2010

The Writing Center Annual Report: 2009-2010

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University of Montana - Missoula

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INTRODUCTION

The 2009-2010 academic year marked continued growth and change in The Writing Center’s services. Persistent faculty and student desire for effective writing tutoring and instruction compelled Writing Center staff to find innovative ways to keep pace the growing demand for Writing Center services. Conducting 4,053 one-to-one consultations with undergraduate and graduate student writers, The Writing Center remained flexible enough to meet students’ needs for well-informed readers and for writing instruction throughout their academic tenures. Writing Center staff facilitated more consultations and presented more in-class workshops at the invitation of faculty than in any previous academic year, a fact that speaks both to the growing relevance of writing tutoring across disciplines and to student and faculty satisfaction with the services provided. Appendix A includes samples of faculty and student testimonials regarding their Writing Center experiences.

The Writing Center (TWC) facilitated this record number of tutoring sessions in response to writing assignments from over 50 disciplines. These tutoring sessions took place in a variety of locations: in Liberal Arts 144, in the Mansfield Library, in the College of Technology’s Academic Support Center, on the College of Technology’s West campus, in the UC Commons during STUDY JAM, and online through a synchronous delivery venue. Tutoring delivery expanded to include drop-in hours in a new Mansfield Library location, an expansion that allowed students to drop in for point-of-need assistance as well as make pre-scheduled appointments.

In addition to facilitating one-to-one tutoring of individual student writers, Writing Center staff offered large-class writing instruction through semester-long, for-credit courses and through discipline- and assignment-specific writing workshops. Collaborating with a variety of on-campus programs to deliver writing instruction across the curriculum, Writing Center staff facilitated over 100 in-class, discipline-specific workshops in response to requests from academic departments in the Colleges and from academic units such as American Indian Student Services, Foreign and International Student and Scholar Services, the Mansfield Library, and TRiO Student Support Services. These collaborative efforts to deliver writing instruction in all departments and over a student’s academic career enact the University’s commitment to embedding writing across the curriculum.

The Writing Center Director also collaborated with the ASCRC Writing Subcommittee to assess the validity of the Upper-division Writing Proficiency Assessment (UDWPA) in an effort to promote an ongoing writing assessment discussion. TWC orchestrated all administrative components of the UDWPA during the 2009-2010 academic year, administering 1,963 attempts, a number that will reach well over 2,200 following the June 2010 exam. As a supplement to its one-to-one UDWPA tutoring, TWC also offered two UDWPA workshops prior to each exam.
These 2009-2010 academic year activities responded to and engendered considerable growth in student and faculty use of TWC’s services. Writing Center staff conducted 4,053 tutoring sessions with students compared to 3,622 tutoring sessions during the 2008-2009 academic year and 2,750 tutoring sessions during the 2007-2008 academic year. The total 2009-2010 academic year instructional contacts with students reached well over 8,393 contacts. These usage numbers are outlined below, further broken down by type of contact and semester.

THE WRITING CENTER MISSION

In light of recent changes and expansion in Writing Center services, Writing Center staff collaboratively crafted new descriptive statements outlining the role and services of TWC. Hoping to use these statements both as a means to educate external audiences and as a compass for internal decision-making processes, staff elected to craft two separate statements, one intended for a student audience and one intended for a faculty audience. These statements will appear on TWC’s new website, which should be live by August 2010. These new statements—still in draft form—read as follows:

For Faculty
As a University hub for campus conversations about writing, The Writing Center helps undergraduate and graduate students in all disciplines become more independent, versatile, and effective writers, readers, and thinkers. We provide a comfortable environment where professional tutors engage students in supportive conversations about writing. Using a variety of strategies to honor a diversity of writers and writing, our tutors help writers at any point during their writing processes and with any writing task. Focused on the development of the writer, tutors help students to recognize their power as communicators and to practice strategies appropriate to various writing contexts. In each instance, the student writer retains responsibility for the written work and for all changes made to the work.

The Writing Center treats writing both as a mode of communication and as a way to learn, and encourages all members of the University community to think more explicitly about their writing processes and the decisions they might make as they write.

We offer faculty:
- In-class orientations to The Writing Center
- In-class workshops tailored to specific courses and assignments
- Writing assignment design feedback and guidance
- Ideas for incorporating writing – both graded and non-graded – into courses
- Faculty workshops on using writing to enhance student learning in any course

For Students
The Writing Center helps undergraduate and graduate students in all disciplines become more independent, versatile, and effective writers, readers, and thinkers. Welcoming all students, including international students, we provide a comfortable environment where writers can engage in supportive conversations about their writing and where writers can receive feedback on their works in progress. Our professional tutors help writers at any point during a writing process and with any writing task. Focused on the development of the writer, tutors help
students to recognize their power as communicators and to practice strategies that will help them write more effectively.

The Writing Center treats writing both as a mode of communication and as a way to learn, and encourages all members of the University community to think more explicitly about their writing processes and the decisions they might make as they write.

We offer students:
- FREE one-to-one writing tutoring (available on a by-appointment and drop-in basis)
- Guidance interpreting writing assignments
- Reader feedback on any writing task, including research proposals and papers, response papers, reports, literature reviews, speeches, scholarship applications, graduate school applications, thesis projects, etc.
- Help developing strategies for revision at any stage of a writing process
- Workshops on specific types of writing and on the various parts of a writing process
- Assistance building strategies for timed writing situations, including the UDWPA exam

TUTORING

At the heart of a one-to-one tutoring session is spontaneous, collaborative dialogue. Because dialogue is at the heart of social learning behaviors and because tutoring is an enactment of the social nature of learning, the tutorial setting in TWC is centered on evolving one-to-one conversation. Through dialogue, the tutor guides the student to develop strategic knowledge of how to compose a piece of writing within the constraints of a particular writing occasion and within the parameters of the student’s own contributions to the conversation. This “tutorial talk” affords the student a unique and non-evaluative space in which to explore ideas and rehearse strategies that he/she can then apply in other rhetorical situations. In effect, tutoring in TWC promotes the development of student writers across their academic tenures, ultimately helping to bolster retention rates at the University.

Since autumn 2002, students have learned the value of a tutoring session at TWC. Seeking opportunities for discussion with other writers and readers, a growing number of students have used TWC almost every year since the 2002-2003 academic year, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1.
Number of tutoring sessions by year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Year</th>
<th>Number of Tutoring Sessions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002-2003</td>
<td>1,599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003-2004</td>
<td>2,468</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-2005</td>
<td>2,088</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-2006</td>
<td>2,601</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-2007</td>
<td>3,347</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-2008</td>
<td>2,750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008-2009</td>
<td>3,622</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-2010</td>
<td>4,053</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tutoring sessions last 30-60 minutes and take the form of a structured conversation between tutor and student on the strengths and weaknesses of the student’s thinking, planning, and writing in the context of a specific assignment. With the exception of peer tutors who staff STUDY JAM and some Mansfield Library drop-in tutoring hours, tutors are professionals, most of whom have an advanced degree and prior teaching experience when hired; each is trained and evaluated throughout each academic year of his/her employment. The majority of all tutoring sessions focus on planning or revising papers for classes in academic disciplines and for admissions applications for varied programs. The multidisciplinary nature of TWC makes it a critical site for the improvement of student writers across the curriculum. By offering face-to-face writing tutoring on three campuses and in three locations on the Mountain campus alone, and by offering online writing tutoring to distance education students, TWC reaches a broad audience of students and faculty. TWC’s hours of operation in its varied locations are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.
The Writing Center’s hours of operation in each tutoring location.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Tutoring</th>
<th>When</th>
<th>Where</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30 minute appointments</td>
<td>Mon. – Fri. 9:30 am-1 pm, Mon. – Fri. 2 pm-5 pm</td>
<td>Liberal Arts 144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 minute appointments</td>
<td>Mon. – Fri. 2 pm-5 pm, Sun. – Thurs. 6 pm-9 pm</td>
<td>Mansfield Library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 minute UDWPA preparation appointments</td>
<td>Mon. – Fri. 2 pm-5 pm, Two weeks prior to each exam</td>
<td>Liberal Arts 144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 minute ESL only appointments</td>
<td>Mon., Wed., &amp; Thurs. 6 pm-9 pm</td>
<td>Liberal Arts 144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop-in consultations</td>
<td>Wednesdays 2 pm-5 pm, Sundays 6 pm-9 pm</td>
<td>Mansfield Library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop-in consultations</td>
<td>Tues. &amp; Wed. 10 am-1 pm</td>
<td>COT East (ASC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop-in consultations</td>
<td>Wed. &amp; Thurs. 11:30-1:30 pm (Spring Semester only)</td>
<td>COT West</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop-in consultations (STUDY JAM)</td>
<td>Mon. &amp; Wed. 6:30 pm-9 pm</td>
<td>UC Commons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online (Synchronous)</td>
<td>Varied from week to week</td>
<td>Online</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LA 144 and Mansfield Library Tutoring
TWC was open for 16 weeks of tutoring during each of the autumn and spring semesters and for limited tutoring hours during the summer session and winter session. During the autumn and spring semesters, TWC opened for an average of 69 hours per week on the Mountain campus in its LA 144 and Mansfield Library locations. TWC opened for an additional 15 hours per week in other locations. During the weeks leading up to a UDWPA exam, supplementary tutoring hours accommodated student demand for help in preparing for the writing assessment. In addition to general tutoring open to all students, TWC opened for nine hours of evening tutoring for non-
native speakers of English exclusively. These students—most of whom were international students—were also welcome to make appointments during daytime hours.

