Program Assessment: Processes, Propagation, and Culture Change

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Abstract: The authors describe their experiences assessing writing-across-the-curriculum and general education programs, paying particular attention to processes and their consequences. At the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UHM), a relatively large research-extensive university, general education assessment activities have been designed around two goals: broadened program ownership and ongoing program improvement through increased faculty involvement. By keeping assessment "at home" and involving faculty members from across the campus in multiple assessment efforts, UHM continues to build its capacity for assessment and promotes an outcomes-guided culture that aims to improve student success.

My almost two years on this Committee have opened my eyes. I finally see how the pieces fit together. We've had great discussions after we've gotten data. Committee members are incredible—there's no loss of energy. We've made some major adjustments in first-year writing already, and as we get more data, we'll be modifying other components too. It's been quite an experience.

—Michael Kirk-Kuwaye, faculty senator
2008-09 chair, General Education Committee

Using data about program effectiveness is the heart of program assessment in higher education. Making "major adjustments" that are sustained, as Dr. Kirk-Kuwaye and our General Education Committee know, works best when you have faculty buy-in, curriculum alignment, clear goals and outcomes, and administrative support. In this article, we describe our assessment experiences with particular attention to some of the consequences of our sustained efforts, including some that we did not fully expect, and offer suggestions. We write because we think that an account of some of our experiences will not only add to the growing literature on assessment research and its outcomes, but may also be helpful to others whose efforts with assessment began more recently than our own.

We have been studying our writing-intensive program at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UHM) since its beginning in 1987 through what today is often seen as assessment (Marsella, Hilgers, & McClaren, 1992; Despain & Hilgers, 1992; Hilgers, Bayer, Stitt-Bergh, & Taniguchi, 1995; Hilgers, Hussey, & Stitt-Bergh, 1999; Stitt-Bergh, 2008). Our long involvement with assessment—within our program, within our program's offshoots, on our campus, and on other campuses—has led us to these conclusions:

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1. Doing assessment "at home"—in-sourcing—has more positive consequences than outsourcing.
2. Multiple assessment studies reflect situational complexities and contribute to understanding a program.
3. Attention to how assessment results are presented can facilitate use of results.

Program Assessment in Higher Education

Definitions and understandings of *assessment* abound. Here we employ the American Association for Higher Education Assessment Forum's definition of *assessment*:

> Assessment is an ongoing process aimed at understanding and improving student learning. It involves making our expectations explicit and public; setting appropriate criteria and high standards for learning quality; systematically gathering, analyzing, and interpreting evidence to determine how well performance matches those expectations and standards; and using the resulting information to document, explain, and improve performance. When it is embedded effectively within larger institutional systems, assessment can help us focus our collective attention, examine our assumptions, and create a shared academic culture dedicated to assuring and improving the quality of higher education. (Angelo, 1995)

This definition makes clear that assessment is *not* course evaluation, teacher evaluation, or program review (although it is typically a component of program review). While assessment can take place at different levels (individual, course, unit, college), our focus in this article is program assessment. We also differentiate *accountability* from *assessment*. Accountability emphasizes the reporting of evaluation results and statistics to external groups (e.g., state and federal agencies, accrediting agencies); the Voluntary System of Accountability serves as an example.

Although public higher education institutions are required to conduct assessment to remain accredited, some professors continue to argue against it. (The National Education Association's fall 2008 *Thought & Action*, for instance, included two anti-assessment articles). We understand the resistance. Assessment that accomplishes its goal—"create a shared academic culture dedicated to assuring and improving the quality of higher education"—involves hard work, time, and openness to changing behaviors and attitudes. Barr and Tagg (1995) and Huba and Freed (2000) went as far as arguing that assessment requires a paradigm shift in higher education. Because K-12 schools have used assessment data for accountability and evaluation, faculty members in higher education often fear that assessment will result in recrimination, firing, decreases in funding or removal of programs, and/or questioning of professional integrity and loss of academic freedom. However, when assessment is designed and used for its intended goal—improvement—the resistance and fear can dissipate.

Our assessment-related practices are designed to improve what we do, not punish nor cast simple judgments. Discovering areas of weakness pushed us and others to change; discovering areas of strength were cause for celebration and sharing of good practices. Each assessment-related practice we describe here involves at least one of the following aspects of student learning outcomes (SLO) assessment:

a. Aligning the curriculum;
b. Establishing student learning outcomes or expectations;
c. Discovering perceptions of learning/teaching or observing/measuring learning;
d. Using results to guide decision-making for purposes of program improvement.

