What’s Up with Writing at Smith?

Teaching Arts Lunch
April 14, 2017
Julio Alves
Alice Hearst
Minh Ly
Goals for today

1. Briefly review our most recent writing assessments (rationale, methodology, results).

2. Review recent results of faculty satisfaction with the writing of seniors in their own classes.

3. Review recent results from the Cycles survey about what graduating seniors say helped improve their writing.

4. Fill you in on the main takeaways from the SGA curriculum committee information-gathering meeting last Wednesday.

5. Talk about next steps.

6. Have a discussion about writing in the disciplines (in the major). This feedback will be very helpful to the writing committee as it discusses writing beyond the first year.
Why we did the 2012 writing assessment

• To discern how well the first-year class was writing.
• To identify the particular strengths and weaknesses of these first-year writers (these have turned out largely consistent in our assessments).
• To help create a culture of writing, and help build faculty consensus around what constitutes good writing.
• To help us think about faculty development.
• To help us develop protocols and curricula that support all writers, especially weak writers.
• To help us identify potential weak writers before they arrive on campus, so we can maximize the impact of orientation and liberal arts advising on course selection.
How we did writing assessment

• After a norming exercise, faculty read papers at their leisure and assessed them based on the rubric on your table.
• Papers assessed as Needs Work and Exemplary automatically got a second reading.
• Some (most) of the Pass papers got a second reading as well for reliability.
• Of course, there were disagreements, which were negotiated before the assessment ended.
### Departmental Learning Goals: summary by skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Outcome</th>
<th>Number of mentions</th>
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<th>Number of mentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Foreign Language</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Engage Scholarly Community</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Thinking</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Community Participation</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read Closely</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Intersectionality</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Studies</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand History</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Quantitative Skills</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Knowledge</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Experimental Design</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oral Communication</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Lifelong Learning</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inter/Multi-disciplinarity</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Artistic Expression</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real-World Applications</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use Evidence</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Technical Skills</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>3</td>
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2016 writing assessment

• A preliminary investigation about writing progression
• An exciting opportunity to build upon data from the 2012 study (same first years - seniors)

• 1st attempt -- let’s try to make it easy
  – Sampled faculty who taught courses with student participants from 2012 who are now seniors
  – Asked them to assess any piece of writing from that student in that course using the same writing rubric from 2012.
  – 71 papers (58 seniors) were assessed

• Did I say PRELIMINARY?
Writing Assessment 2015-2016:
Summary of Senior Scores
Preliminary Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Exemplary</th>
<th>Pass</th>
<th>Needs Work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thesis Statement</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Command of English</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complexity Of Thought</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paragraph Development</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = 58

Exemplary: This paper exceeds expectations for a writer at this point in her career
Pass: This paper meets expectations for a writer at this point in her career
Needs Work: This paper does not meet expectations for a writer at this point in her career
Writing Assessment 2015-16:
Overall Senior Score by Division of Instructor
*Preliminary Results*

- **Humanities**:
  - Exemplary: 59%
  - Adequate: 37%

- **Social Science and History**:
  - Exemplary: 63%
  - Adequate: 38%

- **Natural Science**:
  - Exemplary: 77%
  - Adequate: 23%
  - Needs Work: 17%

- **Interdisciplinary**:
  - Exemplary: 83%
Writing Assessment 2012-2013 and 2015-2016
Overall Scores
Preliminary Results

First Year Overall Score

- Exemplary: This paper exceeds expectations for a writer at this point in her college career
- Adequate: This paper meets expectations for a writer at this point in her college career
- Needs Work: This paper does not meet expectations for a writer at this point in her college career

Senior Overall Score

- Exemplary: 66%
- Adequate: 29%
- Needs Work: 5%

n = 58
How confident are you in your writing ability?

First Years (n = 159)
- Not at all confident: 5%
- Somewhat confident: 36%
- Generally confident: 45%
- Very confident: 13%

Seniors (n = 125)
- Not at all confident: 2%
- Somewhat confident: 17%
- Generally confident: 50%
- Very confident: 32%

Source: Cycles Survey 2016
Writing Assessment 2015-2016:
Student Comments on Writing Improvement

Source: Cycles Survey 2016

*In *Other* Students reported that other programs outside Smith College, Personal Drive, SURF, Peers, and Writing in a different language contributed to their improvement in writing.
Student Feedback on Writing Instruction

• More standardization of the writing emphasis in WI courses (e.g. the number and length of assignments, the number of pages, the writing process).
• More detailed feedback on drafts from professors, both in writing and in individualized conferences (“face time”). Peer review is useful but not enough. Students suggested cutting down on the content in WI courses and using drafts to build skills.
• More writing courses in the major or the divisions, and more instructional scaffolding for writing longer papers and theses (10-30+ pages).
• Identify professors who teach writing well and have these professors train their colleagues.
• Either narrow or widen the gap between FYSs and WI. In other words, standardize WIs or decouple WI from FYS; have FYSs be about community building.
Next Steps

Before and After: An Assessment of Students’ Papers from Their First and Senior Years

Monday, May 15, 10-4 & Tuesday, May 16, 8:45-12:30

Do students improve as writers between the first and senior years? Join the writing committee, friends, and allies for a reading of papers written by the same students in their first and senior years. We’ll read and discuss first-year papers from WI courses and senior papers from across the curriculum for a day and a half. This is not grading--it's expeditious, holistic assessment followed by discussion. Readers read at their own pace. All disciplines welcome.

Stipend: $400
Discussion

1. Do these findings surprise you or reflect your experience?

1. What do you think about the state of the teaching of writing at Smith? (What are we doing well? What could we do better or differently?)

1. Should writing in the discipline be addressed at the departmental, divisional, or institutional level?

1. How can the writing committee help?
May 11, Daniel Anderson (UNC), “Low Threshold, High Payoff: Promoting Engagement in the Classroom through Digital Writing”

May 15-16, First-Year/Senior Writing Assessment

May 17, Van Hillard (Davidson)

Fall 2017, Launching of a teaching circle on writing