

Writing Program Assessment Report 2011

Eight faculty readers met on May 9-10 for a two –day intensive reading of student papers. (Each was compensated \$375 from the Mellon Foundation grant for the Writing Program.) After an introduction to the rubric and the scoring guide developed in 2008, faculty were paired off, given 3 papers to read to each other, trading off paragraph by paragraph. The readers then marked the papers on scoring guides, discussed their scores, and “persuaded” each other about their readings. They reconvened, discussed the guide and their markings, and then began the assessment.

The papers were collected from writing-intensive, mid-career courses, primarily courses aimed at sophomores. We collected approximately 60 sets of papers, of which faculty assessed 52 papers. Most papers received two readings by different faculty pairs, and when the two disagreed about their scores, Joel Haefner or Mary Ann Bushman served as the third reader for that paper.

General observations about the data:

This year was the third year of assessment. In 2009, we collected a rather small sample (27 papers) written by seniors for the reading. In 2010, we collected a larger sample of papers written by freshmen in their Gateway courses. Attached is a bar graph indicating the change over the three years.

This year’s assessment occurs after the first class of students completed the new general education requirement of a writing-intensive course by the end of the sophomore year. It also occurs after an intense effort to provide support for faculty development in teaching writing, primarily within the disciplines. In 2010-11, the Writing Program focused its development activities on designing assignments and on teaching writing in the sciences and social sciences.

The average scores on a scale of 1 (emerging) to 6 (mastering):

1. Recognizes problem, question or issue to address: 3.90
2. Locates issue in appropriate context: 3.66
3. Organization: 3.55
4. Develops evidence: 3.53
5. Engagement with project: 3.85
6. Follows citation conventions: 3.85
7. Style: 3.64
8. Audience: 3.58
9. Considers conclusions, implications, consequences: 3.48
10. Responds to assignment: 3.84
11. Holistic impression: 3.63
12. Average 3.68

What the data seem to show:

- 1) Major improvements in every category of the rubric over the Gateway papers. There were no declines in any category.

- 2) Major improvements in student writing in nearly every category compared to senior writing. In no category did senior writing exceed the sophomore writing, but senior writing was nearly as strong as sophomore in the categories of Issues Identified and Contexts.
- 3) The Holistic category also showed large improvements over the previous two assessments (seniors averaged 2.72 while sophomores scored 3.63).
- 4) Major improvement in engagement, with seniors scoring 2.79 while sophomores scored 3.85.
- 5) Sophomore scores averaged 3.68 out of 6.0, firmly in the “developing” scale.
- 6) Senior papers in 2009 averaged 3.02 and Gateway papers averaged 3.03.

Faculty impressions:

In a final discussion reflecting on the assessment, faculty expressed surprise and pleasure over the writing they had read. They noted that the writing seemed to show intellectual engagement and in many instances had something interesting to “teach” the reader. The two points on which they felt students needed to improve (and to practice) were 1) providing more complex and detailed evidence and 2) considering the broader implications of their arguments. The consensus was that these might be addressed through faculty development activities that focused on teaching argumentative strategies within the disciplines and across disciplines (in Gateway).

Observations from M. A.:

The senior sample we are working from was small (26 papers), and it included papers written by seniors in courses other than in their majors. However, it did reinforce the Teagle data from the earlier grant.

We should do another assessment on seniors when the class of 2013 graduates because that class is the first to have completed the sophomore WI requirement. We also need to address the problem of biased readers—the faculty group who read papers in 2010 knew they were reading senior papers and probably had high expectations.

One of the assignments we included came from a creative writing course, so perhaps the “engagement” numbers might have been slightly skewed. These students are probably more invested in their writing because they the process seriously and have already completed at least one other creative writing course as a pre-requisite. Really fun reading them, however!