

## **RECOMMENDATION TO THE FACULTY SENATE**

**From the University Writing Committee**

**Spring/ Fall 2014**

### **Executive Summary**

Writing is central to the work of higher education because it is a means for learning, a means for documenting and sharing knowledge learned, and a means to show application of that knowledge. NSSE data has found extensive writing to be a “high-impact practice” for student engagement and correlated with higher-order thinking and integrative learning. While most institutions we surveyed require at least six semester hours of writing instruction in their undergraduate curricula, the University of Northern Iowa requires only three. More disturbingly, assessments using the AAC&U LEAP rubric indicate that this single three-credit requirement cannot help students meet the end goal writing proficiencies expected of a four-year degree. This seems to support faculty survey data regarding the quality of student writing across campus (University Writing Committee) and faculty desire for additional writing instruction somewhere in the curriculum (LAC-RSC).

We therefore recommend the Faculty Senate create an exit requirement of at least two additional writing-intensive courses in addition to LAC Category 1A. These writing-intensive courses need to be taken over a student’s career at UNI. Faculty curricular committees should decide how to best implement these courses without adding to the overall number of credit hours within the LAC. For example, they can be hosted either within the LAC, the Department of Languages and Literatures, and/or within a student’s major/minor. We suggest the first-year writing course (or equivalent) be taken in a student’s first year. A second course should be required in students’ sophomore or first semester junior year. The third course should be in students’ second semester junior or senior year. We recommend the implementation of this proposal be done over time, starting with 1-2 majors and LAC courses as a pilot.

For full implementation of this proposal, a plan needs to be developed to oversee faculty development, student support, course proposals, and assessment of these courses. We recognize that we already have resources available to help in some of these areas, such as the Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning, the LACC, and the Academic Learning Center. We realize we will need to address challenges in order to keep class sizes appropriate, incentivize rather than mandate faculty participation, communicate value to students as well as faculty, assess and monitor efforts, ensure appropriate instruction, develop criteria for students who switch majors, and secure commitments to the resources necessary.

## INTRODUCTION/HISTORY

Writing has been called “central to the work of higher education” (Monroe, 2003). According to the National Survey of Student Engagement, writing is a “high-impact practice” for engaging students and concluded from their research that “when institutions provided students with extensive, intellectually challenging writing activities, the students engaged in more deep learning activities such as analysis, synthesis, integration of ideas from various sources, and grappled more with course ideas both in and out of the classroom. In turn, students whose faculty assigned projects with these same characteristics reported greater personal, social, practical, and academic learning and development” (NSSE 2008). Yet UNI has no intentional plan to actualize this. It is, at best, haphazard and piecemeal with no concerted effort to coordinate where in the curriculum writing occurs, how much, of what type, and train faculty who do assign writing to both craft those assignments in light of research and respond to those assignments in the most appropriate manner.

We found that a number of institutions of comparable size and mission offer excellent models for bringing UNI more in line with the current prevailing wisdom about the importance of writing to fulfill the mission of higher education. These institutions have university-level writing requirements (see Appendix A). The requirements are often distributed across the curriculum and/ or within majors. These programs are intentionally designed to support student learning, foster engagement, and enhance the overall educational quality and rigor of their curricula. Many of the institutions we examined designed their writing programs around the premise that writing is mastered by *doing* it, and that as students do it, they engage with content more deeply, internalize concepts more thoroughly, think more critically, and communicate more proficiently. These other institutions recognize what research on writing has shown for decades: learning to write takes time and intentional, coordinated practices can deepen learning not only of the mechanics of writing but of the content which is written about.

We also know our students are not where they need to be by the end of one writing requirement. The American Association of Colleges & Universities has developed a LEAP rubric (see Appendix B), to describe where most institutions of higher education think students should be by the end of the undergraduate curriculum. After one course, however, UNI students are not yet at that point. According to current assessments of students’ work in LAC Category 1A, students are primarily at the 1 - 2 level of the rubric at the end of the course (See Appendix B). This is an entirely appropriate outcome for the single, sixteen-week, three-credit introductory course. Further, it covers only the approximately 60% of students at UNI who earn credit for this requirement on our campus. A significant portion of students<sup>1</sup> earn this requirement through dual-credit enrollment agreements between their high school and community colleges. While the community colleges have dedicated, knowledgeable instructors, the fact remains that students cannot develop into the “capstone” descriptors of the AAU&C LEAP rubric without extensive, curriculum wide practice in a college or university context. The introductory requirement, as

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<sup>1</sup> In 2009, 24% of all incoming freshmen students had already earned LAC 1A credit. About half of students earning credit before entering UNI earned that credit in their junior year of high school.

campus data shows, provides students with a solid foundation for this later practice but cannot fulfill the outcomes alone.