Doing Assessment "At Home"

Institutions of higher education can "outsource" assessment by hiring external evaluators or purchasing tests developed by organizations external to the campus: e.g., the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency, the Collegiate Learning Assessment, and the Measurement of Academic Proficiency and Progress. However, the outsourcing of assessment carries a high price: it signals that the locus of responsibility for assessment is some external organization instead of the program's stakeholders (faculty members, staff, administrators, students). More importantly, assessments run by most external evaluators or organizations do not encourage a campus community to ask serious questions about what it is doing, what it should be doing, and how to become a culture focused on ongoing self-improvement through data-driven decision making. We experienced this "distancing effect" with the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE). Although NSSE highlighted our campus in its "Accreditation Toolkit" document because UHM reports these surveys' results for accountability purposes, our campus has made minimal efforts to *use* the results for program improvement, at least in part because administrators and faculty members are not invested in the process of creating, distributing, or planning uses for the survey's findings.

On the other hand, when an institution in-sources assessment, it has a greater chance of reaching assessment's ultimate goal of program improvement.[1]Faculty members are in the best position to improve student learning because they are in direct contact with students. They should not be excluded or marginalized in any stage of the assessment process. Below we highlight two approaches to the in-sourcing of assessment that helped build capacity and promote an assessment culture on our campus. They also empowered faculty members as agents for change.

Faculty governance as a change agent

Advice from assessment experts and handbooks (e.g., Frye, McKinney, & Trimble, 2006; Maki, 2004; Stassen, Doherty, & Poe, 2001; Walvoord, 2004) often includes the following: start with what already exists (e.g., program descriptions and course master syllabi); ask faculty members to describe the ideal program "graduate." To this sound advice we add the importance of looking at existing structures and processes of faculty governance.

We began to integrate assessment activities into our faculty governance processes when in 1987 we designed our writing-intensive (WI) program as fully faculty-governed. The processes of faculty governance are facilitated by the Mānoa Writing Program, a support office for our faculty's approximately 500 WI classes each semester. The office was created in 1987 by our Faculty Senate and Board of Regents. A faculty governance committee sets academic WI policies (to be implemented by the administration and faculty), reviews and approves course proposals, and uses data to guide decision making. The review and course approval process centers on the WI Hallmarks:

1. **The course uses writing to promote the learning of course materials.** Instructors assign formal and informal writing, both in class and out, to increase students' understanding of course material as well as to improve writing skills.
2. **The course provides interaction between teacher and students while students do assigned writing**; in effect, the instructor acts as an expert and the student as an apprentice in a community of writers. Types of interaction will vary. For example, a professor who requires the completion of one long essay may review sections of the essay, write comments on drafts, and be available for conferences. The professor who requires several short papers may

demonstrate techniques for drafting and revising in the classroom, give guidance during the composition of the papers, and consult with students after they complete their papers.

3. **Writing contributes significantly to each student's course grade. Writing assignments must make up at least 40% of each student's course grade**. If not, the course syllabus must state that students must satisfactorily complete all writing assignments to pass the course with a "D" or better.
4. **The course requires students to do a substantial amount of writing—a minimum of 4000 words, or about 16 pages**. This may include informal writing. Depending on the course content, students may write analytic essays, critical reviews, journals, lab reports, research reports, or reaction papers, etc. In-class exams and drafts are not counted toward the 4000-word minimum.
5. To allow for meaningful professor-student interaction on each student's writing, **the class is restricted to 20 students**. Professors who team teach or who are assisted by a teaching assistant may request that the enrollment be higher as long as a 20-to-1 student to faculty ratio is maintained.

The Hallmarks are more than a course description, for three reasons. First, they require that the instructor draw from a set of pedagogical write-to-learn strategies (strategies of the sort chronicled at the WAC Clearinghouse and discussed on the WAC-L listserv). Second, a writing-across-the-curriculum philosophy is conveyed: writing is best learned in the context of a subject area course. Finally, one Hallmark recognizes that instructors of WI courses can effectively work with only 20 students. The WI faculty committee uses these Hallmarks to determine whether courses receive the WI designation.