While serving a majority of student visitors in its primary LA 144 location, TWC also continued its collaborative relationship with the Mansfield Library. Reflecting this commitment and hoping to provide a shared framework for potential student-centered projects, library faculty and the Writing Center Director co-authored an autumn 2009 proposal for collaboration (Appendix B). This proposal forms the basis for more recent Writing Center and Mansfield Library joint ventures. Tutoring in the Mansfield Library began spring semester 2007. Due to the success of these trial sessions, TWC continued to offer afternoon and evening tutoring in the Mansfield Library six days per week. Tutoring originally was located in a study room (ML202) set up exclusively for Writing Center use and located adjacent to Math PiLOT tutoring. Beginning in the fall of 2009, Writing Center tutors moved to the main floor of the Mansfield Library in order to participate in the Learning Commons space and in order to offer drop-in, point-of-need tutoring. Drop-in tutoring provided on a first-come, first-served basis proved successful in that it allowed a population of students who might not otherwise have used TWC’s tutoring services to receive writing tutoring. However, the time-intensive and attention-demanding nature of assessing a piece of writing and instructing a writer necessitates the preservation of a primarily by-appointment service. Still, offering some drop-in tutoring hours has allowed TWC to better meet the needs of individual student writers.

College of Technology Tutoring: East and West Campuses
TWC offered seven hours of tutoring per week on a drop-in basis in the College of Technology’s Academic Support Center. In response to requests from technical program faculty, TWC also offered four hours of tutoring per week on the College of Technology’s West campus. The West Campus saw significant growth in student use of Writing Center tutoring, a direct result of support from Welding, Carpentry, Building Maintenance, and Diesel Technology faculty who encouraged their students to take advantage of the West Campus tutoring hours. Funding for the added tutoring hours on the West campus was secured through a Perkins Grant intended to fund student support services for those students enrolled in technical programs. In addition to visiting the College of Technology campus tutors, two-year campus students were able to make appointments for tutoring on the Mountain campus.

STUDY JAM Tutoring
Spring semester 2009 saw the establishment of a writing table at STUDY JAM, a peer tutor forum providing study time for students in a variety of disciplines. In an effort to properly train the new peer writing tutors, the Writing Center Director taught a two-credit spring semester Honors College course in peer writing tutoring (Peer Writing Tutoring Preparation). This course formally trained peer writing tutors who, as a part of their experiential learning in the course, staffed the writing table during STUDY JAM hours. As a part of their coursework, these students were required to explore the theories and history of writing tutoring, to observe seasoned professional writing tutors, to participate in course discussions, to perform their own research, and to tutor one night per week at STUDY JAM. Students who performed successfully in the course were invited to apply to become a peer writing tutor during the 2009-2010 academic year. These three peer tutors staffed the STUDY JAM Writing Table and provided drop-in tutoring.
Online Tutoring
During spring semester 2009, TWC launched an online tutoring pilot funded by a Montana University System grant. In response to the University’s growing online course enrollment numbers and inspired by a commitment to providing quality and equitable student support services for online students, UMOnline has partnered with TWC to offer online writing tutoring. Online tutoring continued during the 2009-2010 academic year and currently is being offered to all students during the full ten-week summer session. Learning from the initial pilot, Writing Center staff and UMOnline revised the online tutoring procedure, resulting in a more streamlined, user-friendly process. Though use of the online tutoring services continues to be light, the number of students aware of and taking advantage of the service continues to grow among both undergraduate and graduate distance learners. Students are becoming more comfortable with this system as evidenced by those students who return for online tutoring help after a first appointment.

In an effort to foster student awareness and use of TWC’s online tutoring service, TWC recently began work to partner with UMOnline’s new Exploration of Online Learning course. Intended to support retention by familiarizing students with online learning resources and promoting effective online learning behaviors, this course is an ideal site for exposing students to online writing tutoring. This collaboration will be piloted in the autumn of 2010 during two eight-week sections of the course.

Though institutions across the country have responded to a growth in the online learner population with varied iterations of online writing centers, delivery often has been limited to an asynchronous format, a delivery method that threatens to compromise one tutorial element that is at the heart of a writing center’s identity: spontaneous, collaborative dialogue. It is this social, dialogic nature of the tutoring session that UMOnline and TWC have worked to preserve in the design of a synchronous online tutoring experience. By using an appointment-based system that invites students into a tutor’s Elluminate vRoom, TWC hopes to engage online students in real-time conversations about their writing, helping them to become more effective and versatile writers. TWC and UMOnline will continue to assess the success and usability of this new form of tutorial delivery.

UDWPA Tutoring
In addition to coaching students as they work on writing assignments for academic courses and applications, TWC helps students prepare to take or retake the UDWPA. Tutors do not teach the UDWPA texts but rather show students how to read a text actively, how to interpret a timed-writing assessment prompt, and how to approach a timed-writing occasion. Tutors present students with an opportunity to engage in conversation about how to best prepare prior to each exam, supplying students with reading questions, practice essay questions, and feedback when appropriate. The tutors also are trained in explaining the UDWPA scoring rubric and are available after an exam to interpret the results of the exam for each student who requests this service. Tutoring for the UDWPA is generally limited to appointments in LA144, with additional UDWPA tutoring sessions offered during the two weeks prior to each exam.

Tutoring Appointment Scheduling
Web-based scheduling of student appointments allows scheduling at multiple locations and allows students conveniently to make, cancel, or change their appointments from any computer with an Internet connection. Students are required to register with the on-line system before
making appointments, an extra step that may be an impediment to some students using the services of TWC. However, students also may make appointments by visiting TWC in person or by calling and speaking with a tutor. A receptionist in LA 144 who makes appointments and assists with registration would greatly benefit students in that this individual would be able to answer student inquiries regarding the making of appointments; however, limited funding precludes the hiring of a receptionist.

Tutoring Numbers
The history of student tutoring session totals and approximate hours of operation at TWC during autumn 2002 – spring 2010 are shown in Table 3. This table exhibits the steady growth in student use of TWC. During each semester of the 2009-2010 academic year, TWC had over 2,000 visits, a number which represents a new milestone for TWC. User statistics according to student type and class are summarized in Table 4. Additional user statistics by major, class for which the student is writing, and issues addressed during tutoring sessions are available upon request.
Table 3.
History of student tutoring session totals and hours of operation, autumn 2002 – spring 2010.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semester</th>
<th>A ’02</th>
<th>S ’03</th>
<th>A ’03</th>
<th>S ’04</th>
<th>A ’04</th>
<th>S ’05</th>
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<th>S ’06</th>
<th>A ’06</th>
<th>S ’07</th>
<th>A ’07</th>
<th>S ’08</th>
<th>A ’08</th>
<th>S ’09</th>
<th>A ’09</th>
<th>S ’10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Tutoring Sessions</strong></td>
<td>624</td>
<td>975</td>
<td>1,131</td>
<td>1,337</td>
<td>989</td>
<td>1,099</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>1,401</td>
<td>1,671</td>
<td>1,676</td>
<td>1,442</td>
<td>1,308</td>
<td>1,805</td>
<td>1,817</td>
<td>2,028</td>
<td>2,025</td>
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<td><strong>Open Hours per Week by Location</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Locations</td>
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<td>45</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>50</td>
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<td>UM Mountain</td>
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<td>(Library)</td>
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<td>COT Main</td>
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<td>COT West</td>
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<td>Study Jam</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Autumn numbers include the previous summer’s visits. Spring numbers include the previous winter’s visits.
Table 4.
2009-2010 User Statistics

Total Tutoring Sessions: 4,053

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Tutoring Session</strong></td>
<td><strong>Total Tutoring Sessions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COT East</td>
<td>COT East</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COT West</td>
<td>COT West</td>
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<tr>
<td>LA 144</td>
<td>LA 144</td>
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<tr>
<td>Library</td>
<td>Library</td>
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<tr>
<td>Study Jam</td>
<td>Study Jam</td>
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<td>Left Blank</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Location</strong></td>
<td><strong>Location</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Type</strong></td>
<td><strong>Student Type</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
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<td>Sophomore</td>
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<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Junior</td>
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<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Senior</td>
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<td>Grad</td>
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<td>TRiO</td>
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<tr>
<td>UDWPA</td>
<td>UDWPA</td>
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<tr>
<td>WRIT</td>
<td>WRIT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Type</strong></td>
<td><strong>Student Type</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Junior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Senior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grad</td>
<td>Grad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left Blank</td>
<td>Left Blank</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*User statistics by major, class for which the student is writing, and issues addressed during tutoring sessions are available upon request.

WORKSHOPS

In-class Customized Workshops and Faculty Consultations
The Writing Center Director and Associate Directors led over 100 in-class workshops customized to meet the instructional goals of the instructors who requested them. These workshops were designed for disciplines as diverse as Anthropology, Biology, Economics, Forestry, Linguistics, Literature, Microbiology, Pharmacy, and Sociology, among others. Staff also designed and delivered workshops for academic units such as American Indian Student Services, Athletics, Foreign and International Student and Scholar Services, TRiO Student Support Services, and Upward Bound. The workshops range from a 20-minute overview of TWC’s services and how to use them, to multi-hour workshops that teach students how to better address the writing expectations and conventions of a specific course or discipline. In addition,
Writing Center staff facilitated one-to-one consultations with faculty members in order to discuss assignment design, methods for responding to student writing, and ideas for using writing in large classes as a means to promote thinking and learning. These workshops and consultations enact the philosophy that students develop as writers across their academic tenures and in every discipline. In effect, discipline-specific workshops help to ensure that writing instruction is embedded across the curriculum and that support for student writing instruction is the shared responsibility of all departments. Steady growth in the number of workshops offered each semester is demonstrated in Table 5. See Appendix C for a complete list of in-class presentations and the courses in which they were delivered during the 2009-2010 academic year.

TWC also continued to facilitate faculty workshops on writing-related instruction. For example, during the 2010 spring semester, the Writing Center Director co-presented a School of Business Administration faculty workshop on writing assignment design and evaluation of student writing. Over 30 faculty members participated in this workshop, which led to follow-up consultations with individual faculty members as they worked to design writing assignments and evaluate student writing.

UDWPA Workshops
Additionally, Writing Center staff continued to offer a preparatory one-hour workshop for the UDWPA twice prior to each of the six exams offered during the academic year (Table 5). The UDWPA workshop presents exam preparation strategies and information on structuring essays of the type expected for the UDWPA. Workshops are most beneficial for students who have not previously taken the exam; students who have failed the exam are encouraged to schedule an individual appointment with a Writing Center tutor.

