

University Writing Committee Final Report 2014-15
May 21, 2015
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Attendance Summary: The University Writing Committee (UWC) met 10 times – August 28, September 18, October 9, November 6, December 11, January 15, February 5, March 5, April 2 and April 30. See attendance table attached.

Summary of Activities: The University Writing Committee (UWC) is charged with regularly reviewing the writing plans and their implementation to identify patterns and make recommendations for the on-going improvement of writing and writing instruction. We continue to be impressed that all undergraduate programs have made improving their students' writing and their teaching of writing a priority. We are also pleased that the Committee functions well and that members of the UWC are sincerely interested in strengthening the culture of writing at Auburn. All department writing plans are on a three-year reporting rotation and in 2014-15 the UWC was scheduled to review the reports from 25 programs. Twenty-four programs submitted their reports with one program, Biomedical Sciences, asking for a delay to be reviewed in 2015-16. In addition, five programs were reviewed that had asked for a delay from 2013-14 (Chemistry & Biochemistry, Foreign Language Education, Political Science, Health Service Administration, Public Administration); three programs (Marketing, Aviation Management & Flight Plan Management, and Accountancy) completed a planned major revision of their writing plan because of changes in their curriculum or faculty. Two departments that submitted a review report this year (Psychology and Forestry) identified developing a new writing plan as a priority and will submit revised plans for approval in 2015-16. Of the three programs with new undergraduate majors (Business Analytics, Natural Resources Management, and Global Studies), only Global Studies submitted a writing plan which the UWC approved. We have been in contact with the others to help the faculty in those programs develop an appropriate writing plan and are working with the Curriculum Committee to include developing a writing plan as part of the approval process for new majors as was intended originally. In addition, we have now confirmed with the College of Business that the Business Administration major is being phased out and so no writing plan will be developed for that major.

In addition to reviewing the reports, the UWC has continued to analyze the reports as we did in past years to identify common strengths and weaknesses of departmental writing plans with the goal of focusing the committee's work and that of the Office of University Writing to better support departmental efforts to improve writing. Based on the analysis of the information submitted by departments this year, the UWC concludes that:

- All reviewed programs have successfully begun implementation of their writing plans.
- The five principles are being maintained in all departments, though the UWC continues to notice that feedback and opportunities for revision are inconsistently implemented.
- As was noted last year, those departments that seem to be making the most progress in implementing the writing initiative share several common features. The UWC continues to note that strong plans include
 - ✓ the opportunity to write for more than one audience, especially in assignments that provide authentic professional writing
 - ✓ the use of well-designed rubrics which are employed as both learning and grading tools
 - ✓ informed use of student peer review
 - ✓ more opportunities for revision and revisions of different kinds (i.e., altering the genre or audience and not just revising to make sentence-level corrections)
- Many programs are continuing to revise their strategies for assessment, but assessment practices are inconsistent across the university; assessment is often treated as a bureaucratic requirement rather than a useful process that informs curricular or pedagogical decisions, is too often handled by a single member of the department, and is often so elaborately executed or is so disconnected from real questions faculty might have about student performance that it is difficult to sustain. We continue to see many programs assessing their writing plans but not assessing actual student writing. We also continue to see programs that assess student writing in general rather than identifying specific aspects of writing that need to be improved. While some departments are

using industry advisors or internship supervisors in their assessment processes, too often that feedback is not guided by a clear rubric and is not systematic enough to inform faculty decisions.

- Faculty engagement in the development, implementation, and assessment of writing plans is also uneven. While many reports describe efforts to involve new faculty in the writing plans, structures that maintain consistency in writing assignments and assessment across sections of given courses, and productive conversations among faculty about writing and teaching writing, too many programs have not established a culture of shared responsibility for writing improvement. Programs that see writing as a central part of their courses do not always make visible to those outside the program the structures they have in place to ensure continuity, are more likely to treat writing as part of the individual faculty member's responsibility, and often assume that assessment is adequately conducted in the grading process.
- In following up with programs where we had questions and in reading the review reports themselves the UWC became increasingly concerned that faculty and programs were doing more than they represented in the reports. In short, the reporting process does not seem to be as useful or productive an activity for programs as we intended. In addition, the Committee has become increasingly concerned that too much of our time is being spent monitoring implementation rather than supporting faculty and programs who are trying to improve the communication skills of Auburn students or use writing activities to deepen student learning and critical thinking.

Plans for 2015-16: The major goal for the coming year will be to rethink the review process. We have begun that work by considering alternative strategies, such as surveys, focus groups, or other mechanisms to gain information about implementation of writing across the university. We've also considered developing a rubric to identify strong practices and steps programs might take to move from minimal implementation to a more integrated approach. Though we have drafts of both a survey and a rubric, we realized that the entire process needs to be thought through more carefully so that we don't create a burdensome process that does not promote improved student writing or help faculty. We have sent feedback to the individual programs that were reviewed this year and a letter to the programs scheduled for review next year alerting them of the delay in the next review cycle. The Office of University Writing continues to develop programs, workshops, and on-line resource materials to support both students and faculty, including WriteBites on-line and Conversations in Celebration of Teaching (scheduled for January 29, 2016) both of which showcase exemplary assignments and strategies for including writing in the major. The UWC feels confident that it is meeting its charge in making recommendations to the Office of University Writing and working closely with the Director even if it takes us a full year to revamp the review process. We request that an update on the writing initiative be presented to University Senate sometime in late Spring 2016.