The processes involved with creating the WI Hallmarks and applying them is thus a useful assessment activity that should not be overlooked. Every semester, members of the WI committee review proposals from faculty members to determine whether a proposed WI course aligns with the Hallmarks. Each WI proposal includes the instructor's description of required writing and how he/she will help students with their writing. If the instructor is renewing a WI designation, the instructor also submits a brief reflection about the previous WI course: What worked best to help students learn course content through writing? What worked best to help students learn to be more effective writers?

WI committee members read and discuss the proposals. Because our WI courses are offered across the curriculum—currently WI are taught in over 80 different subject areas—the faculty members on the WI committee read myriad writing assignments and see different ways of constructing course syllabi. They learn about the diversity of courses at a land-, sea-, and space-grant university such as ours. The review invites discussion and eventually consensus over what constitutes appropriate writing assignments and whether the assignments will lead students to the desired program outcomes.

Committee members take their experiences and new knowledge about writing across the curriculum with them into their departments and classrooms. After their two- or three-year tenure on the writing committee, they become our best program advocates and can speak fluently on the subject of writing-to-learn. Thus, a very basic assessment process—reviewing assignments and aligning the curriculum to meet the hallmarks and achieve outcomes—can promote the culture change that those of us in assessment seek.

We recognize that from an assessment standpoint, the Hallmarks are insufficient: they are teacher-centered, not student-centered; they describe "inputs," not "outputs." Prior to the assessment movement (which began about 1985 in higher education), inputs were the currency of accreditation. Campuses measured effectiveness by touting what they provided: "inputs" such as the size of the library collection, the number of faculty members with the PhD, the number of programs offered. Now, campuses are asked to measure effectiveness by examining what students take away: "outputs" such as scores from program outcome indicators and reports of what students have learned. Outputs include both direct measures/observations of student learning (e.g., a test) and indirect indictors of student learning such as surveys, questionnaires, interviews, focus groups. (See the UHM Assessment Office website for a list of direct and indirect assessment data-collection methods.) Both direct and indirect methods are needed to paint as complete a picture as possible and guide improvement efforts.

Our Hallmarks list the inputs. They have guided us effectively in establishing outcomes and locating places in the curriculum where students have the opportunities to achieve the outcomes—the recommended first phase of assessment. Below we list the WI SLOs, which are based on the Hallmarks. The creation and regular application of the Hallmarks as part of faculty governance is vital for assessment because those processes align curriculum with Hallmarks and SLOs and encourage effective teaching practices. Faculty members who design courses to meet the Hallmarks are thereby aligning their courses and pedagogy to the WI outcomes.

Our belief that faculty governance processes can play a key role in assessment practices was reinforced when our campus's General Education (GE) requirements were reviewed and then re-designed. In 1999, our Faculty Senate approved a new GE program. Two aspects of the Faculty Senate's GE initiative are of note here:

1. All categories of the GE curriculum were to follow the faculty-governance model of our WI courses. Course-curriculum guidelines and the designation of courses for a specific GE category are all determined by faculty committees working with the General Education Committee (GEC), a standing committee of the Faculty Senate.
2. GE decision-making was to be driven by assessment.

Once the GE faculty committees were established, their first task was to create criteria whereby courses for each GE category would be chosen. These criteria play a vital role in assessment.

The creation of GE-category criteria, like all faculty activities, occurred in a climate of different and sometimes competing political agendas. Once faculty committees completed the first sets of criteria (called "Hallmarks" on all official documents), faculty from across the curriculum were encouraged to propose courses for each category, following the long-employed practice for WI courses. Faculty committees reviewed the proposals and applied the Hallmarks as part of their decision making. When proposals fell short, faculty-to-faculty negotiation took place in an effort to improve a proposal and approve the course. In addition, faculty committees regularly evaluate the effectiveness of their Hallmarks and modify them appropriately. Faculty policy requires a formal review every five years. (The Hallmarks have remained quite stable, although informal reviews occasionally lead to clarification of a Hallmark. See the UHM General Education website for details of current practices.) As we write, several years after the GE process was first employed by our multiple faculty committees, we see a relationship between the number of GE courses in a department and the number of a department's faculty members who have served a term on one of the committees. From

what we gather through ongoing faculty discussions, this is an outcome of faculty governance that had not been explicitly anticipated.