Table 5.
Workshops offered, autumn 2002-spring 2010.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semester</th>
<th>A '02</th>
<th>S '03</th>
<th>A '04</th>
<th>S '05</th>
<th>A '06</th>
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<td>567</td>
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<td>733</td>
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<td>213</td>
<td>186</td>
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*Approximations
ACADEMIC COURSES

Critical Writing II (UNC 270)
TWC offers five sections each academic year of Critical Writing II (UNC 270), an approved General Education Writing Course. Class size is capped at 24 for face-to-face sections and at 20 for online sections, allowing for intense individual instruction and extensive feedback on numerous pieces of writing as students move through a recursive revision process. The course teaches students to analyze their academic writing tasks, read critically, navigate disciplinary conventions, and write in an orderly, well-developed, and clear fashion.

In addition to traditional face-to-face sections of Critical Writing II, TWC offered two online sections during the past academic year. In consultation with the Writing Center Director and UMOnline instructional designers, a professional tutor and adjunct translated the course into an online delivery format, paying careful attention to the preservation of the community building so critical to any classroom environment and working to ensure that the course continues to be grounded in the published course learner outcomes that were updated in the autumn of 2009. In partnership with UMOnline, TWC will continue to deliver Critical Writing II online, providing students with a wider variety of course delivery choices and reaching a broader student audience.

Research Portfolio Seminar (HC 320E)
In collaboration with the Davidson Honors College, TWC offers one section each semester of Research Portfolio Seminar (HC 320E). During the 2009-2010 academic year, Associate Director Gretchen McCaffrey revised the course curriculum, which now fulfills the Ethics and Human Values General Education Requirement. This revision allows for a joint focus on students’ research projects and on the ethical concerns in research. The purpose of the material is to “teach students how to approach the ethical decisions they will make as researchers.” Assisting undergraduate students with their independent research projects, which are directed by their research advisors, the course emphasizes writing strategies, including extensive revision and disciplinary conventions. Class size is capped at ten students, and participants are often, but not limited to, students completing their Honors Research Project. The 2009-2010 academic year offered a particularly exciting opportunity to offer HC 320E since students’ research project work coincided with the University’s hosting of the National Conference on Undergraduate Research.

Peer Writing Tutor Preparation (HC 295)
While spring semester 2009 saw a new course offering through TWC and in collaboration with the Davidson Honors College—Peer Writing Tutor Preparation (HC 295)—the course was not offered in the spring of 2010 due to limited funding available to hire additional peer tutors. The Writing Center Director plans to commence teaching this course in the spring of 2011. This seminar offers students the opportunity to move from the traditional role as student to the more dynamic role as peer writing tutor at STUDY JAM. Throughout the semester, students not only learn how to facilitate others’ growth as writers, but also students become more effective writers themselves as they explore the value of collaborative learning, the effectiveness of one-to-one tutoring, and the theories and pedagogies of writing and peer tutoring. Through a combination of readings, writings, discussion, and experiential practice in the art of student-to-student tutoring and in the art of providing written feedback to writers, students develop confidence and
experience in helping their peers to develop as writers. Students who successfully completed the spring 2009 course were invited to apply to become a peer writing tutor for the 2009-2010 academic year.

MEDIA

TWC Website: Griz Online Writing Lab (GROWL)
Associate Director Jake Hansen began the design of a new Writing Center website that will more effectively serve as a one-stop location advertising TWC’s services, providing an entry point for appointment scheduling of face-to-face and online tutoring, and archiving writing-related resources for students and faculty. The launching of the new Griz Online Writing Lab—affectionately named GROWL—will allow TWC to build a virtual hub for campus conversations related to writing. In addition to providing a professional and user-friendly public face for TWC, the new website will house the First-Year Reading Experience webpage, a change that will result in increased student awareness of First-Year Reading Experience activities. Meanwhile, TWC’s current website continues to provide routinely updated announcements, to serve as a gathering ground for writing-related resources for both students and faculty, and to facilitate students’ use of the web-based scheduler and online tutoring.

UDWPA Website
In order to more efficiently and clearly communicate UDWPA-related information to students, faculty, and staff, Associate Director Jake Hansen designed a new UDWPA website separate from TWC website. This significant change served two critical purposes: to preclude conflation of TWC and the UDWPA, and to provide a more professional and user-friendly forum for communicating UDWPA information to the University community. This site went live at the beginning of spring 2010, and feedback from advisors and students has been positive. Users can now more easily navigate information outlining 1) the purpose of the exam, 2) recent announcements regarding current academic year exams, 3) how to register for the exam, and 4) how to prepare for the exam. Writing Center staff will continue to update and revise this new website based on campus feedback.

Online Tutoring and Teaching
An online tutoring pilot funded by a Montana University System grant began spring semester 2009, and online tutoring continued during the 2009-2010 academic year. Designed to allow for synchronous tutoring sessions via live audio, TWC’s online writing tutoring resource attempts to preserve that which is most valuable in face-to-face tutoring: spontaneous, collaborative dialogue that requires the engagement of the student writer. Of those academic institutions offering some form of online writing tutoring, over 90% do so in an asynchronous format, a fact that may compromise the ethos of writing center work. This statistic suggests that TWC’s synchronous online tutoring model is a rare attempt among research institutions. In partnership with UMOnline, TWC plans to continue to assess this new form of tutorial delivery, making changes as necessary.

In an effort to foster student awareness and use of TWC’s online tutoring service, TWC also began work to partner with UMOnline’s new Exploration of Online Learning course. Intended
to support retention by familiarizing students with online learning resources and promoting effective online learning behaviors, this course is an ideal site for students to learn about and use online writing tutoring. This collaboration will be piloted autumn 2010 during two eight-week sections of the course.

For the first time, TWC also offered an online section of Critical Writing II (UNC 270) during both the autumn and spring semesters. Enrollment in both sections reached the course cap, allowing for a productive community of writers. TWC currently is assessing the online delivery of this course and plans to offer two online sections during the 2010-2011 academic year.

TRiO SSS COLLABORATION: THE WRITING MENTOR PROGRAM

TWC continued its collaboration with TRiO Student Support Services through the Writing Mentor Program. This program aims to help TRiO students prepare to meet the University’s writing proficiency requirements and to become more successful writers in their academic courses. In an effort to improve the Writing Mentor Program, Writing Center and TRiO staff revised the writing portion of the C & I 160 curriculum, focusing on building student awareness of their own writing processes and of TWC as a service available throughout their academic careers. For a description of this revised curriculum and the justifications for these revisions, see Appendix D. Working closely with the C & I 160 course instructors, TWC’s Associate Directors facilitated in-class workshops, met one-to-one with each student to discuss drafts of a writing assignment, and advised each student regarding the necessary steps to meet the University’s writing competencies and General Education Requirements. Comments from TRiO staff and students regarding the revised Writing Mentor Program were extremely positive and reiterated the benefits of this collaboration for improving the students’ academic writing (see Appendix A). Data suggest that this program has also had a positive impact on TRiO students’ completion of the UDWPA requirement.

TRiO student use of TWC is difficult to track with precision since not all TRiO students who make appointments at TWC self-identify as TRiO. However, data show that the 2009-2010 academic year saw at least 693 TRiO student consultations with a writing tutor in TWC.

ADMINISTRATION OF THE UDWPA

TWC administers all aspects of the UDWPA with the assistance of the Registrar’s Office. The exam is offered six times per academic year. To avoid the higher costs of administering the exam in the GBB computer labs, as many sections as possible this academic year were held in the LA and UC computer labs. Additional information on Writing Center efforts to assist students with this General Education Requirement and on recent passing rates is included in a May 2009 report submitted at the request of ECOS and in partnership with the ASCRC Writing Subcommittee. This report outlines the measures TWC has had take to ensure consistency across exams and to better help those students who struggle to fulfill the UDWPA General Education Requirement. Student performance on the UDWPA exam by semester is summarized in Table 6.
Table 6.
Summarizes student performance on the UDWPA exam by semester, spring 2003– spring 2010.

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<th>A '09</th>
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*Does not include June 2010 UDWPA test results.

During the spring of 2010, the ASCRC Writing Subcommittee devoted its attention to the UDWPA test vehicle. As an ex-officio member of this committee, the Writing Center Director contributed to these discussions and to the drafting of a formal report (the ASCRC Writing Committee Report on Writing Assessment Practice at The University of Montana). This report outlines 1) a brief history of the UDWPA, 2) research-based beliefs about writing and writing assessment, 3) the current status of the UDWPA as measured against these beliefs, and 4) potential alternatives to the current UDWPA test vehicle. This report is included in Appendix E.

FUNDING

The 2009-2010 academic year posed continued financial challenges to TWC in light of increased student demand for one-to-one tutoring sessions. These challenges are not unique to TWC as they are part of the larger fiscal landscape at the University. To meet increased demand and to offset the cost of offering additional tutoring, the Writing Center Director and Associate Directors tutored a significant number of hours, absorbing into their salaries a large portion of tutoring costs. While this impacted their ability to work on other important Writing Center projects such as various writing across the curriculum initiatives, the increase in student demand necessitated this move.

Despite a challenging budget landscape, TWC served a record number of students during the 2009-2010 academic year. This was facilitated, in part, by a one-time-only contribution from the Office of the Provost and additional one-time sources of funding secured by the Director. The Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education awarded TWC and UMOnline a shared grant to continue offering online writing tutoring. Additionally, TWC earned a small return from UMOnline for the teaching of two online sections of Critical Writing II. TRiO Student Support Services provided funding for some TRiO student tutoring. The Davidson Honors College also contributed instructional support funding to TWC in return for the teaching of the Research Portfolio Seminar and Peer Writing Tutor Preparation courses. Perkins money funded all
tutoring on the College of Technology’s West campus. Finally, it is notable that TWC received three small donations through the UM Foundation.