The survey of faculty conducted by the University Writing Committee in 2011 found broad faculty interest in improving student writing skills. We could recycle these lines from our 2012 report to the Senate: “Main points revealed by the survey were 1) an intense interest in further development and support of teaching writing across all areas of UNI, 2) a high degree of reliance on assignments that display knowledge rather than those designed for writing instruction purposes, 3) teaching of writing that does not match LAC 1A outcomes, and 4) a decisive majority of faculty who perceive students deficient in most aspects of college writing.”

This survey’s findings are corroborated by the LAC-RSC recommendation based on university-wide survey. In a 2011 report, they stated:

In the 2010 survey, 53.1% (strongly) favored students taking these courses within the LAC, while 58.3% of faculty (strongly) favored the idea of requiring additional writing-intensive courses in the LAC or within a student’s major and/or minor. 48.6% of faculty (strongly) favored students taking at least two additional writing-intensive LAC courses, or be enrolled in a major that is certified to be writing-intensive. We like the idea of the writing-intensive major, and would encourage the development of a process whereby majors could be certified as such (see University of Wisconsin—LaCrosse “Writing-in-the-Major” Programs). Faculty development on teaching writing would be necessary in order for additional writing-intensive courses to be established.

This is a recommendation also endorsed by the LACC who has recommended to the Faculty Senate act on providing more writing instruction within the curriculum.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

**We propose the Faculty Senate create an exit requirement of at least two additional writing-intensive courses in addition to LAC Category 1A.** These courses would need to be developed in consultation with the appropriate faculty curricular committees. *NO additional credit hours should be added to the LAC or to students’ majors.* Rather, the goal would be to use, as appropriate, existing courses or credits to deliver writing instruction. For example, the Department of Languages & Literatures department could offer an already existing course, English 2015: The Craft of Academic Writing, as a potential option for a sophomore level or intermediate level writing course. Departments also could, in consultation with the University Writing Committee and appropriate faculty governance, recommend their own. Such recommendations would need to be guided by specific, clear criteria and be grounded in the available literature on teaching college-level composition.

**These writing-intensive courses need to be taken over a student’s career at UNI.** We suggest the first-year writing course (or equivalent) be taken in a student’s first year. Students should then take a second course their sophomore or first semester junior year. The third course should be in their second semester junior or senior year, perhaps integrated with their Capstone experience. The goal is for students to take writing courses in different years of their academic career. At least one of the additional writing-intensive courses would need to be done at UNI (for transfer students).

**This exit requirement could be fulfilled in many different ways.**

- 1. Majors could be certified as writing-intensive, and participating in such a major would meet this requirement.**
- 2. A student could take all of these additional requirements as part of the already existing LAC. For example, some sections of LAC Category 3 and Capstone could be labeled as writing-intensive.**
- 3. A student could take two additional writing-in-their-discipline courses from their major, but the major does not have to be certified as writing-intensive.**
- 4. A student could take a “writing in the disciplines” course and/or one additional writing course from the L&L department.**
- 5. Students who write an undergraduate thesis as part of their required program should have this count as one of their requirements.**
- 6. Students could contract to have a class (or classes) be a writing-intensive class of a class they would normally do (similar to an honors contracted course).**

We recommend the implementation of this proposal be done over time, starting with 1-2 majors and LAC courses as a pilot. Eventually, for the full implementation of this proposal to happen, there would need to be a plan set up to oversee faculty development, student support, course proposals, and assessment of these courses. We recognize that we already have resources available to help in some of these areas, such as the Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning, the LACC, and the Academic Learning Center.

We also anticipate that there are already many existing courses in majors (and in the LAC) that are meeting the goal of being writing-intensive, but we haven't done intentional connecting of these courses in terms of outcomes or provided faculty development on a regular basis. Therefore, before an actual pilot, we would do an inventory of these courses to see how feasible this could be, in terms of seeing how much buy-in we may already have. The framing of this initiative will be important. It needs to start from the faculty and develop from the ground up.