Just as we experienced with the faculty-governed WI program, heavy faculty involvement with the entire GE curriculum resulted in changes in faculty members' behavior and knowledge. From our participation as support staff for the faculty committees, we know that more than 50% of the committee work involves applying the Hallmarks during proposal reviews. (No general education courses retain a category "for life"; all have to be reviewed and renewed periodically.) We hypothesize that the repeated application of criteria and discussion of proposals allows faculty members to return to their home departments with better understandings of what makes a regular course into a GE course. As a result, faculty members who have worked on GE faculty governance are becoming missionaries for curriculum development in their home departments.

In sum, from an assessment standpoint, our faculty governance structure results in

a. a curriculum aligned with program goals;
b. frequent discussion of effective teaching practices;
c. increasing infusion of assessment-related thinking across our campus's academic culture as more faculty members serve out three-year terms on one of six GE faculty committees.

Benefits of faculty governance beyond our campus.

The benefits of faculty governance have not been limited to our campus. UHM, a research-extensive university, is part of a 10-campus system. We found that multi-campus faculty discussions can ultimately lead to an improved, shared curriculum that aligns with campuses' goals and produces good articulation policies.

When the Mānoa Writing Program was created 21 years ago, it immediately launched an effort to bring both the ideology of writing across the curriculum (WAC) and the teaching of WAC courses to other University of Hawai'i (UH) System campuses. That effort introduced WAC curricular reform to most system campuses within three years. All UH campuses created WI courses and employed what came to be known as "The WI Model": a faculty governing committee reviews and approves courses using common UH Hallmarks and similar procedures. Today, all ten campuses employ the "model," and we now fully articulate our System WI courses.

In the 1990s, UHM reformed its GE requirements and then started to work with UH System campuses on articulation. Interestingly, what helped us articulate our reformed GE curriculum across the system involved assessment-guided faculty governance. Specifically, we applied a broadened application of the WI model. In fact, all campuses cited the WI model as the model that would allow the articulation effort to succeed despite occasional cross-campus distrust.

The keys to our success with multi-campus articulation were 1) faculty-driven decision making as practiced in the WI model and 2) cross-campus faculty discussions. Initially, cross-campus discussions were implemented in part by articulation committee members' attending other campuses' decision-making meetings. After a year or so of this, issues were emerging infrequently, and attendance by members from multiple campuses dropped. Although a drop in participation is not usually a positive development, in this case it was a sign of growing trust. And—of critical importance—the WI model of faculty governance spread to all GE areas on most UH campuses. Yes, this form of faculty governance takes time and commitment. But, once achieved, it offers advantages that can be catalysts for reform in other areas.

We have learned from our experiences with faculty governance that large-scale change at a research-extensive university is possible. Because our faculty governance structure and articulation efforts

include activities that fall under the broad assessment umbrella, our campuses collectively have begun the paradigm shift toward a culture of assessment.

From faculty governance of curriculum development toward an assessment-driven academic culture.

As we noted earlier, our faculty-governed process of course review using Hallmarks involves "inputs"—what the faculty members deliver to students. Assessment requires "outputs"—what the students learn and report they learn. This involves the identification of SLOs and investigation of student perceptions and, ultimately, actual achievement. Like many other universities, our faculty was more comfortable establishing guidelines for what was taught rather than identifying what students would learn. Thus, Hallmarks came first; student learning outcomes second.

Our campus GE committees have created Student Learning Outcomes/Expectations (SLOs) for each of our GE curricular categories. Below are the SLOs for the WI program.

After multiple WI courses, students can:

1. Write effective texts
    a. write a final draft that is well-focused, effectively organized, and precise in its language.
    b. edit their written work so that it is reasonably free from errors of usage, mechanics, and spelling.
    c. appropriately incorporate (and credit) source materials.
2. Learn to write in the primary genres of their chosen fields
    a. identify the primary genres of their field, describe identifying characteristics, and write in at least one of the genres.
    b. use vocabulary appropriate for field-specific texts.
    c. follow the writing, documenting, and formatting conventions that are appropriate to a field.
3. Develop strategies for effective writing
    a. define purpose and audience for various writing tasks.
    b. describe processes for composing an effective piece of writing.
    c. revise a draft purposefully.
4. Learn to use and value writing as a tool for learning
    a. use writing to build and expand their understanding of a topic.
    b. use writing to consider different ideas or viewpoints on a topic.
    c. explain to others how writing can be used as a tool for learning.