While these additional funding sources were essential to TWC’s ability to meet student demand for its services and while the Writing Center Director plans to continue seeking out such partnerships and funding sources, a more sustainable investment is necessary. One-time, ad hoc investments will neither ensure that the programs and initiatives added remain viable nor that the number of tutoring hours available to students during the 2009-2010 academic year become regularly offered Writing Center hours. TWC’s active and valuable role in supporting students’ development as writers and in bolstering retention rates at the University requires a sustainable investment.

INSTRUCTIONAL CONTACTS WITH STUDENTS

The following numbers of instructional contacts with students do not include semester-length courses taught, phone, email, referral or special UDWPA test contacts. The numbers therefore indicate TWC’s minimum number of instructional contacts with students during the 2009-2010 academic year.

Autumn 2009: 4,141
Spring 2010: 4,252

Total 2009-2010 academic year instructional contacts with students: 8,393

Report prepared and respectfully submitted by Kelly Webster, Director of The Writing Center.
Mansfield Library-Writing Center Collaboration Proposal

Proposed by:
Sue Samson (Head, Division of Information and Research Services Division, Mansfield Library), Megan Stark (Undergraduate Services Librarian, Mansfield Library), Kelly Webster (Director, The Writing Center)

Proposal

In the interest of proactively moving toward a learning commons concept in the Mansfield Library, we propose a purposeful relocation of writing tutoring services and the design of deliberate writing center and library staff collaboration. Though the Learning Commons eventually may involve significant remodeling, we are committed to enacting our collaborative teaching and tutoring efforts immediately to the degree that current space will allow. The Writing Center (TWC) will participate in this immediate collaboration while retaining its reporting line, administrative practices, and main office in LA 144.

Objective

Our objective is to provide a central location and collaborative space with visible and excellent access where students can easily access both appropriately trained writing center tutors and professional librarians. We also aim to explore partnership opportunities in the delivery of our services to students and faculty.

Location/Space/Facilities

We propose moving TWC’s Mansfield Library writing tutoring to the northwest area of the main floor. This relocation will allow for more immediate collaboration between writing tutors and librarians, particularly on those occasions when a handoff needs to occur or when a student would benefit from dialogue with more than one academic professional. In some instances, a student may need to discuss his/her strategic options as a writer with more than one source, or may need both the specific expertise of a reference librarian and of a writing tutor.

This new tutoring space would require a reasonably quiet atmosphere and relative privacy since students are sometimes reluctant to expose their writing and to discuss it out loud. Such privacy could be achieved with ease by:

- reserving 2-3 tables – preferably round – during the designated tutoring times;
- displaying a portable sign with TWC’s logo, thereby temporarily designating the space as a writing tutoring forum;
- locating portable walls to further shape the space during tutoring times; and
• providing one small, lockable filing cabinet for log-in slips, writing texts, a binder of common assignments, and a writing center laptop. These space and facilities requirements would need to be coordinated between library and writing center staff.

Hours

During the 2008-2009 academic year, TWC was open for 16 weeks of tutoring during each of the autumn and spring semesters. Each semester, TWC offered an average of 30 tutoring hours per week in the Mansfield Library. An additional 55 tutoring hours per week were offered in other locations on and off campus. In ML 202, students were able to make writing tutoring appointments Monday–Friday 2:00-5:00 PM, and Sunday–Thursday 6:00-9:00 PM. Of the 3,622 student appointments at TWC during autumn and spring semesters, 1,093 took place in ML 202. The hours offered at the Mansfield Library represented 35.3% of the total tutoring hours; and the students served at the Mansfield Library represented 30.2% of the total tutoring provided.

During the 2009-2010 academic year and in support of the Learning Commons concept, TWC will expand its tutoring model to designate open times for drop-in writing tutoring while continuing to offer by-appointment tutoring sessions. This combination will accommodate both those students who encounter the occasion of need for help while studying in the Library and those students who prefer scheduling an appointment. Library and Writing Center staff will collaborate to determine the ideal times for both drop-in tutoring and by-appointment tutoring, depending on the tutoring costs that TWC budget can bear.

For context, the following tables summarize user statistics during the 2008-2009 academic year, according to location, student type, and class.
Collaboration and Workshops

Strong collaboration between ML and TWC is an exciting opportunity in the Learning Commons. Points of collaboration to be piloted autumn semester, 2009 could include:

- identifying and targeting TWC hours held at ML that would benefit from a librarian co-staffing the tutoring;
- delivering semi-organized citation and research workshops that would complement students’ need for assistance when writing papers that require synthesizing, formatting, and structuring references into a particular citation style;
- delivering collaborative ML/TWC workshops for both students and faculty. Currently, TWC works with faculty who request resources for embedding writing into the curriculum and designs and delivers discipline-specific workshops customized to meet the instructional goals of the instructors. Both TWC and Mansfield Library share the goals of embedding information literacy and writing instruction into courses across the disciplines. These shared objectives imply a common philosophy along with complementary curricular content, providing the foundation for future joint projects;
- using the Library as a space for future tutor trainings, potentially including trainings for tutors across disciplines;
- integrating library instruction into tutor training so that tutors are fully aware of the services offered by the library; and
• inviting TWC to train the Information Center staff as part of ongoing Continuing Education workshops so that library employees are fully aware of the services offered by TWC.
## Autumn 2009 Class Presentations and Faculty Consultations

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<th>Content</th>
<th>Location</th>
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<td>Kate Ryan</td>
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<td>Kelly</td>
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<td>PSY 400</td>
<td>Tom Seekins</td>
<td>Orientation Research, Organization, Thesis</td>
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<td>LA 308</td>
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<td>Orientation &amp; Research Writing</td>
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<td><a href="mailto:rm126430@grizmail.umt.edu">rm126430@grizmail.umt.edu</a></td>
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<td>Clare Sutton</td>
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<td><a href="mailto:ryan.tollesonknee@mso.umt.edu">ryan.tollesonknee@mso.umt.edu</a></td>
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<td>10:00 AM</td>
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<td>Megan Stark</td>
<td><a href="mailto:Megan.stark@umontana.edu">Megan.stark@umontana.edu</a></td>
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<td>C &amp; I 316</td>
<td>Rhea Ashmore</td>
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<td><a href="mailto:Rhea.ashmore@umontana.edu">Rhea.ashmore@umontana.edu</a></td>
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<td>Nicholas Myers</td>
<td><a href="mailto:nm145206@mso.umt.edu">nm145206@mso.umt.edu</a></td>
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<td><a href="mailto:Dan.burke@umontana.edu">Dan.burke@umontana.edu</a></td>
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<td>Wade Davies</td>
<td><a href="mailto:Wade.davies@umontana.edu">Wade.davies@umontana.edu</a></td>
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<td>Rob Saldin</td>
<td><a href="mailto:Rob.Saldin@mso.umt.edu">Rob.Saldin@mso.umt.edu</a></td>
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<td>Daisy Rooks</td>
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<td>Megan Stark</td>
<td><a href="mailto:Megan.Stark@umontana.edu">Megan.Stark@umontana.edu</a></td>
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<td>Dec. 3</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>Megan Stark</td>
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<td>BIOL 295</td>
<td>Sergio Morales</td>
<td><a href="mailto:sergio.morales@mso.umt.edu">sergio.morales@mso.umt.edu</a></td>
<td>Sequencing Writing Assignments and Lessons Consultation</td>
<td>LA 144</td>
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## Spring 2010 Class Presentations and Faculty Consultations

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<td>Ryan Schmidt</td>
<td><a href="mailto:schmidt@bussiness.umt">schmidt@bussiness.umt</a></td>
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<td>M Jackson</td>
<td><a href="mailto:mlejackson@gmail.com">mlejackson@gmail.com</a></td>
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<td>John Walker</td>
<td><a href="mailto:john.walker@mso.umt.edu">john.walker@mso.umt.edu</a></td>
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<td>Valerie Hedquist</td>
<td><a href="mailto:Valerie.Hedquist@mso.umt.edu">Valerie.Hedquist@mso.umt.edu</a></td>
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<td>Leora Bar-el</td>
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<td>Martha Scheer</td>
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<td><a href="mailto:sergio.morales@mso.umt.edu">sergio.morales@mso.umt.edu</a></td>
<td>Science Writing &amp; Sequencing Writing Lessons Consultation</td>
<td>LA 144</td>
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Appendix D

The Writing Center/TRiO Writing Mentorship Program: Proposed Revisions

To continue to best serve TRiO students as they develop as writers in C & I 160, The Writing Center and TRiO will implement the following revisions to the TRiO Writing Mentorship Program during the 2009-2010 academic year.

Revised Objectives

- Provide a writing diagnostic as an entry to discuss writing with students on a one-to-one basis in The Writing Center;
- Provide one-to-one feedback on the writing diagnostic, discussing the student’s approach to the writing task, indicating writing strengths and weaknesses, and framing effective writing as a process of revision;
- Introduce students to academic writing and to the composing process The Writing Center endorses;
- Offer course counseling;
- Provide writing support in the form of on-going tutoring, encouraging students to use The Writing Center as a resource throughout their academic careers;
- Meet and consult with TRiO staff as needed for planning, adjustments to the program, or any other matter that will help TRiO students develop into proficient writers.

Proposed Revisions

1) Provide students with a writing assignment that includes choice and evaluative criteria: offer two choices in the context of a writing assignment, making it clear that students must chose and respond to one of the choices while considering the assignment criteria;
2) Allow students one week to compose a typed essay in response to the chosen prompt. During this week, C & I 160 faculty will encourage students to begin early, to brainstorm, to draft, and to compose over time;
3) Allocate one hour of class time during this week to allow students to work on their drafts;
4) Collect drafts from students and distribute to Gretchen and Jake for reading. No score will be given;
5) Visit C & I 160 sections to discuss academic writing, the power of approaching writing as a process of revision, and general observations of the students’ drafts;
6) Provide one-to-one feedback on students’ drafts and course counseling in The Writing Center (using clipboard sign ups);
7) Invite students to revise their drafts based on feedback in The Writing Center.

