

Assessment of Competence in Written Communication ILO

In 2011-2012, Westmont College conducted a limited assessment of student learning in relation to the Competence in Written Communication outcome. The primary goal was to learn how well our students were meeting the relevant institutional learning outcome (ILO) that reads, *Graduates of Westmont College will write effectively in various contexts*, as well as the concurrent General Education SLO, *Students will communicate in written form for a variety of purposes and audiences across the curriculum*.

Indirect Assessment

Indirect methods of written communication assessment included the writing-intensive course syllabi review conducted in 2010-2011 by the G.E. Committee; analysis of writing center data; and a survey of student and faculty experiences of writing-intensive 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 summer 2012 assessment session, 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 the Lead Assessment Specialist and an English faculty member.

Direct Assessment

Methods and Tools

Direct assessment of student writing was completed in summer 2012. In spring 2012, writing sample portfolios were collected from 7.3% of graduating seniors. Portfolio participation guidelines included the submission of 2-4 writing samples (totaling 10-40 pages) from courses in at least two different disciplines and 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. All eligible students (seniors graduating in December or May of 2012) were contacted via e-mail with student writing, but student submissions were voluntarily. As a result, it became apparent the sample was skewed. The average GPA of the sample was 3.47 while the average GPA of the graduating class was 3.26. Although the sample size was unrepresentative of the senior class, the review continued in order to determine what could be learned from analyzing the writing portfolios of the group.

Results

All student portfolios were assessed by the group of faculty who utilized the rubric designed by the Lead Assessment Specialist for Written Communication. According to the assessment results, students received the highest scores for writing style (average of 4.26 on a 5-pt scale). Student’s lowest scores were for higher-order thinking skills of rhetorical sensitivity and rhetorical mobility (writing for a variety of purposes and audiences).

Westmont Senior Writing Portfolios		
		Criteria Rating Averages
1A.	Rhetorical Sensitivity	3.86
1B.	Rhetorical Mobility	3.70
2.	Content / Message	4.13
3.	Form / Organization	4.10
4.	Style	4.26

After combining scores and calculating averages, 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 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 Westmont’s challenge 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 ILO /GE SLO for writing, such instruction in rhetorical sensitivity and mobility should be introduced in ENG 002 and should be supported and developed in additional writing-intensive courses.

Recommendations for improvement

1. **Vertical Sequencing.** Require completion of ENG 002 or acceptable Writing for the Liberal Arts equivalent for students to achieve junior status. Consider developing an interdisciplinary first-year seminar as another writing for the Liberal Arts option, and to develop more lower-division writing-intensive courses to benefit both majors and non-majors.
2. **Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Resources for Students and Faculty.** Increase professional development resources such as WAC workshops and materials. The college has made a good start by offering three WAC workshops, developing the Writing/Speech-Intensive Faculty Site, and giving away departmental reference copies of John Bean’s *Engaging Ideas*, but only a limited number of faculty have taken advantage of these resources.
3. **Restructure the GE curriculum.** Initiate an evolutionary GE curriculum change that will be more beneficial to student learning rather than a series of micro-steps aimed at strengthening student-writing skills. Specifically, introduce the first-year seminar, which might embed components of interdisciplinarity, critical thinking, and written communication for the Liberal Arts.
4. **Raise the SAT/ACT score bar for fulfilling the Writing for the Liberal Arts Requirement.** Raise the SAT/ACT score bar from 580/28 to 650/30 scores. Since 58% of student population are scored at 580 on SAT but 25% of students are scored at 650, three additional sections of ENG 002 will need to be offered every academic year.
5. **Conversion of selected writing-intensive courses into speech-intensive courses.** Reduce the number of writing-intensive courses. Currently, the college has 107 such courses while in practical terms it may need and can adequately support as few as 20-25 courses. Some of the writing-intensive courses can be modified in order to satisfy the speech-intensive requirement of General Education. Presently, only three GE courses are certified as speech-intensive. As a result, most Westmont students fulfill the writing/speech-intensive GE requirement with writing-intensive courses. It is necessary to

reconsider our curricular offerings in both areas or redesign this part of the G.E. curriculum.

6. **Critical Thinking Resources for Faculty.** As both the pilot project assessment data and the GE Faculty Survey administered in April 2014 suggest, Westmont needs to support student learning and progress in higher order thinking skills and critical habits of mind in order to close the loop for the Written Communication assessment and enhance student learning towards the Critical Thinking outcome.

It was also noted that using small incentives for encouraging students to submit their writing portfolios has proven to be an ineffective method of data collection. The incentive looked insignificant for the amount of work required from students. In terms of data collection and analysis, it would be more effective to acquire an assessment management system and randomly select qualified seniors' works.

Closing-the-Loop-Activities

1. Westmont developed and piloted six sections of one-credit first-year seminar in Fall of 2014. Following this pilot project, the decision was made to continue offering first-year seminars in Fall 2015.
2. In 2012, the Academic Senate reviewed the proposal to raise the SAT/ACT score for fulfilling the Writing for the Liberal Arts requirement and declined it.
3. The G. E. Committee is currently working on separating the writing-intensive and speech-intensive categories and converting the latter into a broader Oral Communication institutional requirement.
4. In 2012 and 2013, seven faculty members, one librarian and one administrator attended a two-day workshop "The Performance Academy: CLA in the Classroom." The workshop provides a mechanism for faculty to facilitate students' learning and practice critical thinking in their own classrooms. The workshop participants conducted two in-house workshops for faculty in Spring 2014 and 2015. One of the workshop participants served as Lead Assessment Specialist on Critical Thinking assessment and three others were members of the Critical Thinking Assessment Team.
5. Additionally, the Department of English decided that for the next round of Written Communication assessment in 2017-2018, senior writing projects will be used for assessing writing across the curriculum since senior writing portfolios are not sufficiently available to be a part of sustainable, statistically relevant assessment. The Department of English is in process of choosing a measurement tool (rubric) for this assessment.
6. Finally, in 2014-2015, the college acquired and piloted the LiveText Assessment Management System for institutional and G.E. assessment.