically including W-Core learning outcomes.** A small team of instructors will be tasked with developing and presenting a reflection prompt to WRIT 101 faculty by Nov. 2017. All WRIT 101 faculty will include the prompt/assignment in their Spring syllabi, and the new reflection assignment will be collected in portfolios for the summer 2018 assessment reading. We expect this new component of assessment to allow us much better measurement of the currently difficult-to-assess Outcomes 2 (Risk-taking) and 3 (Collaboration with other writers).

- **Consult with faculty on major course assignments that seem weakly connected to W-Core learning outcomes.** In the assessment readings, some assignments were identified as not leading to writing that lent itself to assessment based on the learning outcomes. While we remain committed to not requiring a program-wide major assignment in WRIT 101, and while we recognize the value of assignments that teach more broadly than the W-Core outcomes, we do want to coach instructors to ensure that their major assignments do engage the W-Core outcomes among whatever other work they do. To accomplish this, in early Fall 2017 the Director and Assistant Director of the CWP will review assignments flagged in the assessment and design a faculty development workshop on assignment design based on the difficulties we see in the flagged assignments, followed by an assignment exchange among faculty for feedback on assignment revisions.

- **Examine ways our assignments and course instruction are teaching students to integrate source material in their writing (Outcome 6) and develop guidance for instructors in strengthening student learning in this area.** The source-integration outcome was identified by readers as a most noticeable area of student weakness. (Other areas that appeared weak, readers encountered as an assessment problem more than a student learning problem.) Throughout Fall ‘17 we will use faculty development meetings and a small curriculum development team (in consultation with research librarians at Renne Library) to engage instructors in considering how we’re currently teaching source integration and alternatives that might help students learn more in this regard. We will work to develop a set of best practices for WRIT 101 faculty to begin implementing in Spring ‘17.

The implementation and results of each of these items will be assessed in the next cycle, beginning with the summer 2018 assessment reading.
Appendix: WRIT 101 Learning Outcomes (Detailed Guide)
Ratified 10/16/2013

Writing 101 (College Writing I) serves as an introductory writing course for students at Montana State University. While no single writing class can sufficiently prepare students for the entirety of cross-disciplinary writing experiences they will encounter throughout their college education, Writing 101 works to develop habits of and perspectives on writing that will serve students throughout their college coursework and beyond. This outcome statement reflects fundamental attitudes and approaches to academic writing that will aid students as they encounter a variety of disciplinary conventions and expectations for writing. Writing 101 should be understood as a starting point for students as they continue learning to write in college and life.

**Becoming a reflective writer**
By the end of Writing 101, students will
- Learn to become self-aware writers
- Demonstrate metacognition about their texts and processes
- Demonstrate an ability and willingness to significantly revise their own writing

**Taking risks in new writing situations**
By the end of Writing 101, students will
- Demonstrate openness, curiosity, and tolerance of ambiguity
- Experiment with genres, styles, and structures
- Use revision as a way to extend, develop, and change their writing and ideas
- Entertain risky, challenging ideas

**Collaborating with other writers**
By the end of Writing 101, students will
- Engage in collaborative reading, writing, and revising
- Recognize writing as an inherently social activity that requires invested readers
- Understand how writing and conversations are shaped by discourse communities
- Learn to critique texts and request and receive feedback about their writing

**Reading rhetorical situations**
By the end of Writing 101, students will
- Understand the terms “rhetoric” and “rhetorical situation”
- Be able to explore a wide range of strategies for addressing exigence, audience, and purpose
- Understand the concept of and recognize themselves as a part of “discourse communities”
- Demonstrate an ability to analyze a writer’s rhetorical choice

**Increasing control of situation-appropriate conventions of writing**
By the end of Writing 101, students will
- Analyze the reasons that certain styles and conventions are appropriate in particular writing situations
- Recognize reader expectations around usage and mechanics in standard edited English

**Writing with source material**
By the end of Writing 101, students will
- Understand options for accessing a variety of sources
- Know how to rhetorically evaluate sources, including how they are created and disseminated
- Recognize a range of primary and secondary sources
- Understand documentation as an academic practice
- Understand intellectual and technical aspects of integrating external sources into their own writing
Appendix: WRIT 101 2015 Assessment | Portfolio Review Sheet

Portfolio # _________

Rate the presence/degree of each learning outcome by writing the appropriate number in each “source” column (reflection/paper) and then making notes on the basis of your rating

4 Extensive  3 Significant  2 Sufficient  1 Lacking  0 Not present  N No information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Refl</th>
<th>Pap</th>
<th>Present how? (examples / general description)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflective writer</td>
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<td>Risk-taking</td>
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<td>Collaboration</td>
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<td>Reading rhetorical situations</td>
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<td>Writing with sources</td>
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What other learning appears that isn’t covered in our outcomes?