These revisions represent three major changes to the existing Writing Mentorship Program: students will be able to choose from two prompts in the context of a writing assignment, students
The Writing Center
AY 2009-2010

will have one week to complete the writing task, and students will receive one-to-one feedback without a score attached to this feedback.

Justifications for Revisions

If a primary goal of the Writing Mentorship Program is to help students develop into proficient writers in an academic environment, The Writing Center’s first introduction to them will be more effective if it is not in the context of a timed and scored writing assessment. We are in the business of helping students see writing as a complex and uneven process that requires revision over time, a view of writing that will serve students as they approach other writing tasks across their academic courses. The diagnostic we use should embody this, and students should come to view The Writing Center as a part of this prolonged process, not as the site for timed writing instruction only, nor as the site for high-stakes evaluation. If we want students to develop the skills necessary to demonstrate their writing proficiency as college students, we need first to help them understand that the “magic” in effective writing is revision. If we want students to perceive The Writing Center tutors as allies, we need to avoid any potential suggestions that tutors formally evaluate student writing beyond assessing strengths and weaknesses in order to aid in a revision process and in meeting the expectations of various writing assignments.

Additionally, a timed writing diagnostic is not an accurate representation of a student’s ability. While no single writing sample can give a comprehensive view of a student’s ability as a writer, inviting a student to write in response to a prompt over the course of one week can at least offer some insight into a student’s writing process without the constraints and anxieties imposed by a timed and scored assessment. Allocating a week for the writing of the diagnostic allows the writing tutor to discuss with the student how he/she approached the writing task over time.

Finally, student writing in response to the Writing Mentorship Program diagnostic should not be scored for two reasons: writing tutors should not provide formalized evaluations of student writing, whether in the form of grades or numbers based on a holistic rubric; and the numerical score does not serve any of the stated objectives of the Program. These objectives are better served by a writing assignment with specific expectations, expectations that the writing tutor can then refer to as he/she works with the student during a tutoring session. C & I 160 faculty report that the numerical score often looms larger than the feedback received in a one-to-one session with a writing tutor and that the score often prompts a negative response from students. Some students who receive a low score see it as confirmation that they are weak writers, and some who receive a mid-range or high score see it as justification that no further work on their writing is necessary. In both cases, the score becomes the focus, not the valuable feedback offered by the writing tutor, feedback that the C & I 160 instructors identify as the “most valuable part of the process.”
Appendix E

ASCRC Writing Committee Report on Writing Assessment Practice at
The University of Montana
Executive Summary

Background
The Upper-division Writing Proficiency Assessment (UDWPA) is a locally designed and administered writing exam that serves as a General Education Requirement for all undergraduates seeking their first bachelor degree. Administered since 1999, the UDWPA vehicle is intended to assess what its originators saw as salient features of undergraduate writing: the ability to craft a first-person thesis-driven argument on an issue under consideration and to sustain a position in response to others’ thinking. The Writing Committee (WC) presents this information to facilitate faculty deliberations about next steps.

Original purposes
The originators intended for the UDWPA to serve a number of purposes:

1. Bring constructive attention to writing through community-based, local conversations across disciplines;
2. Improve writing instruction;
3. Improve writing proficiency;
4. Provide continuous assessment throughout a student’s academic career;
5. Serve as a mid-career gate meant to assess preparedness for writing in upper-division courses.

Research-based beliefs about writing and guiding principles in assessment
The members of the WC ground their work in informed understandings about the nature of writing, knowledge and beliefs which also shape UM’s sequence of General Education Writing Requirements.

- Writing is not an elementary skill like manipulating a keyboard but rather a way of thinking, processing information, generating ideas, organizing material, and constructing meaning.

- Writing is a complex process in which “good” writing depends on the context and the given task. Writers do not work in acontextual conditions but rather process information in response to a set of variables accounted for by the given task.

- As students move through their courses and encounter new rhetorical situations, their development as writers continues to be complex, uneven, and recursive.

Writing assessment design and practice should accurately reflect that writing is a complex process situated in particular rhetorical contexts.

- The WC anchors its analysis of UM’s culture of writing assessment in the context of position statements on assessment by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCC).

- The practices NCTE and CCCC identify as the salient features of responsible assessment practice call for a reevaluation of the UDWPA test instrument.

Current state of UM’s upper-division writing proficiency assessment
The UDWPA does not serve the original purposes of the assessment, does not align with best practices, and does not reflect the primary ways in which students writers are taught and evaluated in their courses.

- The original intentions of the UDWPA are no longer at play: purposes 1-4 are now served by the work of the Writing Committee, by the efforts of The Writing Center, and by the writing tasks, writing guidance, and evaluation students receive in their writing-designated courses.

- The desire to ensure student preparedness to move into upper-division major courses with a certain level of writing competency is understandable. However, the UDWPA, while it is intended as a mid-career gate to assess preparedness for upper-division courses, does not successfully gate students in this broad way. It offers a limited window on how well individual students perform on a single, timed task.

- The UDWPA is a summative assessment and does not meet the desire for guidance.

- The UDWPA is not grounded in a current, sound theoretical foundation regarding teaching and learning of writing.

- The Writing Course Form, the Upper-division Writing Course Form, and the syllabi from these courses reveal that writing at UM is primarily valued, taught, and evaluated as a recursive process of thinking, meaning making, and revising.

- Certain systems constraints invalidate the UDWPA as mid-career assessment.

Alternatives to UM’s current writing assessment practice

In light of the UDWPA’s questionable status as a still valid instrument, the WC offers three potential alternatives to UM’s current writing assessment practice. If faculty conclude that an external perspective would be valuable in determining next steps for UM’s writing assessment culture, a Writing Program Administrator consultant-evaluator could be brought to campus to assist in developing new assessment practices.

1. Continue large-scale individual writing assessment
   - **Analytic scoring** Changing the current holistic scoring procedure would begin to address the desire for an assessment practice that serves a guiding function. The amount of effort required for analytic scoring is significantly greater than the effort required for holistic scoring. Analytic scoring would require not only a reallocation of already scarce resources but also access to additional resources.

   - **Portfolio assessment** Portfolio assessment is a potentially effective form of mid-career student assessment intended to fulfill a gating function. Although portfolio assessment is perhaps the most forward-thinking and philosophically sound version of writing assessment to date and alleviates the timed, one-shot dilemma, it is difficult to develop, complicated to manage, and expensive to administer.

2. Discontinue large-scale individual assessment and redirect resources to new initiatives
   - Redirecting the funds and time The Writing Center (TWC) commits to the UDWPA would allow TWC to build new initiatives that effectively serve the development of student writers and to provide faculty and programs with curricular support for the teaching and learning of writing.

3. Implement formative program-level assessment
Formative programmatic assessment would look at the entire writing curriculum in order to make informed adjustments and revisions to that curriculum, affecting positive changes in the teaching and learning of writing.

ASCRC Writing Committee Report on Writing Assessment Practice at The University of Montana

Introduction

In its capacity as a body charged with overseeing the Upper-division Writing Proficiency Assessment (UDWPA), the ASCRC Writing Committee (WC) not only monitors the passing rates of the exam but also considers the validity of the test vehicle and data produced over time. Growing out of these charges and in response to an invitation from the Chair of Faculty Senate, this report offers an overview of the current state of writing assessment at The University of Montana. As the natural gathering ground both for campus perspectives regarding the UDWPA and for potential alternatives to the exam, the WC considers the views of UM faculty, administrators, and students as well as those of writing assessment specialists across the nation. The WC invites all of these perspectives into a consideration of whether the UDWPA continues to serve its purpose as a valid assessment tool. Mindful of these varied perspectives and of the responsibilities inherent in meaningful assessment, the WC presents a threefold purpose for this report: 1) to provide a context for analysis of UM’s current writing assessment practice by outlining both current research-based beliefs about writing and guiding principles for valid writing assessment, 2) to identify the current extent and limitations of the UDWPA vehicle, and 3) to outline potential alternatives to writing assessment practice as currently embodied at UM.

The WC is keenly aware of the need for assessment that allows faculty and administrators to make informed decisions about students and programs. This report reflects the WC’s belief that assessment is a tool those involved should be able to adapt and employ in order to expand their understandings of teaching and learning. Having a writing assessment instrument in place does not guarantee this instrument will remain valid over time or continue to serve our purposes at UM. Libby Barlow, Steven P. Liparulo, and Dudley W. Reynolds (2004) argue when considering writing assessment, any “inquiry into student writing must necessarily be formative. It must provide information about what to do next and what to examine next as much or more than it provides conclusive information” (p. 54). Hoping to engage faculty in a discussion that honors the complexity inherent in writing, the WC offers this report to facilitate decisions about appropriate next steps.

1. Context: brief history of the UDWPA

The UDWPA is a locally designed and administered writing exam that serves as a General Education Requirement for all undergraduates seeking their first bachelor degree. Administered since 1999, the exam is a response to an ECOS request that the chair of the English department “and others ASCRC deems appropriate” design an assessment program in the area of “Writing/Reading” to be implemented during the 1999-2000 academic year. Faculty Senate approved the UDWPA as a General Education Requirement in the spring of 1999. Oversight of the requirement was to be shared by faculty and administration in the form of the Provost’s Writing Committee, a group comprised of faculty from each of the schools and colleges, and ex-officio members. This committee selected texts and wrote prompts,

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1 Sections of this history are taken from the former UDWPA test administrator’s 2007 “Report on the UDWPA.”
2 Memo dated October 12, 1998, from Dick Walton, Chair, ECOS and Faculty Senate, to Jim Hirstein, Chair, ASCRC, titled “ECOS Charge to ASCRC.”
evaluated the scoring process, communicated the requirement to students, adjudicated student appeals, set policy, and coordinated the campus units most involved in implementation. In Fall 2002, The Writing Center was added to the list of programs responsible for helping to administer the exam. In May 2005, the Provost’s Writing Committee was disbanded and oversight of the UDWPA was transferred to the ASCRC Writing Committee. Since this transfer and in light of the WC’s additional responsibilities, administration of the UDWPA has ceased to be shared among faculty and various departments, with a majority of the coordination falling to The Writing Center alone. The exam continues to be offered six times each academic year, with early morning, mid-morning, and afternoon time slots scheduled on each exam date.

