

**2011-2012 GENERAL EDUCATION ASSESSMENT OF WRITTEN COMMUNICATION: REPORT ON SENIOR WRITING
PORTFOLIO PILOT ASSESSMENT, 14-15 JUNE 2012**

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I. The SWP Assessment: Overview, Contexts, Data Collection, Limitations

Overview. What can we learn about student writing from our best graduating seniors? This question became central to Westmont's pilot assessment of senior writing portfolios (SWPs) in June 2012. Although we acknowledge the need to learn from students other than those at the top of the Class of 2012 (and did so learn via multiple measures), the results of our pilot SWP study contribute to a valuable, emerging map of Westmont's Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program. In short, our assessment findings point to the need to balance instruction in polished style (including format and citation methods appropriate to discipline) with increased emphasis on higher-order thinking, sensitivity to audience and purpose (rhetorical awareness and mobility), and the craft of revision as part of a robust writing process. Although these findings are not surprising in the context of similar goals in a number of WAC programs nationally, they may surprise some teaching faculty and administrators who (understandably) notice weaknesses in some students' stylistic performances. In addition, these findings have consequences for the current structure of our WAC program, for faculty instruction practices, and for support/development resources for both students and faculty. At the end of this report, I offer high-priority recommendations for Westmont's WAC program.

Contexts. In the 2011-2012 academic year, Westmont entered a six-year assessment cycle for General Education; this past year, GE assessment focused on Written Communication. (Although we had planned to measure Oral Communication in the same year, that area of the GE was deemed "unassessable" by Dean Nazarenko in 2011-2012 due to the low number of Speech-Intensive courses available to students.) In assessing Written Communication, our primary goal was to learn how well our students were meeting the relevant SLO for General Education: "Students will communicate in written form for a variety of purposes and audiences across the curriculum." Although student performance varies, each student's *experience* of such "variety" is formalized by completion of at least two Writing-

/Speech-Intensive courses, one from inside and one from outside his/her major.¹ Due to the few approved Speech-Intensive courses, students almost always fulfill the WSI GE requirement with Writing-Intensive courses.

In accordance with best practices in WAC program assessment, we used multiple measures to assess our program in relation to the relevant SLO. Initially, we focused on formative assessment, seeking to map the existing shape of the WAC curriculum before deciding on the methods of data collection for summative assessment, including direct assessment of student writing (completed in June 2012 in the SWP pilot assessment). In the absence of a Writing Program Administrator (WPA) or WAC Coordinator, formative assessment took considerable time and included review of approved Writing-Intensive (WI) course syllabi and course caps, analysis of writing center data, and a survey of student and faculty experiences of WI courses using the Consortium for the Study of Writing (CSWC) questions (used nationally in partnership with the National Study of Student Engagement). Also, prior to the June 2012 workshop in which senior writing portfolios were rated by a team of Westmont faculty from all three divisions, professional development activities included two faculty WAC workshops on “Responding to Student Writing” (Fall 2011) and “Designing Assignments and Supporting the Writing Process” (Spring 2012), co-led by Cheri Larsen Hoeckley and Sarah Skripsky of the English department. See the Appendices and the Writing/Speech-Intensive Faculty Site² (enrollment key: “wacfac.key”) for additional information on the structure and findings of these assessment activities.

Data Collection and Limitations. After engaging in formative and indirect assessment efforts, we initiated the SWP pilot assessment for direct, summative assessment in Spring 2012. All eligible students (seniors graduating in December or May of 2012) were contacted via e-mail with SWP participation guidelines, which included the submission of 2-4 writing samples (totaling 10-40 pp.) from courses in at least two different disciplines plus a writer’s memo making a case for how the portfolio demonstrated the ability to “communicate in written form for a variety of purposes and audiences across the curriculum” (a rephrasing of the GE SLO for Written Communication).

For multiple reasons, the SWP assessment was limited to a pilot project only, and its results are suggestive rather than weighty. Reasons for the assessment’s limitations include a lack of vertical sequencing in the WAC program³, the lack of a

¹ Depending on placement, that student may first (ideally) complete the Writing for the Liberal Arts GE requirement, most commonly fulfilled by taking ENG 002 (Composition). In some cases, this course also fulfills the requirement for a WSI course outside the major.