Classes could be approved on a rolling basis, with review by committee every few years.

## **CHALLENGES**

Given the current conditions of higher education including state budget appropriations, market demand, and rapid economic change, we realize challenges to fully implementing this plan and achieving the vision of developing a signature program for the university. Foremost among these concerns is providing adequate availability of courses in small enough sections. Currently, LAC 1A courses are capped at 25 to ensure appropriate and timely feedback necessary for effective writing instruction. The Department of Languages & Literatures attempts to limit enrollment in first-time teaching assistants' courses to 18. Similar caps would need to be maintained for courses we recommend here.

Another challenge is making faculty development opportunities sustainable over time. We recognize that few faculty are trained in writing pedagogy and even fewer have graduate-level training commensurate with the qualifications of composition instructors in the department of Languages and Literatures. A growing disciplinary specialty within English, Composition and Rhetoric, has approximately 80 Ph.D. programs in the United States, a substantial body of

scholarship and research, its own disciplinary conferences, as well as its own history of knowing what works and what is yet to be debated. Faculty cannot be expected to integrate all this knowledge in addition to their own disciplinary expertise. However, collaborative partnerships between composition and disciplinary specialists are a common practice. UNI should ensure faculty have access to composition knowledge, research, and training and that resources are in place to encourage collaborative dialogue between composition instructors and disciplinary faculty who wish to teach required writing courses.

Writing assessment is another challenge since it is labor-intensive, requiring not only readers, but pre-assessment development that ensures inter-rater reliability and the generation of data useful to teachers within the program. UNI participated in the NSSE writing consortium data for 2009-2012, which can be sorted by broad area of study as well as by department. The Department of Languages and Literatures has program data from their LAC 1A Review in 2010 as well as direct data on student writing from their assessment in 2013. Cornerstone regularly looks at student work and conducts ongoing assessments of their programs as well. Thus, as mentioned earlier, we recognize that we already have resources available to address these concerns and we feel confident we can find solutions in cooperation with them.

Another set of challenges concerns the communication surrounding the initiative, no matter the final form it takes. Careful communication will need to occur among faculty, administration, and students. The initiative must have buy-in from faculty and not be viewed as an administrative mandate. This will entail regular communication between Faculty Senate, the University Writing Committee, the Liberal Arts Core Committee, the Curriculum Committee, faculty, students, staff, and administration. Work between faculty and administration will need to be ongoing to not only ensure a commitment of resources, but with respect to advising, working with existing articulation agreements, student transcripts, etc. Just as importantly, students will need to be shown the value of writing courses beyond the first year and a plan will need to be developed in consultation with NISG and student voices about how any plan will affect students who switch majors.

Finally, there will still need to be a central, standing body or committee coordinating all this activity lest there be duplication of effort, turf wars, or just plain neglect. This body or committee will need to handle unexpected exigencies and make necessary accommodations as the plan develops. At the same time, this body will also need to be accountable to the UNI community and its members. Again, we feel this can be achieved without adding committees, administrative or faculty lines, courses, or programs.

### **CONCLUSION (SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS RECOMMENDATION)**

- Ensures that students graduate with a higher proficiency in writing and research skills.
- Provides students with an opportunity to incorporate what they have learned from their major into an analytical study specific to their interests.
- Helps to measure a student's aptitude in critical analysis and thinking, as well as writing and argumentation.

- Encourages students to delve deeper into the course material, helping them to make better connections with various ideas and concepts, as well as construct stronger relationships and/or correlations within the subject matter that increase their understanding of the field.
- Provides students with a valuable instrument for the job market or for graduate school applications.
- Promotes the university as being a strong supporter of advanced writing.
- Promotes transfer of skills - transferability (Dartmouth example & research) - Composition Forum Fall 2012 special issue

This recommendation is in line with UNI's stated vision/mission statements and learning outcomes.

We suggest the Faculty Senate respond to the endorsement of this recommendation by the Liberal Arts Core Committee (on 4/18/ 2014), charge the University Writing Committee to begin a self-study to identify potential pilot courses/ instructors, encourage dialogue and planning between the various faculty governance committees, and communicate to administration the need for resources over the next several fiscal years.