The WI SLOs reflect, but do not correspond one-to-one with the Hallmarks. One SLO, for example, may reflect multiple Hallmarks or vice versa. Some Hallmarks may not appear as SLOs. These differences evolved quite naturally as the GE committee members who had used the Hallmarks in reviewing course materials developed SLOs. They understood the difference between a Hallmark and a SLO and acted accordingly—by emphasizing the *student* in the SLOs.

Because over a thousand of our faculty members have already used the GE hallmarks to prepare GE-course syllabi, we believe that basic alignment of individual course content to GE outcomes has already taken place. Thus, the GE committees are ready to collect and evaluate direct evidence of student learning. If we had not integrated assessment-related activities into the faculty governance structures, we might not have been able to move toward assessment-guided curriculum improvement so quickly.

The UHM WI SLOs above and our other GE SLOs are similar to but not identical with those at other campuses in the UH System. While we could have chosen to develop SLOs for GE categories as a System, we opted instead to develop SLOs on each individual campus. We wanted each of our campus faculties to take ownership of assessment. We thought that would best happen if we worked locally both to develop and then to assess our own campus's curricula using the campus-developed SLOs. We have found that the collaborative process of establishing outcomes and discussing results is an important part of assessment. Moving those discussions to the System level would take it far from individual campus classrooms and teachers. Local efforts, on the other hand, involve more campus faculty members in curriculum discussions, which in turn increases the chances of faculty buy-in and the development of a culture of assessment. In the future, cross-campus collaboration on assessment may well prove possible. It is likely to be meaningful assessment because it will be built out of multiple local efforts deriving from shared Hallmarks and similar SLOs.

In-sourced interviews as change agents

Another powerful agent of change, one that can multiply the benefits achieved through faculty governance, is conducting interviews to learn students' and faculty members' perceptions of learning and the curriculum. Because interviews are typically self-reports, they ultimately need to be supplemented by direct assessment of student learning. However, we want to acknowledge their ability to positively affect those involved. Interviewing is a shared event between the interviewee and interviewer in which both parties contribute to create a joint product; in other words, co-construction of the interview's meaning takes place (Mishler, 1986). Because of this dynamic, an interview is likely to change both the interviewee and the interviewer. We have seen this happen. At the Mānoa Writing Program, during the 1990s, we interviewed students and faculty in order to assess two of the WI student learning outcomes (also stated above): students develop strategies for effective writing; students learn to use and value writing as a tool for learning.

Student interviewees would comment during or after our interview that they had not previously reflected on their writing assignments, WI courses, writing in their major, or the cumulative effect of their education. The interview process itself had heightened student-participants' awareness of their own learning strategies, writing strategies, and learning in college. We believe these students took away from the interviews new ways of approaching writing tasks and courses. For example, asking a student why she always wrote the introduction of a lab report first—even though she repeatedly struggled with that section—led her to realize she had never considered starting instead with the methods section, which she stated was the easiest section for her to write.

We also interviewed faculty members. We probed their reasons for assigning particular types of writing, their expectations of student writing, grading policies, etc. By articulating what they did and why, faculty members appeared to gain a better understanding of their underlying assumptions. They often went on to identify areas of their teaching that could be improved. Some faculty members commented with surprise that being interviewed involved more thought than they had expected. As the interviewer asked the faculty members for descriptions and examples of "good organization" or "logical structure," for example, interviewees sometimes realized that they could do more to improve how they presented their writing expectations to their students. The fact that they came to these realizations on their own, through the process of explaining genre expectations to a colleague outside their field, probably improved the likelihood that they would make use of the realizations. To improve reliability, we would also ask interviewees to confirm their statements and the research team's interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In most cases, this reliability check also helped the interviewee to reflect more fully on his pedagogy, although in one instance an interviewee disagreed with the "story" we created based on our observations and interviews.

The research team (faculty members, staff, and graduate students) who designed and conducted all of our interview studies also experienced benefits similar to those of the interviewees. Frequent discussions about the data as they were collected led to new learning and understanding. Interviewing requires concentration, curiosity, and the ability to form effective, non-leading follow-up questions during the interview session. This resulted in the interviewers forming hypotheses during the interview and during coding and interpretation. The experience changed the interviewers' understandings of writing and teaching because interviewees' voices carry powerful weight.

