Assessment History: Driver of Change in Writing Program

By Richard N. Matzen, Director of the Writing Program

The Writing Program (WP) was founded in the fall of 2005 with the hiring of two full-time professors: one in writing and the other in interdisciplinary studies. Also, in the fall of 2005, assessment began driving important changes in the WP’s pedagogy, policies, programs, and curriculum. By the spring of 2010, the WP’s assessment history will be reflected in its portal website that organizes over 260 assessment documents. Some of that assessment will be referred to in the following narrative that focuses on the most significant assessment as a driver of change.

This narrative is organized by three sections of the WP: Academic Writing Program, Writing Center, and Writing Consultant Program. Beginning with the Academic Writing Program (AWP), indirect and direct assessment has promoted change in English Placement, C- Portfolio Review, Transfer Curriculum, and Struggling Writers. Relevant foundational information is that AW 100 is basic writing; AW 111 freshman composition; and AW 112 research writing, the capstone course in the required English sequence.

**AWP: English Placement.** In the fall of 2005, having published an article and book chapter in placement assessment, I was interested in assessing the current English Placement Program; therefore, during my first semester, I organized direct assessment of student writing to verify or not that Accuplacer was placing students correctly into AW 100 and AW 111. By training and leading WP professors in the holistic scoring of timed essays, I found that, based on timed writing samples from 95% of all AW 100 and 111 students, Accuplacer was not placing students accurately, a finding that was aligned with other similar national research. Hence, beginning in the summer of 2006, the English Placement system was changed. Regarding the subsequent reading and rating of timed-essay exams and
portfolios for placement, each summer has resulted in a closeout report in which inter-rater reliability is monitored the reliability and validity of calibration sessions and final placements.

**AWP: C- Portfolio Review.** This review has an assessment history, too. First, in the spring of 2006, I wrote the AW 100, 111, and 112 curricula so that each course was based on syllabi templates and a portfolio system. That same semester, each WP professor was required to provide me with a student’s portfolio to represent that professor’s typical A, B, C, and D portfolio for a particular AW course. Each semester thereafter, I required the ABCD portfolios from professors along with completed forms regarding students’ permission to use them for research and scholarship.

Meanwhile, the same semester the spring semester that the ABCD portfolios began, spring 2006, I talked with Mary J. Allen, author of *Assessing Academic Programs in Higher Education* (2004), after attending her assessment workshop on campus. Together, we clarified the limited purposes that the ABCD portfolios may serve. Consequently, I led workshops with WP professors in fall of 2006 and spring of 2007 during which we created a portfolio rubric for each of the AW courses (AW 100, 111, and 112) based on direct assessment of the ABCD portfolios. In the spring of 2007, the last time ABCD portfolios were collected, part-time WP professor Dr. Maren Hyer suggested that in future assessment workshops, we focus on measuring the differences between C and C- portfolios in each AW course. I quickly accepted her suggestion because when a student does not receive a grade of C or higher in an AW course, he or she is required to repeat that AW course.

In the fall of 2007, the final elements fell into place to have the C- Portfolio Review Workshop in which direct assessment determines passing and failing students. To begin the semester, each WP professor had designed an AW syllabus based on the appropriate AW template and planned pedagogy to support the portfolio system and portfolio rubrics. The semester began, too, with a Participating Adjunct Professor Andy McCutcheon checking each professor’s actual syllabus to guarantee that it meet
template standards. The semester ended with the first C- Portfolio Review Workshop, in which calibration sessions led to the holistic scoring of each grade C or lower, AW portfolio based on the appropriate portfolio rubric(s). After each C- Portfolio Review Workshop through data analysis, I re-evaluate how to improve the next workshop. The workshop ends each semester.

**AWP: Transfer Curriculum.** In the spring of 2006, administrative assistant Kris Christ completed an in-depth analysis of new students who began in the fall of 2005 regarding their AW enrollment and/or transfer. With her research, I reasoned, almost two-thirds of our university students transfer in one or both required AW courses (AW 111 and 112). Considering equivalency between off- and on-campus writing courses may be an IGETC myth, in the fall of 2007, I proposed to the Curriculum Committee (CC) that no university students be allowed to transfer an AW course after beginning at our university, a small step toward a larger goal. In the spring of 2008, however, the Educational Leadership Committee (EPC) decided, after conversations with me and full-time WP professor Will McConnell, to create the “AW 112 Transfer Portfolio Program” that affected all AW 112 transfer students starting in the fall of 2008. Assessment was central to this program.

Theoretically, all AW 112 transfer students would provide us with a transfer portfolio. Then, two WP professors would read and rate—assess—that portfolio to determine if grade of C (or better) research writing competency was demonstrated. If not, the student would be required to enroll in AW 212, a new course. But in the fall 2008, spring 2009, and fall 2009 semesters, approximately 55% of AW 112 transfer students did attempt to provide a portfolio; approximately only 18% with acceptable portfolios passed the review. Both direct and indirect assessment, subsequently, motivated my recent proposal to change the AW 112 Transfer Portfolio Program.