² <https://eureka.westmont.edu/course/view.php?id=11036>

³ Currently, Westmont lacks vertical sequencing in writing instruction (with ENG 002 sometimes being delayed until the junior or senior year of a student’s education). There is no existing requirement for students whose placement results require them to take ENG 002 to do so early in their

portfolio requirement at any level of WAC education⁴, and limited resources to provide incentives for voluntary student participation in a senior portfolio assessment.⁵ Despite these limitations, the SWP assessment added to our knowledge of the WAC program. Moreover, through a rubric norming session plus portfolio reading, rating, and discussion, faculty engaged in a professional development opportunity relevant to all who teach and support WI courses. Other institutions who use portfolio assessments (to measure writing or even multiple outcomes) have also noted the dual benefit of such activities: assessing student writing while fostering faculty development.

Due in part to the aforementioned limitations on the SWP assessment, we collected a small data set of portfolios from 7.3% of our graduating seniors of 2012 (22 portfolios from 301 eligible seniors). Upon reviewing the names of our voluntary participants, it became obvious that the data set was skewed in an interesting way: many were “top seniors” who had received honors at our spring awards and commencement ceremonies. (In fact, the average G.P.A. of our participants was 3.47 while the average G.P.A. of the class of 2012 was 3.26.) Although our small data set was rather disappointing and admittedly unrepresentative of the average Westmont student, we wondered what could be gained from close analysis of the writing portfolios of some of our best students. What could their portfolios teach us about how our most successful students navigate our WAC program? How would their portfolio memos narrate and make meaning of those experiences? Did they share any interesting strengths or weaknesses—in keeping with *or* despite their overall academic excellence? What suggestions and challenges might they offer to us as faculty and administrators?

II. Tools and Methods for Assessing SWPs (Rubric with Five Criteria)

education (nor as a prerequisite for upper-division Writing-Intensive courses); in addition, according to Spring 2011 CLA results, approximately half of our students fulfill their WLA requirement without taking ENG 002. Thus, we opted to do direct assessment of student writing at the senior level in order to learn about how well students were meeting both GE and Institutional SLOs for Written Communication (SLOs which are very similar) by the time of graduation. By the end of our current GE assessment cycle (2011-2017), if we can achieve better course sequencing in our WAC program, we can gather more data about student learning at the GE level. For now, both the GE and institutional learning outcomes for Written Communication were measured by the SWP assessment as well as by indirect assessments, most notably the CSWC survey.

⁴ While approval for a pilot assessment of senior portfolios was granted by the Program Review and General Education Committees in Spring 2012 (after referral of the proposal from the provost), the length of the approval process prohibited a class-wide requirement for the class of 2012.

⁵ Dean Nazarenko approved monetary incentives for student participation in the SWP study, but these incentives were understandably limited to the reach of her budget. Incentives included three \$100 prizes for excellence (one per academic division) and six \$20 prizes for participation (randomly selected).

In addition to Dean Nazarenko, a group of 11 faculty from all three academic divisions spent two days assessing the SWPs. (See Appendix A, SWP Faculty Reading Assignments.)

On the first day, we normed the SWP rubric (see Appendix B) in order to achieve a reasonable degree of agreement on expectations for each of the rubric's five criteria. I designed the first two criteria (focused on rhetorical mobility and sensitivity) to assess our GE SLO in relation to a portfolio assessment which—by definition—assesses multiple writing samples. The last three criteria are restatements of the standard grading criteria for Writing-Intensive courses (see Certification Criteria for Writing-Intensive Courses, approved 4/19/2011). In addition to increasing inter-rater reliability for the SWP session, the norming session increased faculty sensitivity to these three standard grading criteria, which together communicate value for a balance of content/message, form/organization, and style in student writing.

On the second day, faculty submitted SWP ratings. Each portfolio was rated at least twice by faculty members with expertise appropriate to the submitted writing samples. Whenever an acceptable degree of disagreement (i.e., a degree of one on a five-point scale for each criterion) was exceeded by the first two raters, a portfolio was scored a third time to achieve sufficient inter-rater reliability.

III. SWP Assessment Results and (Limited) Interpretation

SWP assessment results are summarized in Appendix C, the SWP Assessment Table. After combining scores and calculating averages on day two of the workshop, it became clear that the sample suggested that our best graduates are strongest in the criterion of style (averaging a score 4.26 on a scale of 5) and somewhat weaker in the criteria of rhetorical sensitivity and mobility (averaging scores of 3.86 and 3.70, respectively).