Multiple Assessment Studies

A single assessment study provides partial answers and limited data for decision making. Multiple assessment studies help draw a fuller picture of a program or specific program-level student learning outcomes. In addition, studies conducted by similar programs on other campuses can confirm or help explain results. For example, Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) reinforced findings on our campus (Stitt-Bergh, 2008) regarding what characteristics, regardless of discipline and individual differences, faculty members believe pertain to academic writing: persistent study of a focal issue, solid reasoning, aimed at an educated audience. Assessment research, like all forms of research, contributes to the body of knowledge, locally, nationally, and internationally.

Some of our assessment studies have been published (Brown, Hilgers, & Marsella, 1991; Hilgers, Bayer, Stitt-Bergh, & Taniguchi, 1995; Hilgers, Hussey, & Stitt-Bergh, 1999; Marsella, Hilgers, & McClaren, 1992), while others were distributed as technical reports, executive summaries, pamphlets, memos, and newsletters. Below is a list of the types of assessment and institutional research studies we have conducted on our first-year composition and WI programs:

- Transcript Analysis
    - Grades, course-taking patterns, and graduation/retention rates of students from different groups (e.g., student placed into remedial, standard, or honors composition courses)
    - WI-course taking: when (freshman, sophomore, etc), in what subject areas, whether in or out of major, number of WI courses completed
    - First-year writing course completion rates and when course was taken (first semester, second, etc.)
- Ethnography
    - High school to university connection: observations of high school senior-level and A.P. English classrooms; interviews with teachers and students on beliefs about writing in high school and in college; categorization of the types of assigned writing; calculation of the average number of pages written by high school seniors
    - Student-writing mentor relationship and student-teacher relationship in a first-year writing course: observations of student-mentor interactions; classroom observations; analysis of written texts; student survey; student focus group; mentor focus group [in progress]
- Text Analysis
    - College students' revision strategies
    - WI syllabi review: types of writing assignments; drafts required or optional; number of pages of formal writing and informal writing; characteristics of a good syllabus
    - Differences between high-quality essays and low-quality essays written for the writing placement exam (used to place incoming students into the appropriate level first-year writing course)
- Interviews
    - College seniors' perceptions of the WI requirement and WI program

    - College students' experiences in their first WI course within their major
    - College students' experiences related to writing and learning in the major and out of the major
    - Faculty beliefs about and characteristics of good student writing
- Focus Groups
    - Alumni perceptions of workplace writing tasks and their level of preparedness to undertake those writing tasks
- Statistical Analyses
    - WI class sizes, number of sections, areas of need
    - Number of entering students ready for college level, honors level, or not ready for college composition courses as determined by the incoming students' writing placement exam
    - Writing placement exam reliability
- Surveys
    - End-of-semester course evaluations in WI courses
        - Student perceptions and self-reports related to the WI Hallmarks and Outcomes
        - Faculty perceptions and self-reports on teaching WI courses
    - Faculty members' opinions about the accuracy of students' placements in first-year writing courses
    - Faculty development workshop evaluations
- Direct Assessment
    - Student writing achievement in composition courses

These studies provided both qualitative data (e.g., student and faculty voices, text analyses) and quantitative data (e.g., descriptive statistics, reliability estimates). As is typical in research, one study often led us to new questions which prompted another study. For example, when we interviewed seniors, we found out that they were, on average, more satisfied with WI courses within their major. We wanted to know why. Two follow-up interview studies were run that focused on writing and learning in the major. In the interviews, students stressed that they wanted to be adequately prepared for post-college writing. They valued writing tasks or writing skills that seemed explicitly connected to a future work situation. Because most students were interested in the subject area of their major, they enjoyed delving deeply into research projects and writing up the results and were even self-motivated to put forth additional effort. Our multiple studies led us to one factor that seemed to be at the core of differences we saw across student experiences: individual students' majors.

Another repeated finding from the interview studies was that after taking multiple WI courses, students came to understand that writing can promote learning, encourage deeper thinking, and increase writing confidence. This was good news for us because we knew from our interviews with faculty members that they wanted students to engage deeply with the subject material and to be critical thinkers. Having both students' and faculty members' perspectives allowed us to identify the classroom strategies that encourage such alignment.