1.1. Vehicle design and scoring

Currently, the UDWPA vehicle is intended to assess what its originators saw as salient features of undergraduate writing: the ability to craft a first-person thesis-driven argument on an issue under consideration and to sustain a position in response to others’ thinking. Each new assessment text is made available to students two weeks in advance of the exam. Students may download the text from the Mansfield Library’s electronic reserves or from UM’s UDWPA website. Scoring criteria are available online at all times. At the exam, students are provided two prompts and are allowed two hours to type or two and one half hours to handwrite their responses to one of these prompts. Students may not use prepared notes during the exam; however, a clean copy of the text is provided to each student.

Exams are scored using a holistic rubric and standard protocol. In June 2007, the former test administrator implemented a two-tiered scoring method that required a second reading only of student essays with low, borderline, and high scores. Previously, all essays were read twice. With this change, clearly passing but not exceptional essays were read once while essays with low, borderline, and high scores were read twice. The former test administrator implemented this scoring method in order to streamline the scoring process while continuing to use the existing scoring criteria given the cost savings the new method provided and the test administrator’s trust in the high inter-rater reliability.

After observing the UDWPA scoring process, the current test administrator initiated a return to the previous method that required all exams be read and scored twice. Currently, all exams are read by two scorers who have been trained to apply the scoring criteria consistently. Exams are read by a third scorer in particular instances: when an exam receives a borderline score (one passing and one non-passing) or when an exam receives two scores that are more than one score point apart.

1.2. Original purposes

The originators intended for the UDWPA to serve a number of purposes: 1) to bring constructive attention to writing through community-based, local conversations across disciplines, 2) to improve writing instruction, 3) to improve writing proficiency, 4) to provide continuous assessment throughout a student’s academic career, and 5) to serve as a mid-career gate meant to assess preparedness for writing in upper-division courses. With the development of a writing curriculum that spans a student’s academic tenure at UM, purposes 1-4 are now served by the work of the WC, by the efforts of The Writing Center, and by the writing tasks, writing guidance, and evaluation students receive in their writing-designated courses. The UDWPA neither functions as an avenue for improving writing instruction—it is distinct and

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3 For more information about the UDWPA and how students are advised to prepare, see the UDWPA website at http://www.umt.edu/udwpa.
4 The UDWPA scoring rubric is available at http://www.umt.edu/udwpa/docs/criteria.pdf. In addition, a detailed discussion of the UDWPA scoring criteria is available for students to consider at http://umt.edu/udwpa/docs/expectations.pdf.
separate from the writing curriculum and its goals—nor provides students with formative guidance intended to improve their abilities as writers. The exam therefore serves no formative purpose with regards to students or the curriculum.

Regarding the final purpose—to serve as a mid-career gate meant to assess preparedness for writing in upper-division courses—the UDWPA, while it is intended to serve this gating function, does not successfully gate students in this broad way. Although the UDWPA provides information regarding how well a student can produce a timed essay in response to a prompt, the exam does not allow strong inferences about students’ preparedness to write for upper-division courses. The exam therefore serves a much more limited gating function than originally intended.

Also critical is the distinction between individual and programmatic writing assessment. While some originators of the UDWPA believed the exam would provide opportunities for professional discussion and reflection among faculty on the ways in which UM facilitates the development of student writers across the curriculum, the exam generally does not serve this programmatic, formative purpose. In its current iteration, the UDWPA is an example of individual assessment of student performance, not a vehicle for programmatic feedback. Because students often scramble to complete the exam just prior to graduation and because the exam is not logically tied to UM’s writing curriculum, it does not provide a window on UM’s current practices and efficacy as an institution devoted to facilitating writing development. Instead, the exam offers a limited window on how well individual students perform on a single, timed task.

2. Context: research-based beliefs about writing and guiding principles in assessment

The members of the WC ground their work in a number of informed assumptions about the nature of writing, assumptions which also shape UM’s sequence of General Education Writing Requirements. Concern over student writing performance at UM is part of a long-standing theme in higher education dating back as early as the 1890s at institutions as prestigious as Harvard. On occasion, these frustrations over student writing grew out of “the assumption that writing was an elementary transcription skill” (Russell, 2002, p. 7). Because writing is not an elementary skill like manipulating a keyboard but rather a way of thinking, processing information, generating ideas, organizing material, and constructing meaning, writing is a complex process in which “good” writing depends on the context and the given task. Writers do not work in acontextual conditions but rather process information in response to a set of variables accounted for by the given task: genre requirements, content, purpose, audience, role of the writer, occasion generating the writing, etc. Experienced writers consider all of these variables at once, an orchestration that changes as the demands of the rhetorical situation change and as the writer processes ideas and revises the product. In effect, a basic tenet of composition stresses that “all aspects of writing, including grammar, are contextually dependent” (Lynne, 2004, 73). Due to the complexity of this contextual activity, as students move through their courses and encounter new rhetorical situations, their development as writers continues to be complex, uneven, and recursive. Writing assessment design and practice should take into account and grow out of this view of writing.

Because writing competence is complex and developed unevenly over time in a variety of contexts, any attempt to assess writing is bound to become a large task that cannot be administered by one department alone. While efforts to implement a writing curriculum across a student’s academic tenure is a laudable move in the right direction, any commitment to writing across departments and to writing assessment demands sustained and significant reserves of attention and resources. In the case of writing assessment, there exists “an inverse ratio between ease of assessment and value of result,” a fact underscoring the point that “‘easy’ assessments—such as multiple-choice tests or measurements focusing only grammar, for example—are not effective (Schneider, Leydens, Olds, & Miller, 2009, p. 78). The single writing
sample, though more convenient to administer than a portfolio assessment relying on multiple samples of student writing, may not provide the answers sought. The assessment vehicle should honor the complexity of the competence assessed.

In an effort to formulate a conceptual framework for writing assessment that more fully takes into account this view of writing, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) have issued position statements outlining guiding principles for writing assessment. Joseph Janangelo and Linda Adler-Kassner (2009) identify the common denominators in these documents as “hallmarks of valid, fair, and generative assessment” (pp. 11-12). The WC anchors its analysis of UM’s culture of writing assessment in the following guiding principles adapted from Janangelo and Adler-Kassner:

1. Current research in learning, writing, and assessment should inform assessment design, implementation, and validation.

2. Because the validation of any assessment practice is ongoing, stakeholders should expect changes in the instrument, its data, and its influence over time.

3. Assessment should be a communal inquiry with all affected stakeholders involved in the design, administration, and validation of the practice.

4. Because a single writing sample cannot accurately demonstrate a student’s overall writing ability, assessment should use multiple measures and analyze multiple samples of student writing produced on different occasions in response to varied writing tasks. This is particularly important in the case of assessments whose results will be used to make high-stakes decisions about student progress.

5. Assessment inquiry and findings should take into account the contexts in which learning takes place. Assessment practices that draw conclusions about student progress in a curriculum should be aligned with that curriculum and the ways in which students are and will be taught and evaluated.

6. Assessment should not invite students to produce decontextualized, artificial writing. Valid assessment recognizes that meaningful writing is defined by rhetorical contexts.

7. Assessment is best used as a feedback loop meant to improve teaching and learning.

8. Responsible and sustainable assessment practices must be supported by significant reserves of time and money.

This list, rooted in what NCTE and CCCC identify as the salient features of responsible assessment practice, calls for a reevaluation of the UDWPA test instrument.

3. The current state of UM's upper-division writing proficiency assessment

Although the UDWPA is a locally designed direct assessment and may have served UM well in the past, the exam no longer serves its intended purposes as an impetus for sustained cross-disciplinary conversations about the teaching of writing, as an opportunity to inform writing instruction, as a vehicle

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5 These position statements are available online at http://www.ncte.org/positions/assessment.
to improve student writing proficiency, or as a mid-career gate assessing student preparedness for writing in upper-division courses. The WC examines the UDWPA taking validity as a compass: to what extent is the UDWPA grounded in a current, sound theoretical foundation regarding teaching and learning of writing, and to what extent do UDWPA test scores allow strong inferences about students’ preparedness to write for upper-division courses or allow conclusions about curricular revisions? The fact that the UDWPA no longer serves its intended purposes or meets this two-pronged definition of validity is evidenced by the following: 1) the exam is not fulfilling its intended function as a broad gate, nor is it capable of answering the desire for a guide that improves student writing abilities, 2) the exam does not align with the ways in which students are taught and evaluated in their courses nor does it align with best practices as defined by current research and theories about writing, and 3) even if the exam did align with the curriculum and with best practices, certain systems problems that hinder student registration preclude the exam from fulfilling its intended gating function.

3.1. Individual assessment purpose: gating mechanism

While the UDWPA was originally intended to serve a number of ambitious purposes, it now functions as a limited gating mechanism revealing whether a student can successfully produce a piece of writing in response to a prompt and under timed restraints. In effect, the UDWPA gates but not in the way originally intended. Because any given exam is designed to test specific competencies, that exam will be limited in its ability to predict capabilities beyond the specific competencies assessed. The UDWPA tests students’ ability to write a timed essay in response to a given prompt based on a particular text. This limited gate does not ensure broad preparedness to write in upper-division courses that present students with notably different writing tasks and expectations.

Varied definitions of preparedness and multiple expectations of how this preparedness might be demonstrated in writing further complicate any discussion of a gating function. Even with these diverse definitions and expectations at play, the desire to ensure student preparedness to move into upper-division major courses with a certain level of writing competency is understandable. However, research does not support an expectation that a singled timed writing sample will accurately indicate a student’s ability to transfer certain competencies to future work.

