Assessment Committee Paper #5, Spring 2013

Writers of Concern

General Summary:
As this subcommittee understood our charge for 2012-13, we were to focus on a reporting system for identifying writers of concern in the FYP/FYS, continuing the work that had been started in 2011-12. We spent our time developing a user-friendly reporting format that would allow us to identify trends in student writing and to track individual students for the purpose of remediation. In 2011-12, the reporting system used to identify first-year writers of concern had been very open-ended: we asked faculty to identify students and give us details about their concerns with the students' writing, using the format with which they felt most comfortable. We made this choice because we thought it would get better compliance from faculty; however, interpreting their responses turned out to be much more difficult than we expected.

Using the recurrent writing problems identified by the FYP faculty in 2011-12, we created an online reporting form that focused on these issues. While this form does not address every writing issue, we recommend remaining with the new reporting system with its limited focus for the next few years. This will help us to track the data over several years, especially in order to get useful information regarding a student's progression from the FYP/FYS, through the general education requirements, and then through the major[s] to graduation.

Though we focused heavily on FYP/FYS this year, the next step would be to take this assessment to departments campus-wide. We have already begun this process. In the fall as the reporting tool was developed, we worked closely with the Associate Dean for Academic Advising Programs, Evelyn Jennings, and she has begun using it to gather information from faculty who assign the current U/W designation. Though she had less compliance from the faculty at large than we had from the FYP/FYS faculty [73% versus 100%], we are hoping this form of reporting will become part of the faculty culture in the future. There is also a document currently circulating to various committees to change the U/W designation in ways that we hope will improve our ability to identify students in need of supplemental writing assistance. The FYP Council has endorsed the draft document, and the Academic Advising Committee has recently recommended some minor changes before the report goes on to Faculty Council. Though that document is not the direct purview of our subcommittee, we have made some contributions to that endeavor.

Our data will be included in this report through a series of appendices that include several documents created for other venues:
- First Year Program: History of Assessment [updated spring 2013];
- Comparative data from fall and spring 2011-12 for Winter Institute presentation;
- Fall 2012 data cover sheet for FYP writing assessment results; and
- Online reporting format [first used for fall of 2012].

Excerpt from First Year Program: History of Assessment [updated spring 2013]

Current and future FYP/FYS Assessment:
Beginning in the fall of 2011, instead of requesting random portfolios for review, the FYP switched once again to a focus on individual writers of concern. A request was sent to all faculty in the program, asking them to identify any writers of concern by name, and to give a brief rationale for the concern. We did not limit the number of names a faculty member could submit, nor did we try to standardize a rubric for reporting, in hopes of getting more active participation on the part of the faculty. In that process, 25 faculty members identified 68 first-year writers of concern; 11 faculty reported that they had no writers of concern, and two faculty members didn't report at all, though we are presuming that they most likely had no writers of concern to report. The biggest challenge in analyzing this information was to organize the written rationales into useful categories for assessment. Using a rubric borrowed from Grinnell and personal interpretation of faculty comments, the Associate Dean of the First Year and the WORD Studio Director came up with several key categories of concern in regards to first-year writing. We also noted which students had ESL challenges, which students were Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP) students, which students were working with our Office of Academic Services for Students with Special Needs, and which were either suspended or on probation in the semester after being identified as writers of concern. While the majority of HEOP and international students are not of concern, we know, however, that this is a potential weakness when they are admitted. We examined these subcategories of students to make sure also that we have the right student support systems set up. This assessment data is currently on file in the FYP program office. The Director of the WORD Studio sent notices to all students identified as having writing challenges, offering her assistance to anyone who wished it. We also notified the two FYS instructors who had a larger than average number of writers of concern in their FYS classes in Spring 2012, offering additional support, if needed.

In the spring semester of 2012, we requested specific information from FYS faculty on the students identified in the fall, and we offered program faculty the opportunity to report other writers of concern that had not been identified in the fall semester. This resulted in: 34 students being identified in both semesters; 30 students identified in the fall but not in the spring; and 27 students newly identified in the spring as writers of concern. We learned in that first year that we needed a more focused rubric for the assessment and reporting of writers of concern, a more accurate way to track our data over time, and a sample paper from each identified student. We also spent some time at the annual FYP/FYS faculty development retreat at Canaras in early June 2012 norming our assessments of first-year writers. This continues a practice of writing assessment that has occurred quite regularly at Canaras for the past several years.