We also looked at the extent to which students and professors shared an understanding of a writing task and its goals. We interviewed professors about their writing assignments and then interviewed students from their classes about their work on those assignments. We had hoped that instructors' intentions corresponded with students' perception, but we were disappointed. The results prompted us to write an issue of our *Writing Matters* newsletter on how to construct a writing assignment that students understand and better meets their needs. Students want to know how the assignment will help them learn course material, fits the goals of the course, or reflects professional writing. They

want directions—a sequence of steps to take—on how to complete the assignment. Other issues of *Writing Matters* similarly grew out of our assessment studies.

Another study was designed to better understand characteristics of good student writing in three disciplines (Stitt-Bergh, 2008). In 400-level WI courses in art, biology, and psychology, faculty members often gave students writing assignments intended to teach writing in a discipline-specific genre. Among the faculty participants in this study, genre markers were clear to those within the discipline that employed the genre. Most immediately identified the genre upon reading the student writing even without knowing the assignment. Some of the faculty members' expectations for good student writing were tied to the genre, but there was agreement across the three fields about what characteristics constitute good student writing. The key "common" characteristics were: a) establish a focus; b) set and fulfill organizational expectations; c) create coherence; d) provide evidence and explanation; e) use unambiguous sentences; and f) follow grammar and mechanics rules. Armed with this knowledge, the WI faculty committee can design a useful, meaningful assessment project to assess senior-level writing, and these characteristics can form the basis of a scoring rubric. Because the characteristics may manifest themselves differently across genres, the rubric can be tailored to meet the needs of a program. (Washington State University's Critical Thinking Project is an example of how a faculty adapts a common rubric.)

Our experiences increased our belief in the value of multiple assessment-related research studies. There will inevitably be calls for out-sourced data-collection and interpretation, reliance on single studies for answers to questions for which they were not designed, and replacement of multiple inquiry sites with a single "research unit" such as an Institutional Research Office. While we occasionally feel drawn toward such things ourselves, we cannot let expediencies of the moment outweigh what we have learned through our own experiences again and again. Ongoing faculty involvement in the assessment process and multiple types of assessment experiences can lead to behavior change when improvement is needed.

Making Assessment Results Lead to Action

Use of assessment results for program improvement—"closing the loop"—is the ultimate goal, but reaching it is a challenge. Our experiences lead us to believe there are two factors that can increase the chances that results are thus used. First, we recommend a mixed-method approach or using multiple methods across several studies. In our experience, nothing is more convincing than an accumulated combination of thick descriptions and supportive statistics. The credibility of either sort of data alone is insufficient for a wide-reaching persuasive argument; a combination, on the other hand, can be vivid and convincing. For example, some administrators want results reported as numbers. However, they may delight if they also hear the voices behind the numbers. We have seen faculty members re-invigorated in their teaching after hearing student voices. But they also want to know how many students the voices represent.

Second, effective presentation of results can overcome use-related challenges. Poor presentation of credible, accurate results decreases chance of use. In extreme cases, poor presentation can be detrimental. One semester we experienced a poor presentation of our campus's NSSE results. The person delivering the oral presentation of results to deans and faculty members spent a good portion of the hour explaining effect sizes. The listeners missed the main points and left without understanding how the NSSE results could be used to guide discussions about what we could do better.

When we prepare reports, we take care with the presentation. We are sensitive to the rhetorical context and pay attention to the message, audience, and medium (Grob, 2004). Haswell and McLeod

(1997) describe in detail the issues needing consideration by authors of assessment reports, and their dialogue highlights the rhetorical differences authors confront when writing to administrators or other decision makers rather than scholarly peers. We prepare several versions of the results in various genres depending on our goals and audiences. We cannot stress enough the need to make reports of results accessible and skim-able. Table 1 (below) is a summary of our presentation strategies for written reports.