For example, when the expectation is for students to use writing as a vehicle to demonstrate the ability to think critically, a timed writing is a poor tool in assessing this ability. In the case of a timed writing occasion, essays that exhibit “good enough” formal features also often exhibit formulaic organization and shallow thinking, a phenomenon perhaps influenced by the reductive strategies some students have developed in response to standardized timed writing testing. Investigating this lack of critical thinking as demonstrated through a written product, William Condon and Diane Kelly-Riley (2004) at Washington State University applied a critical thinking rubric to a timed writing portion of a large-scale junior-level portfolio writing assessment. They found that “the better the writing, the lower the critical thinking score, but the more problematic the writing, the higher the critical thinking score” (p. 61).

Lack of alignment between the UDWPA and the varied writing tasks students encounter in an upper-division writing course further compounds the limitations of the gating function. While some may define preparedness as the ability to perform those tasks commonly associated with writing in certain lower- and upper-division courses, the UDWPA timed writing task does not invite students to engage in the thinking and writing processes students often encounter these courses. For example, the exam does not ask students to engage in research, to evaluate multiple sources, to analyze and synthesize multiple perspectives, to organize new information, to consider a specific audience and context, or to adhere to genre-specific conventions. To assume the UDWPA can predict performance in significantly different contexts and on considerably different tasks takes a much too reductive view of writing. Not only is the developmental sequence of a student writer more complex than a simple linear progression that assumes
students “learn to write” and then enter upper-division coursework, but also the timed writing task is far removed from the more sophisticated and recursive research-based writing tasks students encounter in their upper-division courses.

Equally important, the UDWPA does not guarantee preparedness as defined by broad and consistent control over paragraphing and grammatically correct prose. Problematic organization, poor development of ideas, and uneven sentence-level control may occur in students’ upper-division writing for a number of reasons. First, some students simply choose not to commit the time and attention necessary for carefully organized, developed, and edited documents. Obviously, successful crafting of a single timed writing sample or the successful completion of writing assignments in lower-division courses cannot promise that capable students will choose to be equally attentive to future writing assignments.

Second, temporary regression may account for the problematic organization and lack of sentence-level control observed students’ upper-division writing. This regression occurs when students attempt to transfer knowledge to unfamiliar contexts and new tasks. Research suggests that as students grapple with new or more complex tasks and higher order thinking skills, certain competencies temporarily regress (Carroll, 2002; Haswell, 1991). If, for example, a student’s UDWPA essay exhibits control over paragraphing, sentence-level correctness, and mechanics, this control will not necessarily transfer when the student is faced with an unfamiliar or more complex writing task defined by a different rhetorical situation. Therefore, the UDWPA does not serve the purpose of ensuring broad and consistent control over these competencies.

Third, problems with organization and sentence-level correctness may simply reflect a lack of knowledge. Presumably, those students whose problematic writing is not accounted for by regression when faced with a new task but rather by significant gaps in their literacy and lack of competency in basic, sentence-level skills would have been “gated” at an earlier stage in their academic careers. Students whose lack of sentence-level competency inhibits their success in college-level writing should be identified and guided long before they complete 45-70 credits. If the UDWPA is intended to gate this subset of students, UM must consider whether allocating resources to a large-scale junior-level assessment of all students is the best method for identify this particular group. Since 2007, approximately 75-85% of students pass a given UDWPA exam. Of those who do not pass, some fail to read the assessment text ahead of time, some fail to move beyond summary of the text as required by the prompt, some fail to develop a consistent and logical argument, and some fail to answer the question presented. This leaves a small percentage of students who fail due to a lack of competency regarding more basic writing skills such as correct syntax, grammar, and usage. While this underprepared population certainly exists at UM, a large-scale timed writing assessment may not be the best method for “catching” this group of students so late in their academic careers.

3.2. Individual assessment purpose: guiding mechanism

The UDWPA is not a formative assessment, and as such, it does not contribute to students’ development as writers. Rather, the UDWPA is a summative assessment intended to gate or certify a certain level of competence; consequently, the UDWPA does not meet the desire for guidance that improves writing proficiency and may not ever meet this desire because a timed writing occasion offers only glimpse, a moment in time, into a student’s writing abilities. If a single writing sample does not represent a student’s total ability as a writer, this single sample does not warrant conclusions about a student’s preparedness (gating) or about what a student still needs to develop (guiding).

Even so, some originators of the UDWPA envisioned a guiding function for the exam. These individuals assumed students would voluntarily seek help after an unsuccessful attempt. However, this assumption is not borne out by trends in student behavior. Students generally do not pick up their exams or seek one-to-
one tutoring to glean an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. Those students The Writing Center contacts in order to encourage post-test tutoring often perceive this guidance as punitive rather than instructive. Additionally, although some students do carefully read the scoring criteria and explanation of the features considered, they do not always understand the language of the criteria nor do they necessarily recognize how these criteria might inform their learning in upper-division courses.

3.3. Lack of alignment with curriculum and best practices

Although Faculty Senate originally called for and facilitated the implementation of the UDWPA, decreased interest in and collaborative oversight of the exam has led to an isolated writing assessment administered without sustained faculty involvement. While Faculty Senate and the Office of the Provost jointly instituted the requirement envisioning a community-based assessment supported by a network of campus personnel and programs, today there is no longer broad-based campus input in or support for the administration of the exam. This lack is critical in that without cross-campus input and support, the exam may not be responsive to the ways in which faculty define and measure upper-division preparedness.

This fact brings into relief the necessity that the design of the assessment instrument be aligned both with what students have been taught and with what will be expected of them in future courses. The Writing Course Form, the Upper-division Writing Course Form, and the syllabi from these courses reveal that writing at UM is taught and evaluated as a recursive process of thinking, meaning making, and revising. Because valid writing assessment requires alignment between what is being tested and the intended goals and objectives of the curriculum, it is fair to question whether the UDWPA measures the ways in which writing is discussed and practiced in the classroom. The timed nature of the instrument often results in trite essays mirroring a five-paragraph theme, a formulaic response to a high-stakes timed assessment that may inspire reductive writing strategies. Students have access to the text two weeks prior, and they are given two potential prompts at the time of the exam with two hours to craft an essay. Students are afforded little time to perform many of the recursive steps taught in WRIT 101, Writing Courses, and Upper-division Writing Courses: generating ideas, gathering information, evaluating sources, crafting research questions, attending to audience needs, organizing, drafting, reorganizing, incorporating informed reader feedback, revising, proofreading, editing, etc.

UM’s efforts to integrate writing expectations and assessment across a student’s academic tenure are supported by two insights outlined in current research: students develop as writers unevenly over time and in all of their courses, and writing is a complex and context-dependent process. The soundness of the UDWPA assessment instrument can be further interrogated based on these views of writing. Mentioned above, while a single writing sample may indicate a student’s ability to produce a timed essay, it neither represents a student’s total ability nor allows students to engage in the process-oriented approach to writing the rest of the curriculum endorses. In effect, a single timed writing sample as the primary tool for individual assessment fails to reflect students’ prior writing experiences and does not require that students draw upon those writing strategies commonly required in future courses (Camp, 1993, p. 51). UM is not alone in its experience of “a mismatch between the complexities of the conceptual framework for writing that we find in current research and practice and the simpler construct implied by traditional approaches to writing assessment, including the writing sample” (Camp, 1993, pp. 51-52). The gap this mismatch precipitates compels us to reconsider assessment practice at UM.

3.4. Systems constraints: the 45-70 credit rule and seat availability

6 Writing Course Guidelines are available at http://www.umt.edu/facultysenate/committees/ASCRC/subcommittees/writing_committee/guidelines.aspx.
In addition, certain systems constraints invalidate the UDWPA as mid-career assessment. Because students have taken an average of 90 credits at the time of attempt, the exam has become a senior-level exit exam, a function it was never intended to serve. Lack of enforcement of the 45-70 credit rule alone voids the gating function of the exam. Because most students attempt the exam well after the 70-credit marker, it is difficult to use passing rates as an indication of mid-career ability. This postponement of registration results in the student misperception that the exam is a graduation exit exam.

Seat availability also contributes to the problem of students attempting the exam after the 70-credit marker. The Office of the Registrar opens approximately 3,120 – 3,400 UDWPA seats each academic year. However, two circumstances hamper students’ ability to register for the UDWPA. First, Cyberbear currently allows students to register for multiple sections. As a result, many students register not only for multiple test dates but also for multiple sections on a given test date, thereby taking valuable seat space from other potential registrants. The test administrator currently is consulting with the Registrar to inquire into a systems solution to this problem. Second, there is a significant no-show rate for UDWPA exams. For example, the February 6, 2010, exam had approximately 540 students registered. Only 396 students took the exam, leaving 144 empty seats for this single test date.

3.5. Cost

If the UDWPA neither meets the expectations of the faculty nor serves the purpose of providing the data needed, the defensibility of allocating already scarce resources for the administration of the exam is questionable. Each year, valuable time and money are committed to the administration of the UDWPA. This effort and these funds cannot, therefore, be used for tutoring and other writing-across-the-curriculum activities that could be expanded to help students develop as writers and that could support faculty in their efforts.

4. Alternatives to UM’s current writing assessment practice

In light of the UDWPA’s questionable status as a still valid instrument, the WC offers an outline of potential alternatives to UM’s current writing assessment practice. The WC presents these alternatives in order to facilitate faculty deliberations regarding next steps. To summarize, the originators saw the exam as an opportunity to foster cross-campus discussions around writing, to provide a feedback loop for curricular revision, and to motivate students to voluntarily seek out further guidance. The exam no longer serves these particular functions. With the development of a writing curriculum that spans a student’s academic tenure at UM, these purposes are now served by the work of the WC, by the efforts of The Writing Center, and by the writing tasks, writing guidance, and evaluation students receive in their writing-designated courses. The conceptual framework that informs our current writing curriculum puts an emphasis on feedback and revision, a composing process to which students do not have access when writing a timed essay. Finally, although the UDWPA provides information regarding how well a student can produce a timed essay in response to a prompt, the exam does not allow strong inferences about students’ preparedness to write for upper-division courses or about necessary curricular modifications.