In the proposal, AW 112 transfer students will be required to enroll in AW 212 unless they obtain an exemption based on a portfolio review. One point here is that, for our transfer students to
secure at least minimal research writing competency as second-semester sophomores or first-semester juniors, the typical “age” of a transfer student, they will be required to enroll in AW 212, a research writing course based on discipline-specific rhetoric. A second point is that, through assessment, the WP is better guaranteeing the university that transfer students are securing research writing skills equivalent to those secured by completing AW 112 on campus. Moreover, according to our surveying 83% of the AW 212 students in the spring of 2009, 51% of them—30 students—believed that AW 212 was the best English course that they’ve had in higher education. Incidentally, so far, the proposed change has passed university committees and is expected to take effect in the fall of 2010.

Within this assessment story lies another involving CO 105 Informational Literacy. In the fall of 2007 with library professors, we completed indirect assessment—student surveys and institutional research—that indicated CO 105 Informational Literacy was a better co-requisite to AW 112 than to AW 111; therefore, the change that was proposed and approved in the spring of 2008. Later, in the summer of 2009, library professors participated in the holistic scoring of AW 112 Transfer Portfolios and decided that the assessment of the portfolios for research writing competency was equivalent to assessment for informational literacy proficiency. Hence, in part based on assessment, a new course CO 270 Informational Literacy in the Disciplines became a required co-requisite for AW 212.

**AWP: Struggling Writers.** Indirect assessment efforts have led to improving the curriculum for some struggling writers: international ESL students and AW students repeating AW courses. Regarding international ESL students, as the liaison between the on-campus but corporation-owned intensive English program—the ISC/TELP program—and the university, I reviewed the program’s syllabi for alignment with university syllabi requirements and alignment between preferable learning outcomes and graded activities. As a result, for the fall of 2009, ISC/TELP extensively revised its syllabi templates and created a curricular foundation for assessment. Regarding the few AW students who repeat an AW
course a third time, I proposed a new policy—a proposal supported by indirect assessment—in which these students would be required to have Writing Center and Peer Advisor participation as a condition of their third attempt to pass the AW course. This proposal has been approved by committees in the fall of 2009 and will be implemented in the fall of 2010.

**Assessment in the Writing Center (WC).** In 2006, my Faculty Learning Community participation was defined by my creating the WC Syllabus that requires WC tutors’ and supervisors’ involvement in direct assessment. This syllabus, began in the fall of 2006, continues to be foundational to WC practices. Specifically, WC tutors complete some assignments and supervisors write evaluative reports, in which tutors and supervisors apply tutorial rubrics to evaluate in-person and online tutorials. Regarding indirect assessment, during my tenure as WC Director (fall 2005 to spring 2009), I implemented both student and faculty surveys, and wrote closeout reports for each semester to analyze who used WC services, to guide ways to improve WC services, and to create outreach efforts. The new WC Director, Will McConnell, plans to continue and develop our direct and indirect assessment practices, foundational to WC reflective practices.

**Assessment in the Writing Consultant Program (WCP).** To encourage the university community to have evidence of supporting its communication principle, the WP offers all faculty members the WCP, which means that select WP professors will help any professor to improve his or her writing assignments and assessment, and develop a department’s or program’s writing-intensive courses. Since the fall of 2006, 57 faculty members and 69 courses have been involved with the WCP, one of the reasons why the WCP is seen as a forerunner for a writing-intensive course (or WID) program. Some sentinel events in the WCP follow:

1. **Spring 2006:** As Writing Program Director, I interviewed all department chairs and program directors regarding their support for a WID program, and reported the collective results of these interviews to all participants and curriculum leaders.
2. Spring 2007: I repeated the interview process, aided by Will McConnell, and wrote another report to clarify support for a writing-intensive course proposal or WID program.

3. Fall 2008: I directed Participating Adjunct Professor Aristi Contos in her creating WCP resources on the university’s portal for faculty members to help them create writing assignments and develop writing-intensive courses.

4. Fall 2008: I organized the university’s participation in the national CSWC (Consortium for the Study of Writing in College) survey that, along with the NSSE, measures our university’s students’ experiences with writing.

5. Summer 2008: I began curricular and direct assessment plans regarding Architecture and WP professors co-teaching AR 267 (fall 2008) and AR 268 (spring 2009); the summative assessment report, recently written, may aid Architecture’s developing AR 267 and 268 curriculum.

6. Spring 2009: I began working extensively with MBA Chair Satinder Dhiman to establish two writing-intensive courses in the MBA curriculum, one being a new course for international students.

7. Spring 2010: My writing-intensive course proposal will be under consideration by the CC and EPC.

In general, the WP strives to model how assessment is foundational for student and curriculum development and to the university’s communication principle.