Table 1: Presentation Strategies for Written Reports

Audience	**Presentation Format**
Administrators (university and high schools)	• 1-2 page memos, executive summaries • No dense text, sufficient white space, bullet points to make our message "pop out" • Combination of statistics with illustrative quotes or excerpts from student work • Brief action plan
Faculty Colleagues	• 1-2 page newsletters, memos • Summary of the themes derived from their program's students and supporting faculty or student voices • Classroom strategies and teaching tips
Faculty assessment committee	• Reports, memos • Combination of statistics with representative examples of student work, student voices, or faculty voices
Students	• 1-page pamphlets • No dense text, sufficient white space, bullet points • Tips and lists of campus resources or websites
Professional peers in writing program administration	• Research articles appropriate to particular journals

In addition, breaking down data by possible contributing factors (e.g., students' majors) is advised, as well as providing comparative data (Kopczynski & Pritchard, 2004).

Our *Writing Matters* newsletter aimed at faculty members allowed us to simultaneously distribute and encourage use of the assessment results. The newsletters combined student and faculty voices with concrete suggestions for instructors of WI courses. The *Writing Matters* issues were effective in part because readers could "hear" the voices of their students and colleagues. They liked practical suggestions that gave them ideas for improving their teaching. We tried never to dictate or mandate classroom pedagogy. Instead, we offered illustrations and left it up to instructors to use the suggestions or modify them to suit their own personalities, students, and classrooms.

When we present results in a face-to-face meeting, we are less focused on conveying information and more focused on drawing out administrators' or faculty members' interpretation of the results or ideas for an action plan if improvement is needed. In our experience, they want to contribute to

understanding the *why*behind the results. They want to help figure out *what* can be done to improve. When planning a face-to-face meeting, we include at least one activity to generate discussion and engagement with the results and potential actions. The majority of the meeting is active sharing. Passive listening does not encourage buy-in or implementation of recommended improvements. The more active that administrators and faculty members are in creating an improvement plan, the more likely results will be used.

When we have led discussions of the results, participants often highlight communication problems as a possible reason for the results, and their actions/solutions are typically low cost items. For example, when our study of writing assignment guidelines suggested that students and faculty members interpret guidelines differently (which could lead to poor writing performance), the recommended action/solution was to better educate faculty on how students interpret guidelines and what students find useful on assignments sheets.

In a recent study of an outcome in our first-year writing course, results were presented at a department colloquium. The results suggested that students did not have sufficient opportunity to practice the focal outcome so attendees worked in small groups to identify assignments and activities that they believed would help students better achieve the desired outcome. Each group presented its list to the full group. The research team collated the ideas, added details, and created a handout for all instructors of first-year courses. The Director of Composition agreed to remind course instructors about the handout (which was also posted on the department website) during regular pre-semester meetings.

Conclusion

As we critically reflect on what we have learned about assessment and our writing program, we have come to understand that many activities effectively contribute to a campus's assessment effort. The activities may not initially appear to fall under the umbrella of program assessment. However, any number of activities—efforts to align the curriculum, define desired student learning outcomes, document learning, or use data to guide decision-making—will contribute to a campus's total assessment effort.

When program improvement is the goal, in-sourcing assessment activities is likely to have many more positive effects than outsourcing. Doing "at home" assessment turns assessment into a learning experience and promotes a culture of assessment. Because no single assessment study can reveal the whole picture nor guide significant program decisions, we recommend ongoing assessment with multiple studies over time. Careful presentation of the results coupled with time for discussion can improve the likelihood that results will be used to improve student learning or the assessment process itself.

We have learned that assessment makes a difference on our campus. Program assessment is taking hold in more and more quarters because through the writing-across-the-curriculum and GE programs we decided to own assessment and design assessment activities so they help the institution, program, and individual faculty members who teach GE courses. We encourage other campuses to do the same. The sooner we collectively come to recognize that existing governance structures as well as course and program review processes offer rich opportunities to build a student-centered, assessment-focused culture, the closer we will be to our ultimate goal: improving student—and faculty—success. We believe that this is a goal worth our time and effort.

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Notes

[1] The literature on program evaluation that addresses use of results is instructive. Two types of program evaluation are designed to improve the likelihood that results will be used for program improvement. Participatory evaluation (see Cousins & Earl, 1992) and empowerment evaluation (see Fetterman, 1996) have as their end goal continual program improvement. The underlying belief of these evaluation approaches is that the people in the program are in the best position to solve any program problem and improve the program. The program staff is responsible for all, or nearly all, phases of the assessment. Staff members receive outside expert advice as needed, but the primary responsibility for assessment falls upon them.

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