**Appendix A: Comparative Table of S.H. Writing Requirements Across Institutions**

Institution	Total UG Writing Credits (semester hours)		Freshman/Sophomore credits vs. Junior/Senior Credits	General Writing Credits vs. Writing in a Discipline
California State at Fresno	4 or 6		3/1 or 3/3	3/3
Central Michigan	12		3/9	6/6
Illinois State	3-6		3/3	---
Indiana State	9		3/6	6/3
Iowa State	6		3/ variable	variable
Minnesota – Duluth	3		3/0	3/0
Minnesota State – Mankato	9		3/6	3/6
Northern Arizona	6		3/3	3/3
Ohio University	6-9		3/3-6	3/3-6
Portland State	6		3/3	3/3
San Francisco State	9		6/3	6/3
University of Iowa	4		4/0	---
North Texas	6		6/0	6/0
Wisconsin – LaCrosse	6		3/3	3/3
University of California – Davis	5.33 (8 quarter credit hours)		2.67/ 2.67	Varies by college
University of North Carolina – Greensboro	Reasoning and Discourse	6	variable	Varies by college
	Writing Intensive	6		
	<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>		
Wayne State	6 or 10		3 or 7/3	3 or 7/3
Wisconsin – Eau Claire	2 or 5		All lower division	2 or 5/ 0
<b>UNI</b>	<b>3</b>		<b>3/0</b>	<b>3/0</b>
<b>Average</b>	<b>6.35 – 7.185</b>		<b>3.33/ 2.98</b>	<b>3.125/ 2.43</b>
<b>Median</b>	<b>6</b>		<b>3/3</b>	<b>3/3</b>

## Appendix B: AAU&C LEAP Rubric Criteria

	<b>Capstone</b> 4
<p><b>Context of and Purpose for Writing</b> <i>Includes considerations of audience, purpose, and the circumstances surrounding the writing task(s).</i></p>	Demonstrates a thorough understanding of context, audience, and purpose that is responsive to the assigned task(s) and focuses all elements of the work.
<p><b>Content Development</b></p>	Uses appropriate, relevant, and compelling content to illustrate mastery of the subject, conveying the writer's understanding, and shaping the whole work.
<p><b>Genre and Disciplinary Conventions</b> <i>Formal and informal rules inherent in the expectations for writing in particular forms and/or academic fields (please see glossary).</i></p>	Demonstrates detailed attention to and successful execution of a wide range of conventions particular to a specific discipline and/or writing task(s) including organization, content, presentation, formatting, and stylistic choices
<p><b>Sources and Evidence</b></p>	Demonstrates skillful use of high-quality, credible, relevant sources to develop ideas that are appropriate for the discipline and genre of the writing
<p><b>Control of Syntax and Mechanics</b></p>	Uses graceful language that skillfully communicates meaning to readers with clarity and fluency, and is virtually error-free.

<b>Milestones</b> 3	2	<b>Benchmark</b> 1
Demonstrates adequate consideration of context, audience, and purpose and a clear focus on the assigned task(s) (e.g., the task aligns with audience, purpose, and context).	Demonstrates awareness of context, audience, purpose, and to the assigned tasks(s) (e.g., begins to show awareness of audience's perceptions and assumptions).	Demonstrates minimal attention to context, audience, purpose, and to the assigned tasks(s) (e.g., expectation of instructor or self as audience).
Uses appropriate, relevant, and compelling content to explore ideas within the context of the discipline and shape the whole work.	Uses appropriate and relevant content to develop and explore ideas through most of the work.	Uses appropriate and relevant content to develop simple ideas in some parts of the work.
Demonstrates consistent use of important conventions particular to	Follows expectations appropriate to a specific	Attempts to use a consistent system for basic



a specific discipline and/or writing task(s), including organization, content, presentation, and stylistic choices	discipline and/or writing task(s) for basic organization, content, and presentation	organization and presentation.
Demonstrates consistent use of credible, relevant sources to support ideas that are situated within the discipline and genre of the writing.	Demonstrates an attempt to use credible and/or relevant sources to support ideas that are appropriate for the discipline and genre of the writing.	Demonstrates an attempt to use sources to support ideas in the writing.
Uses straightforward language that generally conveys meaning to readers. The language in the portfolio has few errors.	Uses language that generally conveys meaning to readers with clarity, although writing may include some errors.	Uses language that sometimes impedes meaning because of errors in usage.