These results, though limited, resonate with findings from indirect assessments (i.e., CSWC results and recent writing center data) which suggest that both faculty and students perceive style to be of significant importance in writing performance. In contrast, the higher-order thinking required for rhetorical sensitivity and mobility (i.e., writing for “a variety of purposes and audiences” in keeping with the GE SLO) is a relative weakness in student performance, even among our most impressive graduates. Faculty may, understandably, privilege style in instruction and response practices since style is an area in which it is possible to provide quick, decisive critique. However, these assessment results suggest that, like many institutions with WAC programs, Westmont challenge in General Education in Written Communication is to produce writers who are not only adept stylists but who are also keen, flexible thinkers and communicators. For

students to succeed in achieving our GE SLO for writing (and to be prepared for writing beyond Westmont), such instruction in rhetorical sensitivity and mobility should be introduced in ENG 002 and should be supported and developed in additional Writing-Intensive courses.

IV. High-Priority Recommendations for WAC Program Development (drawing on multiple data sets, including the CSWC and SWP Assessment Results in the Appendices)

When well-supported and sustainably run, WAC programs like Westmont's are a rich, engaging component of General Education and liberal arts learning. While our WAC program is certainly functional, our 2011 CSWC results suggest that we are below national norms in terms of achieving the best practices imbedded in the survey questions. In addition, our SWP results reinforce the impression that we are best at teaching style and that this emphasis may not be serving students' rhetorical development as well as it should. Many programmatic improvements could be made, but the following are my high-priority recommendations:

- (1) **Vertical Sequencing.** Require completion of ENG 002 or acceptable Writing for the Liberal Arts equivalent for students to achieve junior status (similar to major declaration requirement). Also, we would be wise to review ENG 002 placement methods, to consider developing interdisciplinary first-year seminars as another WLA option, and to develop more lower-division WI (and/or SI) courses to benefit both majors and non-majors. Such program development may require faculty incentives, e.g., more curriculum development grants similar to the Interdisciplinary Curriculum Grant.
- (2) **Writing-Intensive Course Support.** While it would be ideal to reduce all of our Writing-Intensive course caps to be comparable with national norms (15-20), such broad-based reduction is currently cost-prohibitive as well as difficult to manage for some departments in which the senior seminar fulfills the WI course in the major (often fulfilling the Integrating the Major Discipline requirement as well). In the latter case, creating two smaller sections for a senior seminar in order to lower WI course caps would detract from the seniors' cohort experience. However, providing alternative support for faculty via teaching assistants and/or Writing Fellows would enhance WI course quality and improve the experience of both faculty and students.

- (3) **WAC Resources for Students and Faculty.** Increase professional development resources such as WAC workshops and materials. We have made a good start this year by offering three WAC workshops, developing the WSI Faculty Site, and giving away departmental reference copies of John Bean's *Engaging Ideas* ("the WAC Bible"), but only a limited number of faculty have taken advantage of these resources. Consider inviting an outside expert (e.g., Chris Anson of NCSU or John Bean of Seattle University) to offer a workshop to increase faculty understanding of best practices in WAC program (e.g., to revise their assignments and response practices); Anson has already been contacted provisionally and is available for limited engagements in the upcoming academic year. Consider, also, hiring/appointing a faculty WAC Coordinator who could work in partnership with both students and faculty to foster student success, e.g.: to form a WAC faculty council, to increase the reach and effectiveness of the writing center by coordinating a Writing Fellows program attentive to Writing in the Disciplines, and even (with institutional funding and permission) to support a sustained portfolio assessment as a requirement for seniors and/or underclassmen who complete the Writing for the Liberal Arts requirement. (Carleton College offers an excellent model of a sophomore portfolio assessment.)

V. Appendices

- **Appendix A: SWP Faculty Reading Assignments**
http://www.westmont.edu/_offices/institutional_portfolio/program_review/documents/appendix-a.pdf
- **Appendix B: SWP Rubric**
http://www.westmont.edu/_offices/institutional_portfolio/program_review/documents/appendix-b.pdf
- **Appendix C: SWP Assessment Table**
http://www.westmont.edu/_offices/institutional_portfolio/program_review/documents/appendix-c.pdf
- **Appendix D: SWP Prompt for Students**
http://www.westmont.edu/_offices/institutional_portfolio/program_review/documents/appendix-d.pdf
- **Appendix E: 2011 CSWC Survey Results (see especially strong results for 2G)**
http://www.westmont.edu/_offices/institutional_portfolio/program_review/documents/appendix-e.pdf
- **Appendix F: Writing Center Data at a Glance (see especially Tutorial Tasks data: stylistic emphasis in the majority of tutorials)**
http://www.westmont.edu/_offices/institutional_portfolio/program_review/documents/appendix-f.pdf