Our next step in the fall of 2012 was to create an online reporting form that utilized what we had learned the previous year about the most prevalent concerns/challenges for first-year writers. We also worked with the Associate Dean for Advising Programs to connect the FYP/FYS writing assessment with the university's U/W system.

In the fall of 2012, using the new tool, 32 faculty members identified 59 writers of concern; 8 faculty reported that they had no writers of FYP concern, and we had 100% compliance from the on-campus program faculty with the new tool, though we did not get a report from the faculty member teaching the FYP in London. This new reporting system explicitly removed the issue of student motivation, which several faculty had referenced in their open-ended responses. We removed the issue of student effort from the new reporting system because we wanted faculty to focus on what their students had actually produced rather than their perception of what students might have produced if only they had worked harder. This change may account for the fact that, even as more faculty members participated in the assessment of student writing, they identified a smaller number of writers of concern.

Once again, we noted which students had ESL challenges, which students were HEOP students, which students were working with our Office of Academic Services for Students with Special Needs, and which were either suspended or on probation in the semester after being identified as writers of concern. This data is currently on file in the FYP program office. The Director of the WORD Studio again sent notices to all students identified by their fall faculty as having writing challenges, offering her assistance to anyone who wished it. We also notified the FYS instructors who had a larger than average number of writers of concern in their FYSs, also offering support, if needed.

Additionally, we presented a session at the Winter Institute in January 2012 that focused on first-year writing and introduced faculty to the new reporting tool. A significant portion of that session was dedicated to norming of assessment responses for two first-year papers. Attendance was not limited to FYP/FYS faculty (though many were present) because we saw a need for campus-wide norming activities; our new curriculum places writing instruction squarely within the purview of departments, after students have declared their majors in their sophomore year.

It is our goal to continue using this tool for identifying writers of concern for as long as it proves effective. Though we asked in the spring for specific information about students identified in the fall of 2011, we believe that in the future the reporting tool itself will give us enough information without having to use an additional layer of reporting or the collecting of writing samples for students that faculty feel are no longer writers of concern by the end of the spring FYS semester. At some point when we feel enough data has been gathered and the identification of and development of support systems for students who need additional writing assistance is running smoothly, we will more than likely return to some other form of direct assessment of student writing that does not focus on only the students who need more help with their writing.

Finally, it is quite clear in this report that the FYP/FYS assessment projects in the past decade and more have focused entirely on student writing. Oral communication skills goals are equally important in the pedagogy of the FYP/FYS, so it will be important to start looking soon for effective ways to assess oral communication competency within the program.

Students Identified as "Writers of Concern" by FYP/FYS Faculty Members
Fall of 2011:
- 25 FYP faculty members identified 68 students as "writers of concern"
- 11 FYP faculty members reported having no "writers of concern"
- 2 FYP faculty members did not respond to the request to identify "writers of concern"

Spring *of 2012:*
- 25 FYS faculty members identified 61 students as "writers of concern"
- 11 FYS faculty members reported having no "writers of concern"
- 2 FYS faculty members did not respond to the request to identify "writers of concern"

Table 1. Recurrent Issues Associated with "Writers of Concern"

Writing Issues	Fall 2011 # students	Fall 2011 In %	Spring 2012 # students	Spring 2012 In %
Central Claim (thesis, controlling idea)	30	44.8%	30	49.2%
Maintains Unity (focus, staying "on task")	28	41.8%	31	50.8%
Weak Argument Issues (connection/focus)	45	67.2%	41	67.2%
Grammar (includes proofreading/editing issues)	35	52.2%	31	50.8%
Use of Information (includes citation/plagiarism issues)	13	19.4%	34	55.7%
Readability/ Voice (complexity/engagement)	17	25.4%	32	52.5%
Motivation (student engagement)	20	29.4%	14	23%

Number of students of concern:
Fall 2011: n=68 out of 650
Spr 2012: n=61 out of 634

Follow-Up Information

Of the 68 students identified as "writers of concern" by FYP instructors during the fall semester of 2011:
- 34 were also identified as "writers of concern" by their FYS instructors
- 30 were not identified as "writers of concern" by their FYS instructors; (during the spring semester, 4 of these 30 students were writing in their native languages [French & Spanish])
- 3 students from fall - no report was submitted by FYS faculty [or report went astray] & one student from fall was suspended and not on campus during spring of 2012
- 27 students not identified as "writers of concern" by their FYP instructors were identified as "writers of concern" by their FYS instructors (2 of these students had the same instructor for their FYS; 24 had a different instructor; one student was a January entrant)

[prepared for Winter Institute, January 15, 2013]