

Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania

# Department of English

Writing Intensive First Year Seminar

Assessment Plan 2012-2013

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2011

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## **Assessment Plan (AP)**

### **Introduction**

Shippensburg University, and more particularly, the General Education Council here at Shippensburg, is currently facing the tremendous challenge, and opportunity, to re-configure its Core requirement. The Composition Program, housed in the English department, is eager to address these challenges, and revise its writing courses to effectively meet the needs of its current and future students. For this reason, we would like to request funds for external assessment that might target a number of crucial areas of writing support. We would like to assess our current outcomes assessment approach, the potential (and functions) of peer tutoring and Writing Fellow instruction, and the effects of our current program on retention and broader student success. While we believe that our one writing course, Writing Intensive First Year Seminar, offers an important skill base for students, we are concerned that this course may not offer adequate support for students. We are seeking external assessment in order to determine if/when a second writing course might be developed within the Core requirement. Additionally, we would like feedback on the structure and support of the current Learning Center in order to more effectively utilize the writing support resources we have.

We will provide some brief institutional history in order to provide the necessary context for our request. Writing Intensive First Year Seminar, the centerpiece of our writing curriculum, was approved by UCC in Fall 2005; it is an “interactive course designed to introduce students to thought-provoking texts and subjects. The seminar assists students in developing four basic skills: writing, reading, discussion, and critical thinking. Students learn to communicate more effectively as writers; they also learn to read, discuss, and think more deeply and successfully” (Undergraduate Catalogue 2011-2013). The Common Final was developed as an assessment tool in Fall 2006. The Common Final, administered to every student in WIFYS, assesses four learning objectives: grammatical clarity, organized development of ideas, effective integration of sources, and thesis development.

The purpose of the Common Final is to reinforce the importance of these four objectives for every WIFYS student. The students receive a question, 4 associated readings, and the rubric well before the final exam. The writing instructor asks students to read each essay carefully, take notes, and come prepared to discuss the issue, with specific references to the four assigned essays. The students develop their own response to the issue, and create a clear and focused thesis in response to the question. They are permitted to develop an outline in advance of the final exam; the exam itself is an open book exam.

At this point, the Common Final results have been reported to the English Department, and in the past, to the General Education Curriculum Committee. However, by inviting the Consultant-Evaluator Service provided by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the body of writing scholars and professionals who set the national standards for program assessment, we hope to gain useful insight regarding our writing program from an external evaluation.

The Assessment Plan that follows reinforces the University's mission and the department's goals. Information gained from the WPA Evaluators will help us make sure that we are providing the most effective writing instruction possible to our students and thoroughly implementing the goals set out by the GEC.

### **Department Goals**

In order to reinforce the goals outlined by the General Education Council, the English Department has set out the following general goals:

Upon successful completion of the course, the student will be able to

1. Understand writing as a recursive process of discovery, drafting, revision, and editing
2. Write essays that meet conventional academic expectations for clarity, organization, paragraphing, and grammatical control
3. Discover and develop a thesis or main idea that is supported by examples and/or evidence
4. Conduct academic research and to integrate ideas and knowledge from sources into students' own writing
5. Avoid plagiarism by properly quoting, paraphrasing and summarizing sources. Students must document sources according to a respected academic style such as MLA
6. Comprehend and analyze college-level readings
7. Demonstrate analytical and critical thinking skills
8. Engage in a university-level discussion

The English Department recognizes the importance of regular and effective assessment, as outlined in Laura Brady's Essay, "A Case for Writing Program Evaluation," located on the Council for Writing Program Administrator's website, <http://wpacouncil.org/consultant>. In this article, Brady argues that writing programs can benefit in multiple ways by asking outside consultants to visit and assess their program. Brady writes that

Collaboration and conversation mark the self-study process and the evaluative visit. Initial conversations with [the coordinator] helped us to consider how our specific, local context might benefit from a national perspective. Ongoing conversations and the self-study gave us the chance to learn locally from colleagues at the department, college, and university level. The consultant-evaluators gave us the chance to learn nationally from the best practices of other more established programs as we initiated changes. (Brady 88)

By inviting the WPA consultants to campus, we will learn more about best practices employed by universities around the country, and we will have the opportunity to develop, revise, and ultimately improve the writing program here at Shippensburg. The external visit will begin with a thorough written self-study that will serve two purposes. First, by writing and reflecting on the writing curriculum currently offered to students, we will gain a better sense of the complexities, particularly the strengths and weaknesses, of our program. Second, we hope to begin a conversation with nationally respected scholars that will begin with the external assessment, and continue as we revise and develop our program to better serve the needs of our students.

In regard to writing instruction, the CWPA established national standards that are implemented by the English Department and the Composition Program. These standards are:

- **Rhetorical Knowledge**, i.e. respond to the needs of different audiences;
- **Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing**, i.e. integrate their ideas with others
- **Processes**, i.e. develop flexible strategies for revision;
- **Knowledge of Conventions**, i.e. understand the importance of genre;
- **Composing in Electronic Environments**, i.e. How to engage in electronic research

## **Methodology**

To carry out the assessment in the spring and the fall 2012, the department will invite Consultant-Evaluators from the Council of Writing Program Administrators to visit the Shippensburg campus and provide external assessment of our writing program and writing tutorial service,

The CWPA describes the service as an integral element of any effective assessment program:

Operating on a method similar to regional accreditation agencies, WPA evaluations have several stages. WPA requests a written program self-study, sends a team of two trained consultant-evaluators to campus for interviews and on-site evaluation, and then compiles a final report. A six month follow-up report from the campus completes the report. (“Consultant-Evaluator Service for Writing Programs”)

The field of composition experiences rapid changes due to the constantly changing need to address multi-literacies. For example, technology and social media outlets are changing the way(s) students communicate, and we need to develop pedagogical sound ways to incorporate these new literacies into our writing classrooms. Outside evaluators can give us the language and feedback we need to address these particular challenges.

## **Value of External Evaluation**

The CWPA outlines a number of benefits that come from an outside perspective on writing instruction:

The WPA consultant-evaluator visit will provide useful strategies and feedback for any number of programmatic and administrative concerns ... As evaluators, their primary goal is not to transform all writing programs into images of their own, but rather to determine a program’s unique strengths and weaknesses. They recognize that every program must retain its individual character, serve a particular community, and solve special problems. (“Consultant-Evaluator Service for Writing Programs”)

When Middle States conducted their assessment of the General Education Program in 2009, they were impressed with our curriculum, yet they emphasized the importance of a second writing course. Feedback from another external evaluator will help us determine if and when this second writing course should be created within the new General Education curriculum.

**Resources to implement the assessment plan (AP)**

WPA charges \$3,000 to cover honoraria for consultant-evaluators, a \$250 administrative fee, and transportation and other related, appropriate expenses.

Each of the consultants will spend four days or more (at minimum, one and a half on campus) understanding the program and writing a substantial report, including recommendations and responses to specific issues.