If faculty conclude that an external perspective would be valuable in determining next steps for UM’s writing assessment culture, a Writing Program Administrator consultant-evaluator could be brought to campus to assist in developing new assessment practices in light of the findings presented here. As part of this work and to help us identify strengths and weaknesses, the consultant may be asked to review UM’s Composition Program, the work of the WC on Writing and Upper-division Writing Courses, and the work of The Writing Center. Based on the external reviewer’s feedback, UM may be better prepared to institute a writing assessment plan that both meets UM’s needs and aligns with best practices, whether programmatic or individual in nature.
The following are not presented as mutually exclusive options. That is, UM may decide to pursue the last option listed, program-level assessment, regardless of whether large-scale individual assessment of students continues.

4.1. **Option one: continue large-scale individual writing assessment**

**Analytic scoring of UDWPA essays**

Changing the UDWPA’s current holistic scoring procedure to an analytic scoring procedure would begin to address the desire for an assessment practice that serves a guiding function. Holistic scoring is based on the whole picture of the writing evaluated. Raters generate one score for a student’s UDWPA essay after weighing particular features outlined in the scoring criteria: responsiveness, development, organization, voice, and mechanics. It is an appropriate scoring method for assessment instruments that screen, rank, or place and for large-scale assessments that divide students into groups. Analytic scoring, on the other hand, isolates scoring features and furnishes explicit, descriptive criteria for each feature. Raters generate multiple scores looking at each feature independently. Analytic scoring is appropriate for assessment instruments that diagnose or provide feedback meant to influence students’ revision processes or to inform writing instruction. This aim differs from the UDWPA’s current gating purpose and the holistic scoring procedures that group students based on proficiency. The scoring method used should reflect the purpose of the assessment: for gates intended to certify, the preferred method is holistic scoring; for guides intended to provide feedback, the preferred method is analytic scoring.

Analytic scoring would allow for richer formative assessment of individual students provided that the feedback produced aligns with curricular goals. This would require that students attend to the feedback and use it productively in ways authentically connected to their coursework. It would also require that faculty tie and adapt the analytic rubric to writing assignments in their courses. Such a change to analytic scoring, however, would not alter the overriding concern that the test is a timed instrument with limited validity. A move to analytic scoring also would not address the fact that the UDWPA provides individual student assessment rather than programmatic assessment meant to evaluate the writing curriculum at UM. Finally, because an analytic rubric requires that scorers be trained on each of the individual features scored so as to ensure reliable and consistent application of the rubric across writing samples and because the actual scoring process is time intensive, the amount of effort required for analytic scoring is significantly greater than the effort required for holistic scoring. Analytic scoring would therefore require not only a reallocation of already scarce resources but also access to additional resources.

**Portfolio assessment**

Portfolio assessment is a potentially effective form of mid-career student assessment intended to fulfill a gating function. Applying the conceptual framework for writing and the guiding principles for valid writing assessment discussed above, some institutions have considered moving to portfolio assessment to measure individual performance. Portfolio assessment traditionally allows for multiple samples of student writing, including artifacts from the composing process such as drafts with instructor feedback. These samples are often chosen by the student as evidence of proficiency in a variety of rhetorical situations. Some portfolio assessments, such as the large-scale junior-level portfolio assessment at Washington State University, also include a timed writing sample. Those selections from coursework allow for a contextualized view of a student’s ability to write in response to particular rhetorical situations; and selections, because they are generated in classroom contexts, ensure that the assessment aligns with the ways in which students are taught and evaluated in their courses. Portfolios offer both a direct measure of writing and multiple samples from across curricular contexts.
While an on-demand timed writing sample affords limited data on student ability, portfolio assessment answers more complex questions about student writing and preparedness. Research in writing assessment stresses the point that valid use of data must acknowledge the scope of the question the assessment vehicle attempts to answer. William Condon (2001) argues that the limitation of direct timed writing assessments “to one sample collected under only one set of writing conditions—and that set itself the most constrained and unrealistic of all conditions under which people write—means that direct tests…are able to answer only fairly simple, straightforward questions” (p. 30). Therefore, valid use of student scores must acknowledge the limited scope of information afforded by the assessment tool.

Although portfolio assessment is perhaps the most forward-thinking version of writing assessment to date and alleviates the timed, one-shot dilemma, it is difficult to develop, complicated to manage, and expensive to administer, prompting the group that developed the oft-referenced junior-level Washington State University Portfolio assessment to compare the endeavor to “shooting Niagara” (Haswell, Wyche-Smith, & Johnson-Shull, 1995). While more philosophically sound than a timed writing exam, portfolio assessment would require sustained support in the form of organized, meticulous faculty work in developing writing sample selection criteria, crafting a rubric, performing the scoring of thousands of portfolios each academic year, and potentially providing comments on multiple pages of student work. Portfolio assessment would therefore require additional resources beyond those currently allocated to the UDWPA. Also, students would be required to maintain these portfolios in paper or electronic format and to submit them for review in a timely manner. All of this would have to take place prior to a student’s enrollment in upper-division coursework.

4.2. Option two: discontinue large-scale individual assessment and redirect resources to new initiatives

Discontinue the UDWPA

An additional option is to retire the UDWPA and redirect resources to facilitate new initiatives aimed at helping students become more proficient writers. While having allowed for discussions leading to new views of writing and writers at UM, the exam does not appear to fulfill UM’s current needs. No longer serving as a suitable gathering ground for faculty to discuss writing, teaching, and learning, no longer connected to the writing curriculum, and no longer serving to guide students to become more adept writers, the UDWPA fulfills one narrow function not tied to the curriculum: to indicate those who are proficient at producing a decontextualized timed essay in response to a prompt. Inferring student preparedness to write for upper-division writing courses is not a valid use of UDWPA test scores. Because timed writing exams such as the UDWPA perform evaluation that is separate from any classroom context, they “result in poorer data and less direct—and hence less useful—evaluations” (Condon, 2001, p. 47). Due to these reasons and because the UDWPA instrument is not grounded in the well-informed conceptual framework for writing that informs UM’s writing curriculum and its emphasis on feedback and revision, eliminating the requirement and redirecting resources is a logical option. 

Redirect resources

Redirecting the funds and time The Writing Center (TWC) commits to the UDWPA would allow TWC to build new writing-across-the-curriculum initiatives that effectively serve the development of student writers at UM and to provide faculty and programs with curricular support for the teaching and learning of writing. Focused on supporting both writing as a mode of learning in any course and on writing as a

7 Though often based on reasons different than those outlined in this report, questioning the UDWPA requirement has been a common impulse among students. This report may result in a significant increase in the number of students writing letters to petition for the right to waive the UDWPA requirement.
mode of communicating in particular disciplines and genres, TWC is positioned to provide students and programs with support that will more fully satisfy the need for formative guidance. As a result, TWC could focus on its mission: to promote students’ development as writers and to provide faculty support.

Some initiatives aimed at guiding students’ development and supporting faculty that might grow out of redirected UDWPA funds include:

- Trained Writing Assistants assigned to specific courses to provide feedback on student writing;
- Discipline-specific writing tutors;
- Student workshops focusing on specific writing concerns such as scholarship essays, graduate school applications, grant proposals, integration of sources, proper documentation, common grammar and punctuation issues, etc.;
- Graduate and undergraduate student workshops and opportunities for feedback co-delivered with librarians;
- Online tutoring opportunities;
- Workshops for faculty and co-delivered with faculty to generate understanding of how students develop as writers (e.g. working with ESL writers, encouraging meaningful revision, crafting writing assignments and evaluative criteria, providing effective feedback, embedding writing without increasing workload, etc.);
- Surveys of and interviews with faculty from across the disciplines to determine what types of support they would value and what they expect of students writing in their disciplines;
- An online resource bank of discipline-specific definitions of and guidelines for “good writing” in these disciplines;
- A dictionary of terms used to talk about writing—including discipline-specific terms as well as nebulous ones like “flow”—in order to develop a discourse for talking about writing across campus.

4.3 Option three: implement formative program-level assessment

Eliminating a large-scale individual assessment of student writing would not exonerate UM from the responsibility of valid writing assessment at the program level. Program-level assessment could occur regardless of whether large-scale individual assessment continues. As the sequence of General Education Writing Requirements is now in place and as more courses apply for a writing designation, support of students’ development as writers is embedded across the curriculum. However, there has been no formal evaluation of UM’s writing curriculum—as embodied in WRIT composition courses and in writing-designated courses—nor of the curriculum’s impact on student performance. While the UDWPA focuses on individual student assessment, it does not provide broad program-level assessment.

Formative programmatic assessment would look at the ways in which writing is taught at UM, the degree to which students are demonstrating writing proficiency across contexts and as defined by certain outcomes, and the extent to which students are progressing as writers. Taking a broad look at the teaching and learning of writing at UM, program-level assessment would allow faculty to assess the ways in which writing is formally and informally integrated across the curriculum and to ask new questions whose answers would allow faculty to monitor and develop these practices. For example, the WRIT composition courses and approved Writing and Upper-division Writing Courses at UM already utilize defined sets of learning outcomes. These outcomes could provide the basis for program-level assessment of the varied ways in which teaching supports student learning and writing, and of the extent to which students are meeting these outcomes as demonstrated in their written work.
Formative programmatic assessment such as this would involve faculty who shape and administer the courses in defining the objectives to be evaluated and in identifying the methods of evaluation. Programmatic assessment would move well beyond individual assessment to a broad collection of data obtained from sample portfolios of student work produced in various courses. Program-level assessment that makes use of multiple samples of student writing, the feedback students receive, and artifacts demonstrating what students do with that feedback would begin to accommodate complexity through performance assessments. By collecting actual classroom performances, the assessment practice would remain connected to instruction and allow for rich and varied feedback on UM’s writing curriculum.

5. Conclusion

For the benefit of UM students and faculty, the WC presents this snapshot of UM’s writing assessment landscape and potential alternatives to UM’s current UDWPA writing assessment practice. Whichever course of action the faculty endorse, the WC trusts that it will be one that recognizes the two-pronged definition of validity described above, the conceptual framework that reflects an authentic view of writing and learning, and the guiding principles for valid writing assessment practices.

References


